

Help Wanted

Some House Democrats contend that President Obama *should be more directly involved* in trying to pass health care reform legislation.

■ By Richard E. Cohen

At a political fundraising reception on September 24 at the McLean home of former Sen. Chuck Robb, D-Va., and his wife, Lynda, freshman Rep. Gerry Connolly, D-Va., lingered to look at the many photographs of the hostess's legendary father and contemplated the challenges that lie ahead for Congress on health care reform. "I want to get into the Lyndon Johnson phase with the legislative nuts and bolts," he said. "I need the current president to roll up his sleeves and start cajoling. We need that now."

The former president has been on Connolly's mind lately. He remains enthralled by Johnson's brilliant and forceful leadership in 1965 as he pushed to enact his trailblazing Great Society program. "The lesson of that history is that LBJ was actively engaged. He stroked egos," Connolly said, while grabbing a reporter's lapels to drive home his point during an interview on the morning after the reception, which featured Vice President Biden and benefited Connolly and two other freshman House Democrats from Virginia. "People trade stories of Johnson working Congress, and he got Medicare as a result."

Connolly emphasized that Congress now needs comparable presidential leadership to assure passage of sweeping health care reform legislation. Without directly criticizing President Obama's handling of the issue, Connolly said he wants him to confront lawmakers more forcefully. He suggested that Obama and his lieutenants should be cutting deals, dangling promises, and making threats—in short, asserting themselves like LBJ would. "With 535 disparate voices in Congress, we need the unifying imprimatur of a president."

From progressives to centrists, across regions and seniority, the Democratic Caucus has marched haltingly toward House passage of health care reform. Connolly is one of many House Democrats who hope for its enactment, but they continue to raise concerns and hesitate to commit to voting for the measure. Sufficient doubts have remained that Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., her leadership team, and the key committee and subcommittee chairmen have struggled for months to close the deal by finding the elusive sweet spot that will attract 218 votes, and perhaps a few more.

As the moment of truth arrives, the public will soon learn the wisdom of the Democrats' strategy on health reform—and, for

■ Gerry Connolly



"I need the current president to roll up his sleeves and start cajoling," says the freshman lawmaker, shown at a town hall meeting in August.

that matter, on other crucial issues. Even before Obama took the oath of office, he established a pattern, during the crafting of the huge economic stimulus bill, of setting broad guidelines for legislative action and then deferring to Congress on the fine print. He took a comparable approach during the budget debate this spring and on a far-reaching climate-change plan that the House narrowly approved in late June.

Obama's style has been to "let the Congress duke it out through the legislative process, and then come in at the end and finish the deal," a House Democratic leadership aide said in an e-mail.

Early on, many Democrats—mindful of President Clinton's mistakes in dictating a highly detailed and complex health care bill to Congress in 1993-94—had warned that the fledgling Obama administration should avoid similar micromanagement on Capitol Hill. But after nine months of the White House keeping its distance and letting Congress call the shots, some Democratic lawmakers are growing weary and now say they want the president more directly involved.

Little wonder, because the Democratic strategy so far hasn't exactly ensured smooth sailing. As late as mid-July, Pelosi was hoping



that the House would pass the health care bill before the August recess, a deadline that dissolved amid intraparty divisions. Then the noisy opposition at town hall meetings across the nation during the five-week break set Democrats back on their heels. After returning to Washington, Democrats enthusiastically received Obama's September 9 speech to a joint session of Congress. Yet Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., told reporters on September 29 that the House might not debate the health care bill until November.

Republicans, not surprisingly, contend that the Democratic approach has been self-defeating. "This was an enormous strategic error and allowed Congress in its worst instincts to run wild," a senior House GOP leadership aide said. "Democrats' legislation is now proving to be more of a liability than an asset. So their leadership is hearing from unhappy members, and they are looking for scapegoats."

Outside Congress, some Democratic opinion leaders and activists have been blunt in blaming Obama for their party's woes. In an essay for *The Democratic Strategist*—a journal managed by experienced Washington-based operatives Bill Galston, Stan Greenberg, and Ruy Teixeira—writer James Vega concluded that three critical White House mistakes "led to the setbacks in the campaign for health care reform this summer."

Vega argued that the new administration failed "to create a clearly defined 'core' message expressing Obama's basic agenda"; "to immediately begin organizing an effective mass mobilization for that agenda"; and "to begin building ongoing social and cultural community institutions to support that agenda."

Ed Kilgore, the publication's managing editor, said that Vega is the pseudonym for a liberal communications consultant who has worked with civil-rights and labor groups and wants to remain anonymous. "Many Democrats share Vega's concern that there needs to be a stronger health care message and that it needs to extend to the 2010 and 2012 elections," Kilgore said.

History Lessons

Politicians are not the only ones who remain consumed with Johnson's overpowering role in enacting Medicare. In a recently published book, *The Heart of Power*, two academicians explored how presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to George W. Bush worked with Congress with varying success to reshape health care policy. David Blumenthal, a professor of health policy at Harvard University, and James Morone, a political scientist at Brown University, credit Johnson for his iconic role as "the most effective health care president in American history."

Several factors accounted for Johnson's achievement, the authors wrote, including a deep personal commitment to change; a quick start on Medicare after his landslide election in 1964; his intimate knowledge of Congress because of his experience as Senate majority leader; and the ability to "know when to compromise and when to push."

Blumenthal and Morone particularly praised LBJ for stroking then-House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Wilbur Mills, D-Ark. "Johnson doesn't get the credit" he deserves, Mills, who retired in 1976, told an interviewer at the LBJ Library in 1987.

Johnson's later problems with the Vietnam War led to his deep unpopularity and his unexpected decision not to seek reelection in 1968. "He was an accomplished and skilled legislator," said Connolly, who was an anti-Vietnam activist in college. "But he was almost a villain because of the war."

Of course, Congress and national politics have changed since LBJ's heyday in ways that limit presidential authority. Blumenthal (who was appointed this spring to a senior position in the Obama administration as national coordinator for health information technology) and Morone cited the growing influence of economists—notably at the Office of Management and Budget and the Congressional Budget Office—in putting speed bumps in an activist president's path.

"In a simpler era, before these agencies existed, it was easier for presidents, such as [John F.] Kennedy or Johnson, to manipulate, ignore, or overrule their economists," the authors wrote. Democrats have learned that painful lesson in recent months as CBO has stifled their spending options and forced consideration of tax increases to finance their goals.

National news media coverage has also changed since the 1960s and now shapes politics 24/7. Some Democrats contend that media coverage of the raucous town hall meetings in August distorted the health care debate. A veteran House Democratic communications aide complained that journalists emphasized only the most vitriolic critics. "It was the media that failed in August, by failing to explain the bill and health reform issues," the aide said.

Looking for LBJ



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

President Johnson showed brilliant and forceful leadership in 1965 as he pushed to enact his trailblazing Great Society program.

House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Henry Waxman, D-Calif., acknowledged that “the White House was taken by surprise” by the August protests. “They were working so hard to move a bill that they didn’t prepare enough for the staged protests,” Waxman said, although he added that Democrats probably could not have done much to counter the opposition.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill.—one of nine chief deputy whips and an early supporter of Obama’s presidential campaign—downplayed the significance of the protests. “I haven’t seen evidence to support the news media narrative that [public] support was slipping,” she said. “After members returned, they were energized. There was a backlash because of the feeling that a line had been crossed by the incivility” demonstrated at the town hall meetings.

Rep. Baron Hill, D-Ind., a member of the Blue Dog Coalition who helped to achieve concessions for centrists during the Energy and Commerce Committee’s health care markup, added that supporters outnumbered the more noisy opponents at his local meetings. “What surprised me was that people were rude,” he added.

Rep. Zack Space, D-Ohio, another Blue Dog who backed compromises at Energy and Commerce, noted that national anxiety is running high because of economic distress, and the complex nature of the pending health care reform proposals compounds those feelings. “These are hard issues,” he said. “It’s not surprising that they cause difficulty and frustration by the American public. But we need to address them.”

Moving Forward

Space said he is “gratified” that Obama has deferred to Congress on health care reform and is “not clinging to any ideology.... Congress is writing the bill, not the president. That’s the way it should be.”

But other Democrats echo Connolly, who is freshman class president, in suggesting that members have grown weary of Obama’s standoffish style. “There is strong support for the president and his policies, but there is a cumulative effect of taking a series of major votes without support or cover,” a House Democratic leadership aide said. “The White House is more engaged in the health reform debate post-August and seems to have recognized the importance of playing a stronger role in the process.... The success of the president’s bold agenda relies heavily on his level of engagement.”

In an interview with *National Journal* this summer, a White House aide was asked about the wisdom of deferring to Congress on the details. His brief reply: “It has worked so far.”

Complicating the role of House Democrats is that top White House officials—starting with Obama and Biden—have been more focused on the health reform dynamics in the Senate. In particular, the White House has encouraged the consensus-building efforts of Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., whom House Democrats view with deep suspicion. And Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., has been more inclined than Pelosi and her team to seek White House assistance in resolving internal problems. House-Senate dynamics could become especially dicey in the negotiations over a final deal.

For House Democrats to criticize Obama’s handling of health reform might strike some as self-serving. Pelosi and her close advisers, for example, have made it clear that they want to chart their own course and have been confident in their ability to do so. In addition, recent public opinion polls have shown that Congress is again approaching basement-level approval ratings and is far below Obama in popularity. In a June Gallup Poll, only 12 percent of respondents expressed confidence in Congress, the worst rating Gallup has recorded for any institution in 35 years.

As House Democrats seek to tamp down their internal grumbling and divisions over health care reform, plus the public objections, some of them are eager for a floor vote. The liberal Schakowsky and other leadership allies have embraced Pelosi’s upbeat attitude that “failure is not an option” in the endgame. “There is a feeling of inevitability that we will pass a strong bill, including the enactment of a public option” for health insurance, Schakowsky said. “Part of our strategy now is to express confidence.”

Many moderate Democrats from swing districts are also eager to support the effort. “We have been fighting for health reform for 60 years,” Hill said. “It’s time for us to act.” He has reserved judgment until he sees the final legislative details. But he

echoed a view common among Democrats that public support will increase after Congress acts. “The fear of change will be forgotten once it has been enacted,” Hill said.

From Connolly’s perspective, Democrats face a steep but attainable challenge. He cited worrisome campaign polls for Democrats in next month’s Virginia governor’s race and added, “We need to deliver on our agenda from last November.” With a Kennedyesque analogy, he said that Obama has defined his goal as comparable to landing a man on the moon. “Now it’s time to implement that strategy,” Connolly said. “We need specific actions to come to closure. There is a difference between marketing and closing a deal.”

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Two Views

“These are hard issues” that prompt public “frustration,” says Zack Space. Yet Jan Schakowsky contends, “Part of our strategy now is to express confidence.”

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