

The Washington Post

Obama gets tough on jobless benefits

By Michael D. Shear
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The gloves are off.

For the second time in three days, President Obama is planning to unload on his Republican adversaries, calling them out for blocking the passage of emergency unemployment insurance.

A White House official says the president will take to the Rose Garden at 10:30 Monday morning, where he will "have strong words" for the GOP lawmakers who have blocked the emergency legislation despite having supported identical measures under Republican presidents.

"And he will point out that they are calling for hundreds of billions of dollars in tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans while telling working families that we can't afford to help them when they need it most," the official said Sunday night.

Maybe it's the polls, which are showing a steady decline in Obama's numbers. Or maybe it's just the frustration of another big victory -- passage of historic Wall Street reform -- while majorities of the public say they don't trust his leadership on the economy.

Or maybe it's just that basketball-playing instinct finally kicking in. You know, the

sharp elbows he gives once in a while.

Whatever it is, the president of the United States is getting a little bit feisty. In his radio address Saturday morning, Obama unleashed a similar critique, accusing Republican senators of standing in the way of financial aid for middle America.

"They've got no problem spending money on tax breaks for folks at the top who don't need them and didn't even ask for them, but they object to helping folks laid off in this recession who really do need help," Obama said. "And every day this goes on, another 50,000 Americans lose that badly needed lifeline."

In the heat of the 2008 campaign, Obama managed some tough rhetoric aimed at Sen. John McCain and Sarah Palin. And at private fundraisers since he became president, he

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likes to poke fun at the other side, getting the Democratic crowd to chuckle at the expense of Republicans.

But this is different. The tone from Obama this weekend is tougher, and it's not aimed just at a partisan audience. It's aimed at the broader public, and the intent is clear -- to offer as stark a choice as possible between the Democrats and the Republicans ahead of the elections this fall.

He can't win the elections for the lawmakers; his political staff reminds them of that all the time. The comments from press secretary Robert Gibbs last weekend that the Democrats, mathematically, could lose the House was a subtle jab to that effect.

But Obama can help to shape the environment, and it seems like he is making it pretty clear that he's not going to stand by for the next four months and let the Republicans do whatever they want.

Don't expect fury. That's not Obama's style. He's still the cool, even-tempered president.

But watch closely Monday at 10:30. I bet you see more of that clenched jaw that he gets when he's serious about something.

It's official. We have a president who can't sit still.

Actually, we have a first family that seems unable to take a relaxing, do-nothing

vacation. Sit and read a book? Relax in front of the tube? What about a day spa? Not on your life. This family's idea of a break is nonstop activity.

The mini-Air Force One (actually a Gulfstream jet) had hardly landed in Bar Harbor, Maine, Friday afternoon when the president and his family were off for a 90-minute bike ride in the mountains.


That gave way, according to my colleague, Felicia Sonmez, to a walking tour of the national park: "President Obama, first lady Michelle Obama, Sasha and Malia arrived at the top of Cadillac Mountain at 2:36 p.m. Cadillac Mountain is highest elevation point in Acadia National Park and the highest elevation point on the Atlantic Coast at 1,500 feet, according to a sign at the site."

There was a stop at an ice cream shop (an Obama favorite) and by 3:41 p.m., they were at their hotel. But by 4:20, they were out

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again, this time for "a slow boat ride around Frenchman Bay."

Saturday involved two hours at a club where the family "played some tennis and hung out at the pool," a tour of a lighthouse at the southern end of the park, another hour-long hike, and then date night for the Obamas, at a restaurant advertising "American fine dining with a Latin flair, great atmosphere, extensive wine list, knowledgeable staff and sophisticated menu."

As Felicia wrote on Sunday, "Since their arrival Friday afternoon, the Obamas have been biking, hiking and boating their way around Mount Desert Island, the third-largest island on the Eastern Seaboard and home to the 47,000-acre Acadia National Park."

And it's not the first time. Their vacation to Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon involved white-water rafting and long hikes. Their weekend away in North Carolina started with another hike even before they had checked into the hotel. (Actually, the Secret Service does that for them.)

Maybe it's just that the Obama's feel cooped up in their new, fenced-in home. Or maybe all presidents are this hyper -- but Obama doesn't have a massive compound that he can escape to and avoid the press.

Either way, there's one thing for sure: The press is getting more of a workout keeping

up with him than it has in years.

Continuing his tradition of honoring sports teams, Obama will host the WNBA champion Phoenix Mercury at the White House to honor the team's 2009 championship season. The ceremony will be in the State Dining Room.

But that's not the only celestial body on his mind Monday. At 2:05 p.m., the president is scheduled to meet with former senator John Glenn (D-Ohio) in the Oval Office to talk about space policy.

The talk may be an uncomfortable one.

Glenn recently went public decrying Obama's plan to end the Space Shuttle program before having an alternate way to send Americans into space. In comments last week, Glenn -- one of America's most famous former astronauts -- said the shuttle program should not be shut down.

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"Why terminate a perfectly good system that has been made more safe and reliable through many years of development?" Glenn said.

Obama's decision, which will allow Americans to be sent to the International Space Station on Russian spacecraft, has split the small cadre of famed American astronauts.

The meeting with Glenn is closed to the press. But perhaps the onetime senator will remember how to get to the microphones set up in front of the West Wing, and we can find out what they talked about.

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