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Trump meets with House Republicans on migrant policy, leaving his position no more clear

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President Trump arrived at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday night to meet with Republicans from the House of Representatives to assure them that a fix was in the works for the deeply unpopular family separation policy at the U.S. border with Mexico. But first he headed for the office of House Speaker Paul Ryan, Republican of Wisconsin.

It was then that a female voice rang out, echoing off the marbled walls of the Capitol rotunda: “Mr. President, f*** you,” the unseen interloper shouted, as evidenced by a video that was shared and viewed thousands of times on social media by Tuesday evening. Trump did not react to the remark, which would have been plainly audible to him. More than anything, the incident was a sign of how contentious the debate over immigration had become.

It was unclear that Trump’s meeting with House Republicans, which followed his visit with Ryan, resolved much. Leaving the conclave, which was closed to the press, Republicans were optimistic but vague. The situation was reminiscent of Trump’s involvement in the effort to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, when he seemed to cheer Republican efforts without recognizing how fractured those efforts were.

“He wants to get it all done,” said Rep. Brian Mast as he emerged from the meeting, without saying whether Trump would support the so-called compromise bill championed by moderate Republicans or the significantly more restrictive legislation proposed by Bob Goodlatte, Republican of Virginia, a leading member of the Freedom Caucus, which shuns centrist compromise on most issues.

Mast also said that Trump wanted to “take care of those kids that’ve been separated,” an apparent reference to the 2,300 or so children who have been separated from their parents after crossing the border illegally. The separation is part of a new zero tolerance policy mandated by Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Trump voiced support for the policy Tuesday afternoon.

Rep. Chris Collins, R-N.Y., was confident of Trump’s support of the compromise bill, noting that it addressed Trump’s four primary demands of any immigration measure: a path to citizenship for children, known as Dreamers, brought to the United States illegally by their parents; a border wall, which could cost some \$25 billion; ending the diversity visa lottery program; and putting a stop what conservatives call “chain-migration,” the right of family

members already in the United States to sponsor other immigrants based on kinship. Those issues, Collins said, were “all tied together in a very neat package” in the bill he believes Trump will promote in the coming days.

Collins also said that Trump had been confronted by his daughter, influential adviser Ivanka Trump, with poignant images from the border. In the spring of 2017, Ivanka showed her father photographs of Syrian children who’d been gassed by dictator Bashar Assad. The disconcerting pictures led Trump to order airstrikes against Syria.

Democrats, however, do not regard the compromise bill as especially compassionate. Even if it does end the current policy of family separations, it otherwise restricts legal immigration and deals more harshly with immigration of the illegal variety. House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California branded the legislation “totally unworthy of America. The libertarian Cato Institute called it “the worst immigration legislation in almost a century,” underscoring its “draconian” features.

Taking a somewhat different tack, Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York said that it was unfair for Trump to put the onus on Congress, since the debacle on the southern border was entirely the making of the executive branch. “Legislation is not the way to go here when it’s so easy for the president to sign it,” he said, presumably referring to the use of the executive order, a power Trump has frequently resorted to. Trump has said that he is bound by law to separate families. That is untrue.

As has frequently been the case throughout his presidency, Trump is responsible for much of the confusion that has beset his agenda. Last Friday, he said he “certainly wouldn’t sign” the compromise bill, though it had in fact been drafted with White House input. A White House spokesman later explained that Trump would effectively endorse any legislation passed by House Republicans — even though there are significant differences between the Goodlatte proposal and compromise measures.

As of Tuesday evening, Republicans seemed relatively sure that Trump would be a booster for the more moderate of the two Republican proposals. Any lingering confusion on their part could be excused, given that Trump spent some of the time behind closed doors with House members discussing North Korea and international trade. He also insulted Mark Sanford, the Republican of South Carolina who lost a congressional primary to a pro-Trump candidate last week. Trump poured salt into Sanford’s wound, calling him a “nasty guy.” This reportedly led to what was described as a moment of near-palpable discomfort among the legislators. (Sanford later described the president’s broadside as “demeaning.”)

But with throngs of reporters waiting in the narrow hallways of the Capitol, congressional Republicans did their best to portray the meeting with Trump as something that had turned out to be halfway productive. Mia Love of Utah called the more moderate proposal that appeared to have gained the requisite support a “great compromise” because it addressed border security concerns while providing a path to citizenship for some undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children.

Particulars aside, Love said that the president’s message was plain: “I’m with you.”