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 [e7e8846556060800e10e6a706700b526.jpg](#) President Obama is sounding optimistic about prospects for the parties to work together, but two key battles await to test the limits of his personal and political capital. "I think that there's going to be politics, that's what happens in Washington," Obama told reporters as he headed back to Washington after 11 days in Hawaii.

Among the obstacles awaiting him is a re-energized Republican Party itching for confrontation, with plans to begin chipping away at Obama's signature health care reforms followed by a protracted showdown over the federal budget.

"They are going to play to their base for a certain period of time," Obama said of Republicans, "but I'm pretty confident that they're going to recognize that our job is to govern and make sure that we are delivering jobs for the American people and that we're creating a competitive economy for the 21st century."

After a string of late-session victories last month that included repealing the ban on gays serving openly in the military, cutting a tax-cut deal with Republicans and ratification of a nuclear arms treaty with Russia, Obama also is politically reanimated. His job approval ratings are back up to 50 percent after a long run in the mid-40s.

Obama also has a potent weapon in the arsenal: a high personal approval rating of 73 percent, according to a recent CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll. Even people who don't approve of the job Obama is doing like him personally.

Chris Reardon, a political scientist and pollster at the University of New Hampshire, noted that presidents with high personal likability ratings can often be more effective than their popularity job approval ratings would suggest or political opponents might expect.

"He hasn't done anything horrendous, people see he is a family man," Reardon said. "He might be cold and so forth, but he hasn't betrayed the country -- it's how he is perceived as a person."

Still, Obama faces potentially strident opposition on Capitol Hill.

House Republicans this month are expected to begin dismantling Obama's health care reforms. While a broad repeal is unlikely, opponents in Congress have various ways to scale back Obama's sweeping, signature achievement.

"They can do a number of things," said Michael Tanner, a health care policy expert at the Cato Institute, including hauling administration officials up to Capitol Hill for hearings, refusing to fund elements of reform or delaying implementation of the reform provisions.

"Can they overreach? Yes," Tanner said. But "the public hates the bill."

The administration is expected to release its budget blueprint in February, after Obama outlines his priorities in a State of the Union speech.

Republicans are planning to cut as much as \$100 billion in federal spending, rolling back the cost of government to 2008 levels.

Demonstrating Republicans' seriousness of purpose, incoming House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., declined on Tuesday to rule out cuts to defense spending, traditionally a GOP sacred cow.

Brian Riedl, an economics policy expert at the Heritage Foundation, said the Republicans' perceived fiscal mandate will inevitably lead to conflict with the administration.

"The White House may be under more pressure to produce a balanced budget in 10 years to bring some credibility to the process, but I don't see any common ground," Riedl said. "It may come down to who blinks first."

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