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Bombastic candidate absent when President-elect Trump meets with Obama

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President-elect Donald Trump was surprisingly gracious as he met President Barack Obama in the Oval Office on Thursday, but make no mistake: He is already working to erase major parts of Obama's legacy from the history books.

Trump will be able to change some of Obama's policies with a quick stroke of the pen. Others will be much more difficult, requiring justification to pass legal hurdles or buy-in from lawmakers on Capitol Hill or foreign leaders.

"He can make a big difference at the outset of his administration, but it will take him years and support from dubious congressional factions and allies overseas to get a lot of other things done," said Charles Tiefer, former solicitor and deputy general counsel of the House of Representatives and now a professor at the University of Baltimore law school.

Despite the strong rhetoric on the campaign trail, Obama and Trump were complimentary of each other after meeting for 90 minutes — longer than expected — seated alone in the Oval Office on Thursday.

There were no signs of the bombastic candidate, with Trump saying he has "respect" for an outgoing president he harshly criticized on the campaign trail. It was the first time the current and future presidents had ever met, Trump said.

Oddly, Trump told reporters the two discussed "some of the really great things" Obama has accomplished as president. The president-elect noted they discussed some issues that feature "difficulties," but he did not mention specific policy issues.

Both men described the meeting as cordial, with the president-elect saying he has "great respect" for Obama and noting what was supposed to be a 15-minute meeting lasted an hour-and-a-half.

"As far as I'm concerned it could have lasted a lot longer," Trump said. "We discussed a lot of different situations, some wonderful and some difficulties. I very much look forward to dealing with the president in the future."

He even said he looked forward to seeking Obama's "counsel" at times, a striking change from his campaign-trail depiction of Obama and other Washington leaders as "stupid."

"I have been very encouraged by the, I think, interest in President-elect Trump's wanting to work with my team around many of the issues that this great country faces," Obama told reporters after the meeting.

It was the first time the two had met. Obama described the conversation as "excellent," while Trump called Obama "a very good man."

It was only days ago that Obama had described Trump as a threat to the republic, blasting his temperament and policies. Long before the presidential race launched, Trump had spent years questioning whether Obama had been born in the United States and was able to serve as president.

"The two men did not re-litigate their differences in the Oval Office," White House press secretary Josh Earnest said. "We're on to the next phase."

Obama Chief of Staff Denis McDonough showed Trump's top adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, around the White House. First lady Michelle Obama met with Trump's wife, Melania Trump, while Vice President Joe Biden met with Vice President-elect Mike Pence.

Later in the day, Trump emerged from meetings with House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and noted that he wants to work on health care, immigration, lower taxes and job creation — all moving in an opposite direction from Obama.

In one important way, Obama made it easier for Trump to undo some of his accomplishments.

William Galston, a former White House adviser to Bill Clinton who is now a senior fellow at the center-left Brookings Institution, noted that Obama relied on a slew of executive actions to get things done after his Democratic Party lost control of Congress.

"One of the consequences of the last six years has been an increasingly expansive use of executive power," Galston said.

Trump's presidency puts many of Obama's achievements in jeopardy.

He has pledged to repeal the Affordable Care Act, pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, resume deporting immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally, kill policies designed to help ease climate change as well as the Trans-Pacific Partnership — a pending trade pact involving 12 Pacific Rim nations — and remove Obama's executive actions.

Trump will be able to rescind Obama's executive orders immediately if he wants.

Examples include those that bar companies that do work for the federal government from discriminating against employees on the basis of sexual orientation and those that halted the deportation of some immigrant children who are here illegally.

“Almost everything a president does by executive order can be undone by a subsequent executive order,” said Ken Mayer, a political science professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who wrote “With the Stroke of a Pen: Executive Orders and Presidential Power.”

Obama himself signed an executive order as soon as he came into office reversing a ban on funding to international family planning groups that provide abortions. It was implemented by Ronald Reagan, rescinded by Bill Clinton and restored by George W. Bush.

“You may ‘win’ or ‘lose’ every four to eight years, depending on whether the president shares your policy preferences, but at some point you have to wonder: Is this any way to govern a country?” asked Gene Healy, a vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute who is the author of “The Cult of the Presidency: America’s Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power.”

Unlike when President-elect Obama met with his predecessor, George W. Bush, there was no media pool traveling with the incoming chief executive. What’s more, media members were not present when Trump and his wife arrived and were greeted by the Obamas.

Instead, the Trump motorcade arrived on the south side of the White House, out of sight of journalists and their cameras.

In a light moment, as reporters were being escorted out of the Oval Office, Obama gave Trump some advice, telling him to never answer shouted questions.

Hours before the meeting, the White House sent out a lengthy fact sheet detailing efforts it launched months ago to ensure a smooth transition, no matter which candidate won. White House officials, led by Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, have been meeting with representatives of both campaigns to discuss the power hand-off process.

Obama earlier this year made the transition one of his top 2016 priorities, which stems from how impressed Obama was with how George W. Bush and his administration ran the hand-over to him.

An orderly handoff of power from one president to another is a “hallmark” of the American system, Obama said, adding, “we’re going to show that to the world.”