

POLITICS

Obama Is Seen as Frustrating His Own Party

By CARL HULSE, JEREMY W. PETERS and MICHAEL D. SHEAR AUG. 18, 2014

WASHINGTON — The meeting in the Oval Office in late June was called to give President Obama and the four top members of Congress a chance to discuss the unraveling situation in Iraq.

But Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, wanted to press another point.

With Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader, sitting a few feet away, Mr. Reid complained that Senate Republicans were spitefully blocking the confirmation of dozens of Mr. Obama's nominees to serve as ambassadors. He expected that the president would back him up and urge Mr. McConnell to relent.

Mr. Obama quickly dismissed the matter.

"You and Mitch work it out," Mr. Obama said coolly, cutting off any discussion.

Mr. Reid seethed quietly for the rest of the meeting, according to four separate accounts provided by people who spoke with him about it. After his return to the Capitol that afternoon, Mr. Reid told other senators and his staff members that he

4

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Secretary of State John Kerry had been arguing for months that getting them installed was an urgent necessity for the administration.

But the impression the president left with Mr. Reid was clear: Capitol Hill is not my problem.

To Democrats in Congress who have worked with Mr. Obama, the indifference conveyed to Mr. Reid, one of the president's most indispensable supporters, was frustratingly familiar. In one sense, Mr. Obama's response was a reminder of what made him such an appealing figure in the first place: his almost innate aversion to the partisan squabbles that have left Americans so jaded and disgruntled with their political system. But nearly six years into his term, with his popularity at the lowest of his presidency, Mr. Obama appears remarkably distant from his own party on Capitol Hill, with his long neglect of would-be allies catching up to him.

In interviews, nearly two dozen Democratic lawmakers and senior congressional aides suggested that Mr. Obama's approach has left him with few loyalists to effectively manage the issues erupting abroad and at home and could imperil his efforts to leave a legacy in his final stretch in office.

Grumbling by lawmakers about a president is nothing unusual. But what is striking now is the way prominent Democrats' views of Mr. Obama's shortcomings are spilling out into public, and how resigned many seem that the relationship will never improve. In private meetings, Mr. Reid's chief of staff, David Krone, has voiced regular dismay to lawmakers and top aides about White House operations and competency across a range of issues, according to several Democrats on Capitol Hill.

"Maybe if something isn't working, you'd say, 'What can I do better?'" said Senator Joe Manchin III, Democrat of West Virginia, expressing dismay that the president seemed to have little interest in taking a warmer approach with Democrats. "Maybe we wanted something different. But it kind of is what it is."

Asked to characterize his relationship with the president, Mr. Manchin, a centrist Democrat who has often been a bridge builder in the Senate, said: "It's fairly nonexistent. There's not much of a relationship."

Few senators feel a personal connection to the president.

“In order to work with people, you need to establish the relationship first before you ask for something,” said Senator Angus King of Maine, an independent member of the Democratic caucus. “And I think one of the things the White House has not done well and the president has not done well is the simple idea of establishing relationships before there is a crisis.”

Senator Claire McCaskill, the Missouri Democrat who was an early supporter of Mr. Obama’s presidential bid, said that if her fellow Democrats were hoping for Mr. Obama to transform into a Lyndon B. Johnson late in his second term, they should quit waiting.

“For him, eating his spinach is schmoozing with elected officials,” she said. “This is not something that he loves. He wasn’t that kind of senator.”

White House officials flatly reject the idea that Mr. Obama has failed to build deep ties with Democrats on Capitol Hill.

“The president is fighting to get Democrats elected and keep the Senate this fall because the stakes are too high for the American people,” said Amy Brundage, the White House deputy communications director. “We’re focused on making the case about Democrats’ commitment to building on the progress we are seeing in the economy and growing the middle class, and we will continue to work in close partnership with the Democratic leadership throughout the fall.”

Regarding the meeting with Mr. Reid, White House aides said that the senator had caught the president off guard by abruptly shifting the conversation away from a sober discussion of the security threats in Iraq. Later, Mr. Obama called Mr. McConnell to press him to clear the way for more confirmations.

The aides also cite 18 meetings this year that the president has held with groups of lawmakers, not including one-on-one phone calls or meetings. They say administration advisers routinely consult Democrats when crafting policy on climate change, the Affordable Care Act and the economy.

They point to four social events for Democrats that the president hosted this year, and said Mr. Obama had extended 250 invitations to members of Congress for bill signings so far this year.

But in interviews, several Democrats said that small talk at large, formal White House gatherings was not the kind of relationship they had in mind.

“I can count them on both hands, and they’re big,” said Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, referring to the number of times he has been to the White House since he took office in 2011, and to the size of the events. “It’s more the interaction that I think has been somewhat lacking — the personal.”

Early in his presidency, Mr. Obama largely outsourced his relations with congressional Democrats to Rahm Emanuel, his hyper-energetic first chief of staff. In the meantime, some Democrats say, they have just learned to accept the president’s solitary nature and move on.

Representative Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, the No. 2 House Democrat, said that compared with Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Mr. Obama “is more self-contained, less gregarious.” He added: “Does it somewhat take away from his spending more time with members of Congress and the Senate and politics? Yes.” But, Mr. Hoyer said, “this president has reached out as much as any president in my view, been open to compromise as much as any I’ve observed.”

If there was an opportunity amid the Washington paralysis for Mr. Obama to build relationships, it might have been during his frequent golf games. But only twice in more than 180 rounds has the president invited members of Congress to play with him, and only one Democratic official — Senator Mark Udall of Colorado — has joined a presidential foursome.

Democratic senators, for their part, do not always show up at White House events. Twelve were invited to a St. Patrick’s Day reception this year, for example, but only one showed up.

Aides tried to encourage Mr. Obama to broaden his invitation list, to the White House and the links, but the idea went nowhere.

Several people noted that Mr. Obama's path to the White House helped prevent the kind of close relationships that other presidents forged with Democrats.

Unlike Mr. Clinton, who worked hard as a candidate to court every Democrat he could — from county chairmen to the socialite Pamela Harriman and Vernon Jordan, the superlawyer — Mr. Obama presented himself as unencumbered by the kind of close ties to the Democratic establishment that would mark him as a creature of Washington.

Senator Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, who said he had a “closer personal relationship with Mr. Obama than most” of his colleagues, said that while he was satisfied that the president had tried to reach out, Mr. Obama would never be a “creature of Washington” like Mr. Clinton. “I don't think that was ever in the cards, and I still don't,” Mr. Durbin said.

Another point of tension between Senate Democrats and the White House has been the extent of the president's participation in the party's effort to retain the Senate this fall. A group with ties to Mr. Reid has established a “super PAC” to compete with the efforts by the billionaire brothers Charles G. and David H. Koch to tip control of the Senate to Republicans.

But the White House and Democrats have sparred over conditions that the administration has put on the president's participation, and Mr. Obama has no appearances currently scheduled for the group.

The back and forth is reminiscent of the 2008 campaign, when Mr. Obama and his aides made a decision that he would not appear on stage side by side with Democratic lawmakers, given the low popularity of Congress.

That thinking has continued in the White House. Members of Congress are usually invited to Mr. Obama's speeches, but they sit in the audience. The result is that Democratic members are robbed of a triumphant picture with the president that they can show their family members, while the White House sacrifices the loyalty of a once grateful lawmaker.

“The White House has something in common with the rest of America, and that is disdain for Congress,” Ms. McCaskill said. “It is hard to blame them.”

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