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**Senators explain gun vote absence; Obama among the absentees**

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SPRINGFIELD-Three senators whom Gov. Ryan blamed last week for the demise of his gun legislation explained and in one case apologized Tuesday for their absence from the Senate chamber.

"I'll admit I made a mistake, and I should have stayed around," said Sen. Kathleen Parker (R-Northbrook), who was with college friends on a millennium vacation to Santa Fe that took three years to plan.

She, Sen. Barack Obama (D-Chicago) and Sen. Thomas Walsh (R-La Grange Park), all darlings of gun-control groups, had been counted on by Ryan to support making illegal gun possession a felony.

But because they were gone, the package fell shy of the necessary 36 votes, allowing Senate President James "Pate" Philip and National Rifle Association lobbyists to trump the governor and Mayor Daley. Ryan said their absence cost him victory, though Parker wasn't so sure. The vote Dec. 29 was 31-17.

"I don't think there were 36 votes there. It wouldn't have passed. But I should have been there. I would not make that decision again," she said.

None of the three face an immediate threat to their Senate seats since none are up until 2002. But Obama's absence could cost him dearly in his bid to oust U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.) in the March 21 primary.

Rush already has questioned why Obama chose to be in Hawaii during last week's vote and was joined in that criticism Tuesday by state Sen. Donne Trotter (D-Chicago), who is also vying for the congressional seat.

"For him not to show, I think, sort of speaks to his commitment to serve those constituents who have elected him senator," said Trotter, who voted in favor of re-enacting the Safe Neighborhoods Act and its felony gun provision.

Obama traveled to Hawaii with his wife and 18-month-old daughter to celebrate Christmas with his 80-year-old grandmother, who lives there. Obama and his family were scheduled to return to Chicago in enough time to reach Springfield for the vote.

But as they prepared to leave, Obama's daughter developed a serious case of the flu, and he opted not to have her fly on a "red-eye," all-night, eight-hour flight back home.

"I take my legislative responsibilities extremely seriously," Obama said Tuesday. "In the midst of a congressional race, I'm well aware of the potential risk of missing a vote, even if that vote doesn't wind up making the difference on a particular piece of legislation. But at some point, family has to come first," he said.

A loved one's illness also is why Walsh missed the vote, but he offered no apologies for his decision to stay home and tend to his pregnant wife, who also came down with the flu.

"I have no regrets," Walsh said. "I think I can defend my record pretty strongly if someone wants to make a case that I shouldn't have been with my wife when she was sick."