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June 7, 2010

Pushing a Liberal Agenda, With Democrats as Target

By JACKIE CALMES

WASHINGTON — From the capital to Arkansas, liberals plan to spend this week aiming some not-so-friendly fire at [President Obama](#) and Congressional Democrats.

Up to 2,000 liberal activists began assembling here on Monday for a conference to press the White House and Congress to fight harder for an ambitious progressive agenda, including a generous jobs bill, even as Democrats returned from a holiday recess to resume talks on further shrinking the proposed legislation to satisfy deficit-conscious colleagues.

But if things in the capital were not going as the activists wanted, they held out hope for change should Senator [Blanche Lincoln](#), a Democrat they deem too conservative, lose in a runoff on Tuesday night for her party's nomination. Liberal groups had [mobilized behind her rival, Bill Halter](#), in what they called "a shot across the bow" to other centrists who obstruct or weaken the Democratic agenda.

As dismayed as the left-leaning groups are by Congress's Democratic leadership, which they see as too conciliatory to party conservatives, many of them ultimately blame Mr. Obama for not standing up more forcefully to Republicans.

"This is the greatest reform president since [Lyndon Johnson](#), and every progressive in the movement is dismayed and disaffected," said Robert L. Borosage, the co-director of the liberal [Campaign for America's](#)

Future. “Some of that is expectations that were shattered” — by Mr. Obama’s lack of support for a public health insurance option and liberalized rules for union organizing, and his escalation in Afghanistan.

“But some of it is a broader question,” Mr. Borosage added, “which is you have these really historic reforms — the biggest recovery plan ever, the most comprehensive **health care reform** since **Medicare**, what will be the most comprehensive financial reform since the ’30s, the largest increase in student aid since the G.I. Bill — and none of them are sufficient to the cause that they address.”

That liberal lament is loudest right now on the issue of the government’s role in creating jobs.

A debate that has been simmering for months — between those who want more stimulus spending and tax cuts to avoid an economic relapse, and those who fear the economic and political fallout of deeper debt — is flaring now in Congress’s struggle to enact another measure to create private sector jobs and preserve many in the public sector.

Mr. Obama supports a jobs measure larger than **the one likely to pass in Congress** — though not as large as liberals want — that would extend compensation to the long-term unemployed through the rest of the year, aid strapped cities and states that are slashing payrolls and provide \$23 billion to prevent the layoffs of up to 300,000 teachers.

Yet Democrats in Congress are paring all those pieces to reduce the package’s size and thus secure Democratic votes in the face of Republicans’ near-united opposition.

Liberals say the president has prematurely encouraged the Democratic deficit hawks in Congress by his own anti-deficit rhetoric.

“The Congress is not stepping up and the president isn’t leading,” said Roger Hickey, Mr. Borosage’s co-director at the Campaign for America’s Future, which is sponsoring this week’s gathering. “He is not taking this to the country and saying, We’ve got to prevent the country from falling back into another **recession.**”

The activists will not be happy, then, to learn on Tuesday that just as they are demanding more jobs-related spending, Mr. Obama is calling for additional steps to reduce overall federal spending. Previously, and unsuccessfully, they opposed his initiatives for a three-year domestic spending freeze, a pay-as-you-go law

requiring offsetting savings for new spending and a bipartisan fiscal commission on reducing the debt, which the liberals view as a threat to [Social Security](#).

Mr. Obama's budget director, [Peter R. Orszag](#), in a speech to the liberal-leaning [Center for American Progress](#), will direct each federal agency, domestic and military, to identify under-performing programs equivalent to 5 percent of its department's appropriations. Also, for a second year the non-security-related agencies must show how they would budget if they were held to 5 percent below the planned freeze.

Mr. Orszag, in an interview, said that would give the administration options as it prepares its next budget for release early next year to either chop an agency's budget or "nip and tuck" various programs within it.

"I strongly believe that we need to be acting aggressively to address the twin deficits we face — the jobs deficit in the short run and the fiscal deficit in the medium and long term," Mr. Orszag said. "We ignore either one at our peril."

In truth, none of the cuts in annual appropriations will significantly reduce the long-term deficit projections. Those are driven mostly by escalating costs for the benefit programs that liberals most aggressively protect — Medicare, [Medicaid](#) and Social Security — and by insufficient tax revenues to support them.

For all their criticism, the activists say their conference also will aim to get out the liberal vote in November to prevent a Republican takeover of Congress.

"We cannot afford to let our disappointments get in the way of organizing," Mr. Borosage said. "At least, for the first time in 30 years, real reforms are on the table."

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