

Obama feels the heat, changes the play

Ben Smith Ben Smith – SUN JUL 19, 8:03 AM ET

Finally, we're starting to see him sweat.

President Barack Obama made his personal icy cool the trademark of his campaign, the tenor of his [White House](#) and the hallmark of an early run of successes at home and abroad. But as the glamour wears off and a long, frustrating summer wears on, he is being forced to improvise — stooping to respond to political foes and adjusting his tactics and demeanor for the trench warfare of a legislative agenda.

The root of the change is one that faces every president: Economic and international realities that resist political charm. Iran and North Korea have shown no interest in the president's outstretched hand. The [economy](#) has delivered a double-whammy, with rising unemployment stirring voters' concerns while sluggish growth deprives the government of tax revenues Obama would like to spend on new programs.

[Health care reform](#), which once appeared flush with momentum from earlier congressional victories, is now on a slog through no less than five committees, which include Democrats who either aren't sold on Obama's expansive vision or can't figure out how to convince voters to pay for it.

"This is when it gets harder," the president told supporters June 30.

And so it has.

In turn, Obama has adjusted, deviating from the playbook on every front.

The cool president has turned hot on the stump, stripping to shirtsleeves to lambaste doubters in New Jersey Thursday. He departed from his prepared remarks last week to accept a Republican challenge to take personal ownership of the economy: "That's fine. Give it to me," he said.

Even Obama's scripted speeches are deliberately more forceful, aggressive and direct in taking on critics, aides say. Friday remarks at the White House had a trash-talk edge — count me out and you'll be sorry.

Obama's political operation has dispensed with its post-inauguration cocktails for Republicans — or more often, ignoring them outright — in favor of the old politics of engage, attack and cajole. Obama's even engaging in a little [Democrat-on-Democrat](#) politics, as his ex-campaign arm is beaming TV ads into the home states of moderate fence-sitters on health care.

The tightly programmed White House also is champing at the bit, kicking off what officials say will be a relentless three-week push on health care, starting with the hastily scheduled Friday address. But its first event might have backfired a bit. Its main consequence was proving that the magnetism of [Obama's](#) personal appearances has worn off, as it drew little media attention and a dismissive tweet from the key Senate Republican, Chuck Grassley of Iowa: "Waste of time."

The sum has been a new sense of uncertainty and strain, and a growing murmur among Democrats in Washington nervous about the White House's tactics, and a rising tide of concern in the states as local Democratic parties eye midterm elections that are traditionally a challenge for a new president.

"That honeymoon period is over," said [Chris Redfern](#), the chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party. "Now they're having to push back, and push back hard."

White House officials and allies brush off any notion that this new sense of unease is meaningful. The only true test, they say, will be results. Obama still might win major health care reform legislation this year that could be the most important new government program in decades. He has a fighting chance to pass regulations on greenhouse gases, in the form of a "cap and trade" mechanism, through the Senate. And Obama continues to press hard, if with no clear progress, for a breakthrough in the Middle East.

"It's the third quarter, he's down by a point, and he's got his best player on the bench — what really is going to be important is the fall," said James Carville, the veteran Democratic observer.

"If he gets what's perceived to be some kind of a major health care thing, gets the climate bill through, if the economy recovers, then we'll all say he had a hell of a summer. Conversely, if the thing falls apart, we'll say that by July the 19th we could tell the thing was going bad."

White House Deputy Communications Director Dan Pfeiffer dismissed the suggestion that Obama should be expected to succeed effortlessly — or that he's on a path toward failure on any of these varied fronts.

"Obama and his team have been down this road dozens of times and been declared dead many times and always succeeded," he said. "No one gets rich betting against Barack Obama."

The most visible aspect of the White House's new feistiness is an increasing willingness to engage Republican legislators whose criticisms Obama earlier had been happier to overlook. Relentless criticism of the [stimulus package](#) from a House Republican leader, [Eric Cantor](#) of Virginia, drew a furious barrage from the Democratic National Committee and a visit from no smaller figure than the [Vice President of the United States](#). Rank and file Republicans who criticize the stimulus have also suddenly found themselves under a concerted DNC assault that asks if they'd prefer the federal funding left their districts out. And criticism from [Sen Jon Kyl](#) (R-Ariz.) drew letters from no fewer than four Cabinet secretaries to his state's governor, asking if she would prefer they withheld stimulus money.

That pushback has been urged, and welcomed, by state leaders like Redfern and Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Mark Brewer.

"The DNC has been and we were quickly able to rebut and demonstrate all the money that is being spent in their respective districts," said Brewer of two GOP congressmen attacking the stimulus. "They've backed off."

Still, many Democrats say the Republican attacks on spending are taking their toll.

"The rhetoric is so empty, but it is fairly consistent and I think it's had an impact on those in middle," said Ohio's Redfern.

But when the White House pushback focused not on Republicans but Democrats on health-care – in the form of Organizing for America ads running in the home states of moderate senators -- some in the party called foul, including Senate Majority Leader [Harry Reid](#) (D-Nev.)

The vote last month in the House on the American Clean Energy Security Act showed a willingness to get White House hands dirty in a different way.

Wrangling votes for the "cap and trade" legislation in the House, Obama backed off a campaign promise to auction off all "allowances" – permits to release a set amount of greenhouse gases. Instead of selling them to raise money for other environmental initiatives, the White House allowed congressional [Democratic leaders](#) to trade them for votes, assigning allowances to the refinery-heavy district of, for instance, Texas Rep. [Gene Green](#) in exchange for his support.

The battle over [health care](#), the centerpiece of the President's summer, has also hardened into a fairly conventional Washington fight, a new president's sweeping agenda colliding with congressional caution. Obscure Washington figures like Congressional Budget Office chief Doug Elmendorf and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) have shown the ability to pose a real threat to the White House juggernaut. And some of the White House's close allies have grown jittery about what they say is a strategy to spend the three weeks leading up to the Senate's August recess – the insecure deadline for health care votes in both houses – with a series of events aimed at building public pressure on Congress.

"They're great at campaigns, but legislative battles are different," said a senior Democrat close to the White House. "It's not about persuading 51 percent of the American people – it's about seven senators."

In another mark of Obama's constant adjustments, his latest [remarks](#) didn't mention the August deadline.

White House allies acknowledge the new strains, but say the hard work will pay off.

"A lot of the hard stuff he's doing now will pay dividends," said John Del Cecato, a former Obama campaign aide.

Meanwhile, admiration of Obama's personal qualities has been tempered, even among sympathetic observers, with anxiety for where his agenda will stand at summer's end.

Comedy Central's Jon Stewart noted recently that Obama told a Pakistani interviewer that he is an accomplished chef of Pakistani cuisines and reads the great Urdu poets.

"Mr. President," Stewart said, "while I am impressed with your Renaissance Man-level of knowledge in a plethora of subjects, may I humbly say: That's great. Just fix the economy!"

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