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Obama Refuses to Rule Out Health-Care Surtax

Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama defended his campaign for a health-care bill before Congress's August recess, saying "the default in Washington is inaction and inertia."

Mr. Obama also remained noncommittal on a surtax to pay for the overhaul, which some experts have said could cost over \$1 trillion in the next several years.

The president said in an interview on NBC's "Today" show that "the House has put forward a surtax." And he repeated his feeling that wealthier Americans, "such as myself," should pitch in and help reinvent the system to spread coverage to those now without it.

Mr. Obama has said that people making over \$250,000 a year should have to pay more, and he defended his insistence on getting a bill from lawmakers before they leave next month on their summer recess. Asked why he felt so strongly about the timeline, he replied, "because if you don't set a deadline in this town, nothing happens."

"And the deadline isn't being set by me," he said. "It's being set by the American people."

Mr. Obama acknowledged in the interview that lawmakers right now are "not where they need to be." He has invited Democrats on the House Energy and Commerce Committee to a meeting at the White House later Tuesday and he has a prime-time news conference scheduled for Wednesday night.

Asked about statements some Republicans have made indicating they think health care will damage his standing, Mr. Obama replied, "It's typical... Somehow people think this is about me. This is all about politics... All I can say is, this is absolutely important to me, but this is not as important to me as it is to the people who don't have health care. I've got health care."

Mr. Obama's meeting at the White House with House Energy panel Democrats follows a committee drafting session that lasted past midnight Monday as panel members slogged through numerous amendments, with majority Democrats turning back Republican attempts to change the bill. ([See related article.](#))

Prior to his meeting with the lawmakers, Mr. Obama planned brief remarks on health care, something that's become a near-daily occurrence as the president has moved swiftly from hands-off to deeply engaged on his top domestic priority.

Mr. Obama's increased personal involvement comes with Republican criticism sharpening, outside groups growing more strident and sticker shock reverberating around Capitol Hill in the wake of a bleak prognosis from the Congressional Budget Office last week saying lawmakers' health proposals wouldn't hold down costs.

Sen. John McCain said, "I do not underestimate the power of the president" in increasing pressure on Congress to pass a health care overhaul, but said he thought most Americans had become "very skeptical" about the proposal.

"This costs too much, taxes too much and spends too much and the American people are becoming very aware of it," the Arizona Republican said in an interview Tuesday on CNN.

In the Senate, negotiators seeking a bipartisan compromise reported progress Monday. Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus of Montana, said there's tentative agreement on four big policy issues out of a list of about one dozen. He wouldn't elaborate.

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