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With G.O.P. Unity at Risk, Boehner Tries Tougher Style

By CARL HULSE

WASHINGTON — Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) is a laid-back leader who likes to say that his role is to let the House work its will. But with the nation's economic standing and his own political future at risk, Mr. Boehner jettisoned his usual laissez-faire approach on Wednesday.

“I didn't put my neck on the line and go toe to toe with Obama to not have an army behind me,” Mr. Boehner declared at a private party meeting, according to some House members. He demanded the fealty of conservatives who were threatening to sink his budget proposal and deny him the chance to confront the Senate with a take-it-or-leave offer on a [debt ceiling](#) increase.

Mr. Boehner really had no choice but to go all out. A defeat of that plan — which seemed likely Tuesday night before its prospects improved Wednesday — would have been a disastrous repudiation, in effect a stinging vote of no confidence in him.

Since taking over what some people now describe as the worst job in Washington, Mr. Boehner has found himself caught between two imperatives: to lead his majority, bolstered by [Tea Party](#) newcomers, in its crusade to cut spending and the size of government, while serving as responsible partner in governing with a Democratic White House and Senate.

The current impasse is the starkest illustration yet of that tension as the speaker labors to persuade House Republicans, who find the notion of increasing the debt limit repugnant, to do so in order to prevent what Mr. Boehner, a former businessman himself, knows could be a disastrous default.

In a conference call to his membership on Sunday, Mr. Boehner reminded his caucus members that they had a duty to the nation, even if they did not like what he was asking them to do.

“Let me thank all of you for your patience, and for your confidence, and for your commitment to our country,” Mr. Boehner said, according to participants on the call. “We’re doing the right thing, and you all know that the right thing isn’t always the easiest thing to do.”

The speaker has used the many resources at his disposal to coax along his fellow Republicans, from listening sessions in which House leaders sought to educate Republican newcomers on the issue, to an informal party last week. It was held in a storied room on the first floor of the Capitol known as the Board of Education, where another speaker from Ohio, Nicholas Longworth IV, used to gather with colleagues during Prohibition to unwind. Mr. Boehner fed the freshmen debt limit talk along with pizza, sliders and chicken wings.

But it remained a tough sell, with Mr. Boehner in danger of losing the vote, particularly after a Congressional Budget Office report showed that the House plan fell short of the savings estimated by the speaker. The leadership regrouped, beefed up the savings in the measure, used the party meeting to make its case and appeared to gain ground headed into Thursday’s floor fight.

Though Mr. Boehner seems to have temporarily regained his footing with his Henry V performance in the party meeting — he received his third standing ovation in three days — he is hardly out of danger.

Even if he prevails in the House vote expected on Thursday, the next few days could still spell the difference between success and catastrophe for Mr. Boehner, whose Republican establishment temperament diverges sharply from the fire-breathing conservatives among the rank and file.

While it seems unlikely now, getting the Senate to swallow the House proposal would be a major

victory for the speaker, who will have delivered the solution to the debt impasse over the objections of Democrats and President Obama. But if Republican intransigence is blamed for a default or his caucus is forced to accept some version of the Senate Democratic plan — an outcome some House members would consider far worse than allowing the nation to not pay its bills — Mr. Boehner could be weakened.

Still, many Republicans consider him safe because of the general good will he has built with many members despite their differences. And there are few signals from other Republican leaders that they are ready, or even want, to take him on.

“I find it hard to believe that even if some critics have a beef with Boehner on how the final debt limit solution will look (and surely some will), that they will have the courage or the inclination to try to oust him,” John Feehery, a party strategist who served as a top aide to Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, wrote on his blog on Wednesday. “Boehner has done a good job.”

In interviews in recent weeks, roughly two dozen members, even some who vehemently oppose Mr. Boehner’s plan, said they respected how he had conducted his negotiations with the White House. And they said they appreciated his inclusiveness, especially freshmen who expected otherwise as they pushed early on for more aggressive cuts.

“Leadership gets great credit for having been very straightforward,” said Representative Robert W. Goodlatte of Virginia.

Representative Renee Ellmers of North Carolina said she came to Washington suspicious of Mr. Boehner. At Tea Party rallies before she was elected, she heard that he was part of the problem.

“When I got here I realized that wasn’t the case at all,” she said. “I was told he wasn’t conservative. He *is* conservative, and that’s what I tell other people in our discussions. He has been great to all the freshmen.”

Allies of the speaker say they expect that most of the 87 Republican freshmen will back the House debt limit plan in the end.

Despite all the vitriol in the debt limit fight, Democrats have been careful to not go too far in impugning Mr. Boehner — Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York, the No. 3 Democrat, on Wednesday called him a “good and reasonable man” — in the event they have to work with him. But they have also sought to portray him as a captive of the right wing of his caucus.

Still, Democrats are keeping the door open for Mr. Boehner, hoping that in the final resolution of the impasse he will have to join with them in enacting a debt limit increase that extends through 2012. At the moment, though, Mr. Boehner is not ready to walk through the opening.

Jennifer Steinhauer contributed reporting.



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