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President Heads West to Sell His Deficit Plan

By MARK LANDLER and HELENE COOPER

WASHINGTON — After weeks of tussling and political gamesmanship in Congress over federal spending, **President Obama** will take his message on the road this week, traveling to the West Coast to promote his deficit-cutting plan.

It is the first campaign-style tour for Mr. Obama since he emerged from the sidelines of the deficit debate last week with a speech calling for a mix of long-term spending cuts, tax increases and changes to entitlement-benefit programs.

With its emphasis on cutting the budget, the speech had elements to appease moderates and independents who have been drawn to the calls from freshman Republicans in Congress to rein in government spending. But at the same time, the address was a nod to the liberal wing in his party, with its progressive notes about the government's responsibility to provide a safety net to its citizens.

The 44-minute speech seemed to win over at least some leading liberal figures — a big first step toward shoring up and energizing his party's base at the outset of a re-election campaign that will inevitably require him to play to the middle and, potentially, draw renewed ire from the left.

“Undoubtedly, he rediscovered his voice,” said **Robert B. Reich**, the chancellor's professor of public policy at the **University of California, Berkeley**. “Hopefully, this will be his campaign voice.”

The trip, with stops in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Reno, Nev., is also Mr. Obama's first since the unofficial start of his re-election campaign in Chicago last week.

While he faces a fractured and late-starting field of Republican challengers, some political clouds hang over him, too.

In the latest Gallup tracking poll, Mr. Obama's approval rating was 41 percent, tied with the lowest level of his presidency. Among Democrats, his approval was 77 percent, four percentage points below his average rating in 2011 and seven points below his average rating since he became president.

It is hard to say whether Mr. Obama's deficit plan dampened his ratings, since the interviews were conducted on April 12 and 14, before and after the speech. But they clearly reflect worries about the economy and pessimism that the White House will find common ground with the Republicans.

Mr. Reich, who was labor secretary in the Clinton administration, said Mr. Obama's pledge to defend health care and [Social Security](#) would resonate with older voters, who deserted the [Democratic Party](#) in the last midterm elections. Democrats, he said, will also respond to Mr. Obama's vow to raise taxes for higher-income Americans when the Bush administration's tax cuts finally expire in 2012.

"His language had a kind of 'read my lips' quality that will make it hard to retreat from," Mr. Reich said. "The question remains whether he has closed the enthusiasm gap. I don't think one speech will do it."

Mr. Obama acknowledged as much on Thursday, speaking to 2,300 young supporters at Navy Pier in Chicago.

"I know there are times where some of you have felt frustrated because we've had to compromise with the Republicans on some issues," he said. "There have been times people are frustrated because we didn't get everything done in the first two years. There have been times where I felt the same way you do."

But Mr. Obama implored the crowd not to lose heart, declaring that the vision of America he laid out in his fiscal speech — one in which "we are connected to one another; that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper" — would animate his campaign and drive the debate in the 2012 election.

If Mr. Obama sticks to that message, it will cheer other Democratic constituencies, not least the labor movement. Unions were dismayed by the budget deal the White House struck with House Republicans in December to extend the [Bush tax cuts](#), even though it also extended unemployment insurance.

But union officials said Mr. Obama won them back last week. "The rhetoric of the speech was fabulous," said Thea Lee, the chief economist of the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) "It was a strong speech; it was a principled speech."

Ms. Lee said there was still uncertainty about parts of Mr. Obama's plan, notably how it would affect taxes. The White House said it could generate \$1 trillion in savings from "tax expenditures" — closing loopholes on deductions for charitable donations, interest payments on home mortgages and the like.

For frustrated Democrats, perhaps the only thing better than Mr. Obama's feisty speech last week about cutting the deficit were the even feistier remarks he made about the Republicans the next evening, at an intimate dinner with campaign contributors in a chic Chicago restaurant.

Speaking into a microphone that he thought was off, Mr. Obama bragged about how he had faced down House Republicans during budget talks. "You want to repeal health care? Go at it. We'll have that debate," Mr. Obama said, recalling a testy exchange with an aide to Speaker [John A. Boehner](#). "You're not going to be able to do that by nickel-and-diming me in the budget. You think we're stupid?"

The White House said later that Mr. Obama did not regret that his private remarks had been picked up by reporters. And why should he, Democratic loyalists asked.

After a period in which the party faithful fretted that Mr. Obama was giving up too much to the Republicans, those supporters were thrilled to see him come out swinging.

"He needs to be combative," Mr. Reich said. "The Republicans have been combative since he became president."



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