

GOP To Obama: Tone Down Attacks

BY DAVID ESPO

AP Special Correspondent

WASHINGTON — Polite yet firm, Senate Republicans told President Barack Obama on Thursday to tone down his political attacks and prod Democratic allies to support controversial changes in Medicare if he wants a compromise reducing deficits and providing stability to federal benefit programs.

Participants at a 90-minute closed-door meeting said Obama acknowledged the point without yielding ground — and noted that Republicans criticize him freely. “To quote an old Chicago politician, ‘Politics ain’t beanbag,’” the president said.

The discussion came as Obama wrapped up a highly publicized round of meetings with rank-and-file lawmakers in both parties and both houses of Congress in hopes of building support for a second-term agenda of deficit reduction, immigration overhaul and gun control.

Obama met with Senate Republicans and House Democrats as legislation to lock in \$85 billion in spending cuts and avert a government shutdown later this month made plodding progress in Congress and the two parties advanced rival longer-term budgets in both houses.

No breakthroughs had been anticipated and none were reported in the closed-door sessions, although Obama told reporters before returning to the White House, “We’re making progress.”

In the Senate, several Republicans told the president his rhetoric was not conducive to compromise.

Sen. John Thune of South Dakota referred to a recent interview in which Obama said some Republicans want to eviscerate Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. “Nobody here believes those programs ought to be gutted,” Thune told Obama, the senator later recalled.

“It’s better if the president is here fully engaged with us than traveling around the country saying Congress isn’t doing its job,” Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming later told reporters, summarizing comments he and others had made. “The president needs to be here working side by side with Congress.”

Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee said the message to Obama had been: “Step one is to work with us, not just heckle and taunt us on the campaign trail, and step two is to lead.” The Tennessee lawmaker said Obama must also “go against the grain in his own party,” much as Lyndon Johnson did in winning civil rights legislation from Congress in the 1960s or Richard Nixon did in forging an opening with China in the 1970s.

Obama has repeatedly told Republicans in recent days he supports curtailing the growth of cost-of-living benefits for Social Security and other benefit programs as part of a compromise, as well as raising costs for wealthier Medicare beneficiaries.



POOL PHOTO BY DREW ANGERER VIA ABACA PRESS/MCT
President Barack Obama, with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) walking behind him, leaves a meeting at the U.S. Capitol with the House Democratic Caucus, on Capitol Hill in Washington Thursday. Earlier in the day, President Obama also met with the Senate Republican Conference.

He has also told them they must agree to raise revenue — although not tax rates — as part of any deal.

So far, at least, Republicans have noted that proposals to overhaul Medicare include higher premiums or copays on wealthier seniors. Some also have said they could accept higher revenues as part of tax reform that stimulates economic growth.

Neither approach is likely to guarantee enough revenue to satisfy Obama or congressional Democrats.

If nothing else, the reviews of Obama’s meeting with Senate Republicans were uniformly positive. “We’ll see where we go from here, but it was a great meeting,” said GOP leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, who normally is one of the president’s sharpest critics in Congress.

From the Senate, Obama walked to a similar meeting with House Democrats, completing a quartet of closed-door sessions over the span of three days.

Senators emerging from meetings with Obama said the discussions had ranged over the fate of the proposed Keystone Pipeline, regulatory concerns, fracking, deficit reduction and more.

The president declined to be pinned down on the fate of the Keystone Pipeline, which support-

ers hope to build to ship Canadian oil to the United States. Sen. John Hoeven of North Dakota said Obama pledged only to make a decision before the end of the year on the project, which is opposed by environmentalists but supported by some labor unions.

Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., mentioned the Navajo Generating Station, a power plant in Page, Ariz., where the Environmental Protection Agency is requiring the facility’s owner to spend \$1.1 billion to upgrade emissions controls. Flake recently wrote that a separate federal agency recently said that even with the change, it couldn’t guarantee there would be “any perceptible improvement in visibility at the Grand Canyon and other national parks and wilderness areas.”

While Obama completed his closed-door round of meetings, the Senate slowly worked its way through a bill that locks in \$85 billion in spending cuts through the end of the budget year while guaranteeing there won’t be a government shutdown.

In a show of bipartisanship, leading senators in both parties agreed to provide flexibility for the departments of Commerce, State, Justice and Homeland Security in apportioning the spending cuts, just as the House did with the Pentagon in its version of the bill.

Pope Francis Brings New Style To Papacy

BY NICOLE WINFIELD

Associated Press

VATICAN CITY — On his first day as shepherd of the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics, Pope Francis picked up his luggage at a Vatican hotel, personally thanked each member of the staff and even paid his own bill. Then, at his first Mass, he delivered a short, unscripted homily — in Italian, not the Latin of his predecessor — holding the cardinals who elected him responsible for keeping the church strong.

Pope for barely 12 hours, Francis brushed off years of tradition and formality Thursday with a remarkable break in style that sent a clear message that his papacy is poised to reject many of the trappings enjoyed by now-retired Benedict XVI.

That was hardly out of character for Francis. For years, as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the Argentine pastor took the bus to work, kissed the feet of AIDS patients and prayed with former prostitutes, eschewing the luxurious residence that would have been his due as archbishop of Buenos Aires.

But now he is pope — the first from the New World and the first Jesuit — and his style both personal and liturgical is in a global spotlight.

On his first day, he couldn’t have signaled a greater contrast to Benedict, the German academic who was meek and generous in person but formal and traditional in public.

The differences played out Thursday in the Sistine Chapel as the 76-year-old Francis celebrated his first public Mass as pope.

Whereas Benedict read a three-page discourse in Latin, Francis had a far simpler message. Speaking off-the-cuff for 10 minutes in easy Italian, he said all Catholics must “build” the church and “walk” with the faith.

He urged priests to build their churches on solid foundations, warning: “What happens when children build sand castles on the beach? It all comes down.”

“If we don’t proclaim Jesus, we become a pitiful NGO, not the bride of the Lord,” he said.

“When we walk without the cross, and when we preach about Christ without the cross, we are

not disciples of the Lord. We are mundane. We are bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but we are not disciples of the Lord.”

The new style was evident even in Francis’ wardrobe. Rather than wear the new golden pectoral cross he was offered after his election Wednesday, he kept the simple crucifix of his days as bishop. He also turned down the red velvet cape that Benedict wore when he was presented to the world for the first time in 2005, choosing the simple white cassock of the papacy instead.

“It seems to me what is certain is it’s a great change of style, which for us isn’t a small thing,” Sergio Rubin, Francis’ authorized biographer, told The Associated Press.

Rubin said the new pope “believes the church has to go into the streets” and be one with the people it serves and not impose its message on a society that often doesn’t want to hear it.

For this reason, as Cardinal Bergoglio, “he built altars and tents in the squares of Buenos Aires, and held Masses with former prostitutes and homeless people in the street,” Rubin said. “He did this to express the closeness of the church to those who are suffering.”

Rubin said he expected to see more changes — even substantive ones — once Francis gets his footing.

“I think the categories of progressive and conservative are insufficient,” Rubin said. “Pope Francis is someone with a great mental openness to enter into dialogue. He is very understanding of different situations. He doesn’t like to impose.”

Francis began Thursday with an early morning trip in a simple Vatican car — not the papal sedan — to a Roman basilica dedicated to the Virgin Mary, where he prayed before an icon of the Madonna.

Like many Latin American Catholics, Francis has a particular devotion to the Virgin Mary, and his visit to the St. Mary Major basilica was a reflection of that. Laying flowers on the altar, he then prayed before a Byzantine icon of Mary and the infant Jesus.

“He has a great devotion to this icon of Mary, and every time he comes from Argentina he visits this basilica,” said the Rev. Elio Montenero, who was present for the pope’s arrival. “We were surprised today because he did not announce his visit.”



Francis

HAGEL SWORN IN



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT
Vice President Joe Biden congratulates new Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel during a swearing-in ceremony at the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia, on Thursday.

Physicists Say They Have Found A Higgs Boson

GENEVA (AP) — It helps solve one of the most fundamental riddles of the universe: how the Big Bang created something out of nothing 13.7 billion years ago.

In what could go down as one of the great Eureka! moments in physics — and win somebody the Nobel Prize — scientists said Thursday that after a half-century quest, they are confident they have found a Higgs boson, the elusive subatomic speck sometimes called the “God particle.”

The existence of the particle was theorized in 1964 by the British physicist Peter Higgs to explain why matter has mass. Scientists believe the particle acts like molasses or snow: When other tiny basic building blocks pass through it, they stick together, slow down and form atoms.

Scientists at CERN, the Geneva-based European Organization for Nuclear Research, announced in July that they had found something that looked like the Higgs boson, but they weren’t certain, and they needed to go through the data and rule out the possibility it wasn’t something else.

On Thursday, they said they believe they got it right.

“To me it is clear that we are dealing with a Higgs boson, though we still have a long way to go to know what kind of Higgs boson it is,” said Joe Incandella, a physicist who heads one of the two main teams at CERN, each involving about 3,000 scientists.

Whether or not it was a Higgs boson had to be demonstrated by how it interacts with other particles and its quantum properties, CERN said. The data “strongly indicates that it is a Higgs boson,” it said.

The discovery explains what once seemed unexplainable and still is a bit hard for the average person to comprehend. But it means the key theory that scientists use to explain everything works — for now, at least.

Its discovery could be a strong contender for the Nobel, though it is uncertain whether the prize would go to the 83-year-old Peter Higgs and the others who first proposed the theory, or to the thousands of scientists who found it, or to all of them.

Gov’t: Thousands Of Illegal Immigrants Freed

WASHINGTON (AP) — After weeks of denials, the Obama administration acknowledged Thursday that it had, in fact, released more than 2,000 illegal immigrants from immigration jails due to budget concerns during three weeks in February. Four of the most serious offenders have been put back in detention.

The administration had insisted that only a “few hundred” immigrants were released for budgetary reasons, challenging as inaccurate a March 1 report by The Associated Press that the agency had released more than 2,000 immigrants in February and planned to release more than 3,000 others this month. Intense criticism led to a temporary shutdown of the plan.

The director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, John Morton, told a congressional panel Thursday that the agency had actually released 2,228 people from immigration jails over the course of three weeks, starting February 9, for what he described as “solely budgetary reasons.” They included 10 people considered the highest level of offender.

After the administration had challenged the AP’s reporting, ICE said it didn’t know how many people had been released for budget reasons but would review its records.

Morton, who testified with two other agency officials, told lawmakers that the decision to release the immigrants was not discussed in advance with political appointees, including those in the White House and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano. He said the pending automatic cuts known as sequestration was “driving in the background.”

Employer: Shooting Rampage Suspect ‘Spooky’

HERKIMER, N.Y. (AP) — Police SWAT teams navigated a cluttered, abandoned bar to find the suspect in four fatal shootings holed up in a small room, killing him in a shootout early Thursday with officers after a nearly 19-hour standoff that paralyzed an upstate New York village.

Why Kurt Myers, described as a loner, went on the shooting rampage the day before remained a mystery.

A man who worked for 20 years with Myers said that he was intelligent, quiet and a good worker who got along well with colleagues, but that he was “spooky” recently.

Steve Copperwheat, who hired Myers as a machine operator in the early 1980s at Waterbury Felt, a manufacturer of industrial textiles, said he encountered him in a Wal-Mart parking lot three months ago after not seeing him in about 10 years.

“I yelled over to him and he looked at me, said my name, said he was retired, and just went booking away,” Copperwheat said. “It was almost like he didn’t want anybody to know where he was. He was trying to be very distant, which surprised me. The whole conversation was really spooky.”

TSA Stands By Plan To Allow Knives On Planes

WASHINGTON (AP) — The head of the Transportation Security Administration told lawmakers Thursday he stands by his plan to allow passengers to carry small knives onto planes despite a growing backlash against the proposal.

It’s unlikely in these days of hardened cockpit doors and other preventative measures that the small folding knives could be used by terrorists to take over a plane, TSA Administrator John Pistole told a hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee.

On the other hand, searching for the knives on passengers or in their carry-on bags is time consuming, Pistole said. TSA screeners confiscate about 2,000 such knives every day, with each incident chewing up about two to three minutes, he said.

“I think the decision is solid and it stands and we plan to move forward,” Pistole said.

The policy, which goes into effect April 25, has sparked strong opposition from flight attendants, federal air marshals, some pilot unions, aviation insurers and even some airline CEOs. In the hands of the wrong passengers, the knives present an unnecessary safety risk to flight attendants and other passengers, critics say.

Several members of the House committee said they share those concerns, and urged Pistole to reconsider his position.

Besides knives, the policy will also allow passengers to include in their carry-on luggage novelty-size baseball bats less than 24 inches (610 millimeters) long, toy plastic bats, billiard cues, ski poles, hockey sticks, lacrosse sticks and two golf clubs. Items like box cutters and razor blades are still prohibited.

Knives permitted under the policy must be able to fold up and have blades that are 2.36 inches (60 millimeters) or less in length and are less than a half-inch (127 millimeters) wide. The policy is aimed at allowing passengers to carry pen knives, corkscrews with small blades and other small knives

Software Glitch Delays 660,000 Tax Refunds

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Internal Revenue Service says 660,000 taxpayers will have their refunds delayed by up to six weeks because of a problem with the software they used to file their tax returns.

The delay affects people claiming education tax credits who filed returns between Feb. 14 and Feb. 22.

H&R Block, the tax preparing giant, says that some of its customers were affected but the company has resolved the problem. A limited number of other software companies have also had problems, but IRS spokeswoman Michelle Eldridge declined to name them.

Turbo Tax customers were not affected, spokeswoman Julie Miller said.

The IRS expects to process about 150 million tax returns from individuals, so less than 1 percent will be affected. About 6.6 million taxpayers are expected to claim the education tax credits.

The software problem was on Form 8863, which is used to claim the American Opportunity credit, which provides up to \$2,500 to help pay for college expenses, and the Lifetime Learning credit, which provides up to \$2,000.

The form includes a series of questions. On some of the questions, if the taxpayer answered “no,” the answer was left blank when the form was electronically transmitted to the IRS.

H&R Block said the forms were filled out correctly but the answers were dropped when the forms were transmitted to the IRS.

“It’s important to note that the tax returns were prepared accurately. The error occurred in e-file processing,” H&R Block said in a statement. “We are communicating directly with our impacted clients to assure them that we are doing everything we can to expedite their returns.”

The IRS has long had a goal of increasing the number of people who file their tax returns electronically. The agency promises faster refunds for people who file electronically and have their refunds deposited directly into bank accounts. Most taxpayers who file this way can get refunds within 21 days, the agency says.

In 2012, nearly 120 million taxpayers electronically filed their federal tax returns with the IRS. That’s about 81 percent of all individual returns.

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