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News Analysis

Aim of Obama Health Speech: Reigniting a Presidency

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WASHINGTON — On one level, [President Obama](#)'s address to a joint session of Congress on Wednesday night was what it seemed: an attempt to corral lawmakers into approving the signature initiative of his presidency, the health care overhaul that has eluded Washington, as Mr. Obama said, for 65 years.

But [the speech](#) was about more than health care.

It was an attempt by this still new president to display his authority to a Congress that had begun to question his fortitude, to show that he was as strong a political leader as he was a political candidate and to show that he was not — to use the shorthand of the day — another [Jimmy Carter](#): professorial, aloof, a micromanager who perhaps was not ready to be the nation's chief executive.

It is one thing to create and surf a political movement, as Mr. Obama did in capturing the White House. It is quite another to lead an uneasy country and a politically divided Congress toward tough decisions that create winners and losers.

“That’s what this is about,” said [Joe Trippi](#), a Democratic consultant. “We know he can be a candidate; he may even have the right ideas. Now he has to reach down there and make something big happen in the country — either a lot of Americans changing their minds, or members of Congress backing his agenda even if it puts their own political hides at risk. Can he get people to do these things?”

For nearly an hour, Mr. Obama spoke strongly and passionately, pausing only to acknowledge the repeated cheers from his audience as he made what appeared to be his clearest and most concise case yet on a complicated issue that had repeatedly defied his communications skills.

He managed to invest his case with both economic and emotional urgency — particularly when he invoked the memory of Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#), whose widow, Victoria, was in the audience — without getting bogged down in too many details.

Mr. Obama had clearly decided to speak more to the American people [watching on television](#) than to the lawmakers arrayed in front of him in the House chamber. On this evening, at least, Congress was part of the political theater, both in the form of the constant applause from fellow Democrats and in the person of the Republican congressman [who yelled out “lie”](#) when Mr. Obama asserted that nothing in his plan would provide coverage for illegal immigrants.

It will take time to see if this works. [Bill Clinton](#) gave a similarly well-received address on this very subject in the chamber 16 years ago, to an audience that included many of the same people, among them his wife, [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), then an author of an ambitious health care plan, now secretary of state.

But there was a key difference between Mr. Clinton in 1993 and Mr. Obama today. For Mr. Clinton, it was the beginning of the process; Mr. Obama was ushering in what he hopes to be an endgame, at a moment, as he noted, when four Congressional committees have already reported out bills.

In a recognition of the current political atmosphere, Mr. Obama used his speech to ease away from what had been another defining aspect of his candidacy: the promise to transcend the partisanship in Washington.

He did offer gestures across the aisle, embracing an idea from Senator [John McCain](#) of Arizona that would insure the poor against catastrophic medical expenses and endorsing some sort of [medical malpractice](#) limits that Republicans have long championed.

But in a climate where at this point he might be lucky to get more than one or two Republican votes from Congress, those were seen by Republicans and Democrats alike mostly as an effort by the White House to get credit for trying and so insulate the administration from criticism that it was trying to jam a bill through on its terms. For the White House, one of the more worrisome events of this summer has been an erosion of independent voters’ support for this president and his health care plan.

Though Mr. Obama spoke of a plan that “incorporates ideas from many people in this room tonight, Democrats

and Republicans,” he used the kind of tough, confrontational language that suggested the extent to which the White House would seek to portray Republicans as recalcitrant and standing in the face of a historical tide.

“Know this,” he said: “I will not waste time with those who have made the calculation that it’s better politics to kill this plan than improve it.”

Matthew Dowd, a onetime adviser to former President [George W. Bush](#), argued in an interview that Mr. Obama would not succeed unless he trimmed back on his plan, defying liberal Democrats and appealing to Republicans.

“You cannot sell the country on something it doesn’t want,” Mr. Dowd said.

Mr. Obama is most engaged when his back is to the wall, typically after a period of drift. Again and again throughout his career, he has risen to the occasion: The November 2007 speech at a dinner of Democrats in Iowa that put him on the road to victory there, his speech that defused the controversy over racially charged remarks by his onetime pastor, the [Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.](#), even the speech he gave to Democrats at the 2004 convention in Boston that elevated him to fame.

But as he struggles with the adjustment from campaigning to governing, the battle he is trying to bring to a successful close may prove the toughest test of all.

For his first six months in Washington, Mr. Obama was carried by the momentum of the excitement of his election, by the adrenaline of dealing with the financial crisis that greeted him and by his own popularity. Now, with polls suggesting that all that is beginning to fade, and with Republicans regrouping, he is faced with a need to show that the leadership strengths he displayed as a candidate can be transferred to the office of the presidency.

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