

# GOP Draws Stark Budget Contrasts With Obama

BY JOSH LEDERMAN  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans drew stark contrasts with Democrats on tricky budget issues as President Barack Obama came to the Capitol on Wednesday in a stepped-up effort to improve relations with lawmakers whose votes he needs to enact his second-term agenda.

Obama held a rare meeting with House Republicans geared at thawing political gridlock, even though he conceded in an interview airing hours earlier that a political accommodation may be impossible.

"It was good. I enjoyed it. It was useful," Obama told reporters as he emerged from the roughly 90-minute meeting.

Many Republicans who long have chided Obama for failing to engage their party on the nation's biggest problems are applauding his newfound outreach — part of a concerted effort by the president to mend ties with Congress in hopes of reaching a grand compromise on fiscal issues.

Neither side is backing down from entrenched positions that have prevented deals in the past — a status quo scenario that Obama acknowledged could preclude any agreement.

"Ultimately, it may be that the differences are just too wide," he said in an interview broadcast Wednesday on ABC's "Good Morning America."

"If their position is, 'We can't do any revenue,' or 'We can only do revenue if we gut Medicare or gut Social Security or gut Medicaid, if that's the position, then we're probably not going to be able to get a deal,' he said.

During the meeting, a White House aide handed Obama a note alerting him that a new pope had been selected. After the president told the Republicans that white smoke was seen at the Vatican, indicating a selection had been made, one lawmaker jokingly asked whether that meant White House tours had resumed.

It was a reference to tours that were canceled after Obama and Congress couldn't agree last month on a way to avert deep, automatic spending cuts that began affecting federal programs on March 1.

The issues separating the two parties are the same as they have been all along — fundamental disagreements over whether to pair tax increases with budget cuts in an effort to rein in the nation's deficit.

Case in point: the House GOP's new budget proposal, crafted by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who ran against Obama as the 2012 Republican vice presidential nominee, but broke bread with him last week as the president initiated his congressional "charm offensive."

Ryan and House Republicans put forward their 2014 budget fully mindful that it would be dead on arrival at the White House and in



Ryan



Obama

the Democratic-controlled Senate. The plan, which the White House immediately panned, doubles down on longstanding Republican proposals to slash funding for programs Obama and Democrats want to protect. It includes a repeal of Obama's health care law — a major component of his legacy — and Medicare changes that would shift more of the cost to future patients.

"I understand that not everyone shares our view. And I respect that difference of opinion. All I ask is that you join in the effort. If you don't like our plan, offer your own," Ryan said Wednesday at a budget committee meeting.

Democrats rejected it out of hand, arguing that November's election, in which Democrats gained seats and Obama won a second term after campaigning on the need for more revenue, showed Americans had rejected the GOP approach.

"While providing a tax windfall to the very wealthy, this proposal absolutely guts vital investments that are essential to shared prosperity, upward mobility, and a rising middle class," said Democratic Rep. Chris Van Hollen, the budget panel's top Democrat.

Nor has Obama budged from his insistence that any budget include new tax revenues — the key sticking point in February's failed attempt to avert \$85 billion in automatic spending cuts that both parties agreed made for bad policy.

Meanwhile, Senate Democrats were to unveil a counterproposal Wednesday that aides said would raise taxes by almost \$1 trillion and would use savings to repeal the automatic spending cuts — a nonstarter for House Republicans.

The resolve from both sides to dig in their heels on the most contentious issues raises an important question about Obama's efforts to make nice with Republicans: What's the point?

The president said in the network interview that he was searching for the "common-sense caucus."

Earlier, White House press secretary Jay Carney told reporters, "We're not naive. There are disagreements and obstacles. But the president is at the head of this effort because he believes deeply in it."

In reaching out to lawmakers, Obama hopes to attract more moderate elements from both parties in Congress to deal comprehensively with the nation's long-term fiscal imbalance. The fence-mending campaign started with a dinner Obama hosted last week at a hotel near the White House for a dozen Senate Republicans and continues this week with the House GOP meeting Wednes-

day and a pair of closed-door sessions with House Democrats and Senate Republicans on Thursday.

In interviews and on Sunday talk shows, many Republicans on the receiving end of Obama's overtures have praised the president for making an effort — even if they feel it's too little, too late.

"We welcome it," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said Tuesday. "I told the president on Friday I hope he'll invite all of our members down for these dinners."

But other Republicans are refusing to give Obama the benefit of the doubt.

Fueling their reluctance is the not-so-distant memory of being hammered by the president on a near-daily basis amid last month's fight over the automatic spending cuts; Obama claimed Republicans alone were responsible for blocking a deal.

"All of a sudden there's a pivot literally overnight, where he wants to come to the caucus and everyone should get out the drums and pound them and sing songs," Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., who chairs the House GOP's campaign committee, said in an interview. "It doesn't work like that in any relationship I've been in."

White House aides say Obama is also sensitive to the fact that for Republicans looking ahead to the 2014 elections, appearing too chummy with a Democratic president could inflict more harm than good — especially for Republicans from conservative states who fear a primary challenge from their right.

A House leadership aide said that Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, believes Obama's outreach is genuine but that GOP leaders perceive it to be geared mostly toward boosting Obama's own standing. The aide was not authorized to discuss publicly internal GOP deliberations and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The White House argues it's the opposite. Freed from the need to run for re-election, aides said, Obama feels more flexibility to strike deals with Republicans that include provisions that liberals in his own party might not want, such as an adjustment for Social Security cost-of-living increases. Obama proposed the idea Tuesday in a meeting with Senate Democrats, but it's not included in the plan Senate Budget Committee Chairwoman Patty Murray, D-Wash., was to unveil Wednesday.

Murray's proposal would raise taxes by almost \$1 trillion over a decade and cut spending by almost \$1 trillion over the same period. But more than half of the combined deficit savings would be used to repeal the spending cuts that began to hit the economy on March 1 and are set to continue through the decade.

The president will release his own budget proposal in early April, although aides are playing down its significance because prospects that Congress will take up his plan are negligible.

## Obama: Keystone XL Pipeline Not A Major Jobs Creator

BY MATTHEW DALY  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Jobs numbers and other benefits touted by supporters of the Keystone XL oil pipeline are probably exaggerated, President Barack Obama told House Republicans on Wednesday, according to lawmakers who attended the closed-door meeting.

But Obama did not rule out a decision to approve the \$7 billion pipeline, according to participants.

Obama told Republicans at the Capitol that he's still weighing a decision on the pipeline, which would carry oil from western Canada to refineries along the Texas Gulf Coast.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said Obama appeared "conflicted" on the pipeline, saying that many of the promised jobs would be temporary and that much of the oil produced likely would be exported.

But Terry said Obama also indicated that dire environmental consequences predicted by pipeline opponents were exaggerated.

"He said there were no permanent jobs, and that the oil will be



Terry



Scalise

put on ships and exported and that the only ones who are going to get wealthy are the Canadians," Terry said.

A White House spokesman said Wednesday no decision on the pipeline has been made.

Terry, who supports the long-delayed pipeline, said he wished Obama's comments were less negative, but said he was still hopeful the project would be approved, a view echoed by Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., another pipeline supporter.

Scalise, who asked Obama about Keystone at the GOP meeting, said the president "made light" of jobs numbers predicted by supporters, including some who have predicted that the project could create as many as 100,000 direct and indirect jobs.

Obama said the pipeline "is not going to create as many jobs

as you (Republicans) hope," Scalise said.

Calgary-based TransCanada, which is proposing the pipeline, initially said it could create at least 20,000 jobs, including 13,000 construction jobs and 7,000 jobs among suppliers and manufacturers. The company later clarified that the figures were for one person per year, based on a two-year construction timetable. The State Department has estimated the project would create about 5,000 to 6,000 jobs.

A draft environmental report released by the State Department this month said there would be no significant environmental impact to most resources along the proposed pipeline route, which goes through Montana, South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas. The report also said other options to get the oil from Canada to Gulf Coast refineries are worse for climate change.

State Department approval is needed because the project crosses a U.S. border.

On at least one aspect of the pipeline, Obama is "flat-out-wrong," Terry said. While some oil is likely to be exported, the total is far less than a majority,

Terry said. "That was disturbing to me," he said.

## Bill Would Make Gun Protections Permanent

WASHINGTON (AP) — A catchall government spending bill being debated by the Senate makes four long-standing gun protections permanent, including one preventing the Justice Department from requiring firearms dealers to conduct inventories to make sure weapons haven't been stolen.

Congressional aides from both parties say there are six pro-gun provisions that Congress has enacted annually in its spending bills since at least 2004.

They say that for this year's bill the Republican-led House wanted to make them all permanent. The aides say only four were made permanent, in exchange for the House dropping a seventh provision barring the government from requiring gun dealers to report some sales of two or more firearms popular with Mexican drug cartels.

The aides spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss lawmakers' deliberations.

## 57 Charged In Fla. Gambling Scandal

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — Florida's lieutenant governor resigned and nearly 60 other people were charged in a widening scandal of a purported veterans charity that authorities said Wednesday was a \$300 million front for illegal gambling.

Lt. Gov. Jennifer Carroll's resignation came a day after she was questioned in the investigation. Her public relations firm did work for the St. Augustine-based charity Allied Veterans of the World, but she has not been accused of wrongdoing.

Authorities said the probe involved 57 arrest warrants and 54 search warrants issued at gambling operations in 23 Florida counties and five other states: South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Nevada and Pennsylvania.

Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi said charges, which will be formally filed next week, include racketeering, conspiracy, money laundering and possession of slot machines.

"It's callous and it's despicable," Bondi said of the alleged scam, which she said "insults every American who ever wore a military uniform."

## Senate Panel Says Military Taking To Long

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a stinging rebuke of the military's efforts to curb sexual assault, members of a Senate panel hammered Defense Department officials on Wednesday for making too little progress in combating the crimes and failing to improve a military justice system that victims described as slow and uncaring.

During a two-part hearing, the panel heard harrowing testimony from several victims, who said military justice is broken and pushed for Congress to take action to stem the rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment that they said are pervasive in all the service branches.

Pentagon officials said they are taking the problem seriously. "Sexual assault in the military is not only an abhorrent crime that does enormous harm to the victim, but it is also a virulent attack on the discipline and good order on which military cohesion depends," said Robert Taylor, the Pentagon's acting general counsel.

"The Air Force has zero tolerance for this offense," added Lt. Gen. Richard Harding, the judge advocate general of the Air Force.

But lawmakers pointed to a decision by an Air Force general to reverse a guilty verdict in a sexual assault case as evidence of how the military fails the victims who come forward to report the crimes. Under military law, a commander who convenes a court-martial is known as the convening authority and has the sole discretion to reduce or set aside guilty verdicts and sentences or to reverse a jury's verdict.

## La. Pipeline Blaze Could Burn For Days

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The Coast Guard says a fire raging in a coastal Louisiana bayou where a tugboat struck a gas pipeline appears to have diminished some but is far from out.

However, smoke from the blaze was still visible Wednesday evening in New Orleans, 30 miles to the north. And officials say they don't expect the fire sparked by Tuesday night's crash to be out until Thursday or later.

It started when a tug pushing an oil barge struck a liquefied natural gas pipeline in shallow water. Four people were injured, one critically.

The Coast Guard said no oil had spilled as of Wednesday evening. A Coast Guard statement said what appeared to be pockets of oil on the water turned out to be ash from the burned gas.

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