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Biden Emerges to Lead Deficit Talks in Congress With Obama's 'Full Accord'

By Kate Andersen Brower - Apr 19, 2011

Vice President Joe Biden might have struggled to stay awake last week when President [Barack Obama](#) spoke about his debt-reduction plan. Still, when Obama needed someone to forge a deal with Congress, he summoned his second-in-command.

For Biden -- who appeared to nod off for about 30 seconds during Obama's speech on fiscal policy -- the assignment to lead the debt talks with lawmakers was further evidence of how the president depends on him, especially when it comes to dealing with an increasingly hostile Congress.

Biden, who directed the White House campaign to reach an accord on this year's budget and avoid a government shutdown, will now head negotiations between Republican and Democratic lawmakers to come up with a plan by the end of June for comprehensive debt reduction. He has also been tapped to find votes in Congress to raise the U.S. debt limit, according to an administration official who asked for anonymity.

"He can do things; he has the president's full accord," [Alan Simpson](#), co-chairman of the president's debt commission, told reporters after an April 14 White House meeting with Obama, Biden and Erskine Bowles, the debt panel's other leader.

Simpson, a former Republican senator from [Wyoming](#), said one of the best decisions Obama made was asking Biden to be the "point person" on the deficit discussions.

Biden may be better known for his gaffes than his policy advice. In March 2010, he audibly whispered an expletive in Obama's ear at the signing of the health-care law. During the 2008 election campaign, [he introduced](#) Obama to a crowd as "Barack America" and at a rally urged a wheelchair-bound Missouri legislator to "stand up" and take a bow.

No 'Gaffe Machine'

His supporters insist that those who work with Biden, 68, take him seriously.

"Thinking people, the people you have to deal with in order to make the kind of things he's made happen, they don't think that Joe Biden's a gaffe machine," said longtime friend Ted Kaufman, who was appointed to Biden's Senate seat from [Delaware](#) after the 2008 election. "[Mitch McConnell](#) doesn't

underestimate him.”

That’s what Obama is counting on in naming Biden to oversee the discussions on deficit reduction.

House and Senate leaders from both parties will pick members from their caucuses to take part in the talks, and Biden will host the first meeting with lawmakers on May 5 at Blair House, the White House said yesterday.

\$4 Trillion Cut

In his April 13 speech Obama outlined his plan to reduce the deficit by \$4 trillion over 12 years. He set a target of reducing the annual U.S. deficit to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product by 2015, compared with the 10.9 percent of GDP projected for this year.

During the speech, Obama, 49, teased Biden, who is 19 years his senior, saying “you don’t qualify” as one of the young people the president was addressing who may wonder why deficits matter.

Biden, a 36-year veteran of the Senate who was either chairman or the top Democrat on the [Foreign Relations Committee](#) for 12 years, does qualify as a key presidential adviser, his backers say.

He successfully argued behind the scenes for a multilateral effort before the March 19 U.S. and allied intervention in Libya, according to another person familiar with the talks. And he led the campaign to win Senate support to approve ratification of a new arms-reduction treaty with [Russia](#).

Looking for Momentum

Since taking office in 2009, he has traveled to Baghdad six times to help wind down the war in [Iraq](#). And he oversaw distribution of the \$814 billion economic-stimulus package, an initiative that has drawn criticism from Republicans even as an [independent board](#) said that more than 75 percent of the funds have been allocated.

On the deficit, Obama is seeking to regain momentum after the release of a spending plan by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, a Wisconsin Republican, and an agreement with congressional Republicans on cuts for the current fiscal year that cleared the way for approval of a 2011 budget.

At the beginning of March, Obama asked Biden to coordinate the administration’s efforts to break a stalemate on the 2011 budget. Soon after, the vice president held a meeting with Senate Majority Leader [Harry Reid](#), a Nevada Democrat; House Speaker [John Boehner](#), an Ohio Republican; Senate Minority Leader McConnell, a Kentucky Republican; and House Minority Leader [Nancy Pelosi](#), a California Democrat, in his [Capitol Hill](#) office, according to chief of staff Bruce Reed.

Biden asked all staff members to leave, then pushed a plan for the Senate to vote on a pair of competing

proposals -- one a House Republican-backed measure to reduce the budget by \$61 billion and the other a Democratic alternative that would cut about \$10 billion.

‘Just Show’

The idea was to show those Republicans clamoring the loudest for deeper cuts that a compromise would be necessary. On March 9, the Senate rejected both options.

Senator [Susan Collins](#), a Maine Republican, called Biden “a constructive force in negotiations because he so understands Capitol Hill.”

Some analysts dismiss his contribution to the budget talks. Daniel Mitchell, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning research group, said Biden’s outreach to his former colleagues “is mostly just show.”

“He doesn’t have a budget and tax background and expertise,” Mitchell said.

Douglas Holtz-Eakin, who was chief economic adviser to the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, Senator [John McCain](#) of [Arizona](#), said Biden’s job of pushing Obama’s debt plan through Congress won’t be easy.

‘Pretty Thin’

“The president’s given a speech that’s pretty thin, and he’s left it to the vice president to bring to Congress,” said Holtz-Eakin, a former director of the [Congressional Budget Office](#).

Biden’s big strength may be in overseas affairs, having headed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee before becoming vice president.

His behind-the-scenes role on [Libya](#) was as “a voice of extreme caution” sketching out “downside scenarios” against intervention during meetings with the president, said Steve Clemons, founder of the American Strategy Program at the Washington-based New America Foundation, a centrist public policy center, whom the administration has consulted on Libya.

Biden’s argument ultimately prevailed. In his March 28 address to the nation on Libya, Obama stressed that the U.S. wasn’t going in alone to quell unrest. And shortly after the intervention began, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization took full control of all air operations over Libya.

‘Hard Feelings’

Still, some lawmakers say they wish that Biden had made more visits to Capitol Hill to talk about Libya.

“There are hard feelings that are deeper than the lack of public criticism would indicate about not being

consulted,” said Senator [Jeff Sessions](#), an Alabama Republican. “That’s in both parties.”

The White House “missed a great opportunity to not have the vice president be on top of the Libya situation from the beginning,” Sessions said in an interview. “All the senior members that are relevant he served with for a long time.”

Republican Senator [Orrin Hatch](#) of [Utah](#), who has known Biden for 34 years, said the vice president has the president’s ear, along with those of lawmakers.

“I have no doubt that they would not move ahead or backwards or any other direction without having [Joe Biden](#) in the room,” Hatch said.

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