



Obama talks to House Republicans in Baltimore in rare, televised debate

By [Paul Kane and Perry Bacon Jr.](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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BALTIMORE -- [President Obama](#) offered a muscular defense of his first year in office Friday in the most hostile of territories -- a gathering of House Republicans, who engaged him in a pointed debate that had moments of both tense drama and [bipartisan](#) comity over the stark policy differences that separate the two sides.

In an unusual session, Obama repeatedly accused Republicans of seeking political gain at his expense by opposing fiscal policies they had previously supported. But he also reached out for their help as he recalibrates his 2010 agenda to focus intensely on the economy, and he provided House Republicans -- a group he basically ignored for the past year-- with a 90-minute, nationally televised platform to air their policy prescriptions for the nation.

Other presidents have trekked to the opposing party's premier annual policy event. But this encounter came with an added twist: an eleventh-hour request from the White House to allow the usually closed-door, question-and-answer session to be shown live on cable news networks.

What resulted was an unprecedented public debate between the president and a group of lawmakers who have effectively opposed nearly every move he has made. The give-and-take more closely resembled Great Britain's Question Time -- in which members of Parliament question the prime minister -- than anything in congressional history.

Eight Republicans, some addressing Obama for the first time, queried him on topics that ranged from the \$12.4 trillion national debt to trade policy to [lobbyist](#) access to the White House. Some exchanges were cordial, but many were sharp, with Obama telling the Republicans that he had read their proposals but that economists had found them lacking.

"Bipartisanship, not for its own sake, but to solve problems, that's what our [constituents](#), the American people, need from us right now," Obama said, appearing before a retreat of the 178-member House [GOP](#) conference at the Renaissance Baltimore Harborplace Hotel.

After [Rep. Jeb Hensarling](#) (Tex.) spent several minutes blaming Obama for the increase in the federal deficit to \$1.35 trillion, the president interrupted and asked, "You're going to let me answer?"

"The whole question was structured as a talking point for running a campaign," Obama told him.

"That's not true, and you know it's not true."

Republicans did not hold back either. Rep. [Mike Pence](#) (Ind.) insisted that the president had been "busy ignoring" [the GOP's](#) ideas.

Obama's rebuttal -- "I'm not an ideologue" -- drew laughter and chatter from Republicans, many of whom consider him the most liberal president ever.

Obama gave a fierce defense of the \$787 billion stimulus package signed into law in February without a single House Republican vote. He angrily told Pence, the No. 3 GOP House leader, who served as the event's moderator, that 2 million jobs were lost from December 2008 through February 2009, long before the Recovery Act took affect. "I'm assuming you're not faulting my policies for that," Obama said.

Obama's economic standing was boosted by Friday morning's announcement of a big increase in the gross domestic product. But Republicans repeatedly focused on what they consider his support of big government programs.

"You've also said that you want to take a scalpel to the budget and go through it line by line. We want to give you that scalpel," said Rep. Paul D. Ryan (Wis.), the top Republican on the Budget Committee, pleading for Obama to push Democratic leaders to allow a vote on a line-item-[veto](#) proposal.

When he introduced the president, House [Minority Leader John A. Boehner](#) (Ohio) handed him a 27-page package of Republican proposals on health care and others issues.

White House advisers and Republicans both declared the event a success. With a series of contentious issues on the horizon -- regulatory reform, a jobs bill and the tax on banks, for starters -- Obama wanted to challenge GOP claims that he has been [partisan](#) and exclusionary and to demonstrate, as his advisers like to put it, that it "takes two to tango."

Republicans, dubbed "the party of no" by Democrats, said the session gave them a high-profile setting to offer their proposals and begin to lay a policy foundation for the campaign year. "It was the kind of discussion, frankly, we need more of," said House Minority Whip [Eric Cantor](#) (Va.).

Obama, who took an additional 15 minutes of questions and stuck around another 15 minutes to shake hands with members of the political opposition, said, "You know, I'm having fun."

The president defended his health-care proposal as "[centrist](#)" and denounced the near-unanimous opposition by Republicans, saying they had twisted his plan into a "Bolshevik plot." He offered no further details on how to move the stalled legislation.

He also did few favors for [House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-Calif.) and [Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid](#) (D-Nev.) when rank-and-file Republicans asserted that GOP leaders were routinely ignored by Democratic leaders despite Obama's talk of bipartisanship.

"They've really been stiff-armed by Speaker Pelosi," said [Rep. Peter Roskam](#) (Ill.), a friend of Obama's from their days in the Illinois Senate. "Now, I know you're not in charge of that chamber, but there really is this dynamic of, frankly, being shut out."

Obama declined to defend Pelosi. "Both sides can take some blame for a sour climate on Capitol Hill," he said. "What I can do maybe to help is to try to bring GOP and Democratic leadership together on a more regular basis with me."

Obama, who once vowed to air the health-care negotiations on C-SPAN, admitted that the closed-door dealmaking by Pelosi and Reid was a "messy process."

Republicans said they had some initial hesitation about televising the session; such gatherings by tradition are held in private by both parties. But GOP leaders had spent the past six months hectoring Obama for not living up to his C-SPAN pledge, and rejecting his request would have undercut their message. And since losing their majority in 2006, House Republicans have been an afterthought in the political calculus on Capitol Hill, making Friday's session their highest-profile meeting in years.

The oddity of the moment, however, was not lost on anyone, including Obama. His last appearance before the House GOP conference was in the basement of the Capitol last January, as he sought support for the stimulus package. Hours before that meeting, Boehner had announced his opposition and urged his troops to do the same.

Obama joked Friday that there would be more such gatherings: "You know what they say, Keep your friends close, but visit the Republican [caucus](#) every few months."

Staff writer Anne E. Kornblut contributed to this report.

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