



“Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now”

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Obama

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trol and his frustration with them was evident when he fumed in September, during the crisis over Syria: “I would much rather spend my time talking about how to make sure every 3- and 4-year-old gets a good education than I would spending time thinking about how I can prevent 3- and 4-year-olds from being subjected to chemical weapons and nerve gas.”

But presidents don’t get to pick their crises. And plenty of Obama’s woes were of his own making, raising questions about his competence and management of the White House.

How could he not have known that his government was spying on the private communications of friendly world leaders? Why didn’t he know his health care website wouldn’t work? How could he have promised over and over again that Americans could keep their health insurance if they liked it when his own advisers knew it wasn’t that simple?

As a result, the president is ending his fifth year in office in a “defensive crouch,” says presidential historian Douglas Brinkley, and may have to be content with simply protecting his health care law and other Democratic-backed programs that Republicans are eager to repeal.

At this point, says Brinkley, “it’s really a fire-wall presidency.”

The 2014 midterm elections give Obama his best opportunity to rebound. But Democrats,

DIXIE’S FIGHT



Surrounded by supporters at a press conference outside her home in Seattle's Central District, cancer survivor Dixie Mitchell talks about her struggle with foreclosure. Mitchell obtained a mortgage modification two years ago, but her monthly mortgage payments still take up two-thirds of her fixed income.

who just weeks ago saw an opportunity to retake the House after Republicans got blamed for the government shutdown, now fret about the health care law’s ongoing problems and

may be content to just keep control of the Senate.

There’s a certain irony in Obama’s success depending on Congress, a body with whom he has had a lukewarm partnership.

Lawmakers from both parties say Obama doesn’t talk to them much, nor do his aides. Letters go unanswered. Policies come out of the blue. Social interactions are few.

Both sides wistfully recall the voluble Clinton, who figured out how to craft deals with Republicans on welfare reform and other agenda items after the GOP took control of the House and made big gains in the Senate two years into his presidency.

Sen. Tom Coburn, an Oklahoma Republican who worked with Obama when he was a senator and still considers the president a friend, says flatly: “He’s flunked in terms of relations with Congress.”

“If you know him personally, he’s a very likable person,” says Coburn. “But it’s different than with most other presidents in terms of having relationships with Congress. ... There’s a lack of a personal touch.”

Of course, the president’s tepid relationship with Congress is hardly his fault alone. The tea party forces that pulled House Republicans to the right in recent years made it difficult for the GOP to reach agreement with Democrats on much of anything, and produced the showdown over the president’s health care law that spawned the government shutdown.

Obama did attempt to improve relations with Republicans earlier this year, holding a few dinners with GOP lawmakers. His chief of staff, Denis McDonough, has been widely praised by Republicans for being a frequent visitor to Capitol Hill.

But some lawmakers say that’s as far as the outreach goes. Sen. John McCain, the Arizona Republican who ran against Obama in 2008 but has since tried to work with him on immigration and the budget, said no one from the White House legislative affairs staff has ever called him or come to his office just to chat.

What does it matter if Obama doesn’t buddy up to his former colleagues?

He needs those relationships to advance his agenda in Congress. And the strained ties with legislators are emblematic of a broader problem for Obama rooted in his tendency to keep a tight inner circle.

“Instead of going out and talking to his enemies, making friends and schmoozing, or banging heads together with them or whatever, you can see that the man is diffident — deeply, deeply diffident about the kinds of politicking that are necessary to build consensus,” says Nigel Nicholson, a professor at the London Business School who has written a book about

CHIEF JOSEPH



Elizabeth Britton, granddaughter of Chief Joseph, visited Chief Joseph Elementary School in May. She told the children, “You’re nothing if you don’t know who you are.” Her visit brought tears to the eyes of Principal Joe Galati, at right, and other visitors as well.



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