

GOP leaders look to early health care bill, details vague

WASHINGTON (AP) — Under mounting pressure from Donald Trump and rank-and-file Republicans, congressional leaders are talking increasingly about chiseling an early bill that dismantles President Barack Obama's health care law and begins to supplant it with their own vision of how the nation's \$3 trillion-a-year medical system should work.

Yet even as Republicans said they will pursue their paramount 2017 goal aggressively, leaders left plenty of wiggle room Thursday about exactly what they will do.

Their caution underscored persistent divisions over how to recraft a law they've tried erasing since its 2010 enactment, plus their desire to avoid panicking the 20 million people who've gained coverage under Obama's overhaul or unsettling health insurance markets.

In an interview with conservative radio host Mike Gallagher, House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., said the initial repeal and replace legislation will be "the primary part of our health care policy" and would be followed by other bills. Later, he told reporters at the



In this Jan. 4 file photo, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Ky. pauses during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington.

Capitol that while Republicans will work quickly, "We're not holding hard deadlines, only because we want to get it right."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said the early repeal bill would "begin to make important progress." He said Republicans "plan to take on the replacement challenge in manageable pieces, with step-by-step reforms." He set no timetable.

"Repealing and replacing Obamacare is a big challenge. It isn't going to be easy," McConnell added.

The leaders spoke a day before the House plans to give final approval to a budget that would shield the forthcoming repeal-and-replace bill from a Democratic filibuster in the Senate.

Stripping Democrats of their ability to endlessly delay that bill — a tactic that takes 60 votes to thwart — is crucial for Republicans, who have just a 52-48 edge in the Senate. That chamber approved the budget early Thursday by a near party-line 51-48 vote, drawing a Twitter thumbs-up from Trump.

"Congrats to the Senate

for taking the first step to (hash)RepealObamacare — now it's onto the House!" the president-elect tweeted.

Trump, who enters the White House next Friday, has pressed Republicans in recent days to act quickly on annulling and reshaping Obama's law. GOP leaders seem to be taking his urgings to heart, though some have suggested his desire for speed doesn't match Congress' vintage lack of agility.

Asked how quickly lawmakers could send Trump a bill, No. 2 Senate Republican leader John Cornyn of Texas said, "The most important thing is when do you get 218 votes in the House and 51 votes in the Senate," the majorities needed for passage.

"He's not a creature of this place so there's always a bit of a learning curve," said the No. 3 Senate GOP leader, John Thune of South Dakota.

Obama's law, which he considers a trophy of his soon-to-end presidency, has provided health care subsidies and Medicaid coverage for millions who don't get insurance at work. It has required insurers to cover certain services like family

planning and people who are already ill, and curbed rates the sick and elderly can be charged.

Republicans hope to use their first bill to void and rewrite as much of Obama's law as they can, but so far they've provided little detail. Cornyn said in a brief interview Wednesday that the early legislation will "push some of the responsibility and resources down to the states and give them more flexibility," such as for Medicaid.

Republicans want to end the fines that enforce the statute's requirements that many individuals buy coverage and that larger companies provide it to workers — mandates that experts say were needed to stabilize insurers' rates.

They'd like to expand health savings accounts, erase the taxes Obama's statute imposed on higher-income people and the health care industry, eliminate its subsidies that help people buy policies and pare back its Medicaid expansion.

But they face internal disagreements over policy, such as how to pay for their new statute and how to protect consumers and

insurers during what may be a two- or three-year phase-out of Obama's overhaul.

They also must head Senate rules forbidding provisions that don't directly affect taxes and spending from being safeguarded from filibusters. That means repealing important parts of the law — like the requirement that insurers offer coverage to all customers including the most ill — would have to await later bills that would need Democratic support.

Democrats have so far solidly opposed the GOP effort.

But one influential conservative health care authority warned Republicans Thursday that it would be best to work with their rivals.

"Bipartisan support for whatever is assembled is the best way, and probably the only way, to ensure that what passes in 2017 is accepted by the public" in a way Obama's law was not, James Capretta, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who formerly worked for President George W. Bush, wrote Thursday in National Review Online.



In this 1994 file photo, Cuban refugees float in seas, 60 miles south of Key West, Fla. President Barack Obama announced Thursday he is ending a longstanding immigration policy that allows any Cuban who makes it to U.S. soil to stay and become a legal resident.

Obama ends visa-free path for Cubans who make it to U.S. soil

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama announced Thursday he is ending a longstanding immigration policy that allows any Cuban who makes it to U.S. soil to stay and become a legal resident.

The repeal of the "wet foot, dry foot" policy is effective immediately. The decision follows months of negotiations focused in part on getting Cuba to agree to take back people who had arrived in the U.S.

"Effective immediately, Cuban nationals who attempt to enter the United States illegally and do not qualify for humanitarian relief will be subject to removal, consistent with U.S. law and enforcement priorities," Obama said in a statement. "By taking this step, we are treating Cuban migrants the same way we treat migrants from other countries. The Cuban government has agreed to accept the return of Cuban nationals who have been ordered removed, just as it has been accepting the return of migrants interdicted at sea."

The Cuban government praised the move. In a statement read on state television, it called the signing of the agreement "an important step in advancing relations" between the U.S. and Cuba that "aims to guarantee normal, safe and ordered migration."

Obama is using an administrative rule change to end the policy. Donald Trump could undo that rule after becoming president next week. He has criticized Obama's moves to improve relations with Cuba. But ending a policy that has allowed hundreds of thousands of people to come to the United States without a visa also aligns with Trump's commitment to tough immigration policies.

President Bill Clinton created "wet foot, dry foot" policy in 1995 as a revision of a more liberal immigration policy that allowed Cubans caught at sea to come to the United States become legal residents in a year.

The two governments have been negotiating an end to "wet foot, dry foot" for months and finalized an agreement Thursday. A decades-old U.S. economic embargo, though, remains in place, as does the Cuban Adjustment Act, which lets Cubans become permanent residents a year after legally arriving in the U.S.

Under the terms of the agreement, Cuba has agreed to take back those turned away from the U.S., if the time between their departure from Cuba and the start of deportation hearings in the U.S. is four years or less. Officials said the timeframe is required under a Cuban law enacted after Congress passed the Cuban Adjustment Act.

"For this to work, the Cubans had to agree to take people back," said Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser.

Administration officials called on Congress to repeal the Cuban Adjustment Act.

Officials said the changes would not affect a lottery that allows 20,000 Cubans to come to the U.S. legally each year. But Rhodes cast the shift as a necessary step toward Cuba's economic and political development.

"It's important that Cuba continue to have a young, dynamic population that are clearly serving as agents of change," he said.

Rhodes also cited an uptick in Cuban migration, particularly across the U.S.-Mexico border — an increase many have attributed to an expectation among Cubans that the Obama administration would soon move to end their special immigration status.

Since October 2012, more than 118,000 Cubans have presented themselves at ports of entry along the border, according to statistics published by the Homeland Security Department, including more than 48,000 people who arrived between October 2015 and November 2016.

Trump's pick for top diplomat splits from him in many ways

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rex Tillerson's foreign policy isn't sounding much like Donald Trump's. At his confirmation hearing Wednesday, the former Exxon Mobil CEO selected by Trump for secretary of state called Russia a "danger" and vowed to protect America's European allies. He rejected the idea of an immigration ban on Muslims. He treaded softly on the human rights records of key U.S. partners like Saudi Arabia.

In the words of Sen. Bob Corker, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's GOP chairman, Tillerson "demonstrated that he's very much in the mainstream of foreign policy thinking." But doing so forced Tillerson to break with several of the president-elect's most iconoclastic statements on diplomacy and international security.

Again and again, Tillerson hewed more closely to long-standing, bipartisan positions on America's role in the world, and who are its friends and foes.

That may help Tillerson win over senators who've expressed wariness about his extensive relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. But it could leave him putting a Trump foreign policy in place that looks little like the vision he outlined Wednesday.

A look at where Tillerson's views didn't quite match those of his would-be boss:

RUSSIA

Tillerson adopted a tough tone toward Moscow, apparently attempting to rebut the perception that he's too close to Putin.

The Russian leader previously awarded Tillerson his country's "Order of Friendship" following Exxon's deals with Russia's oil industry. But on Wednesday, Tillerson called Putin's Russia a threat to the United States.

Whereas Trump as a candidate played down Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, arguing the population there was pro-Russian anyway, Tillerson said the annexation was illegal and amounted to "a taking of territory that was not theirs."

Whereas Trump's campaign team last summer softened language in

the GOP platform calling for arming Ukraine, Tillerson said he would have recommended providing U.S. and allied defensive weapons, plus aerial surveillance, so the Ukrainians could protect their Russian border.

"The taking of Crimea was an act of force," Tillerson said. When Russia flexes its muscles, he said the U.S. must mount "a proportional show of force."

Still, the Kremlin said Thursday the former Cold War foes can overcome their differences once Trump takes office. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said he hopes the two presidents will get along and they can normalize ties if they show "mutual respect."

CAMPAIGN HACKING

Before Wednesday, Trump spent weeks ridiculing the U.S. intelligence agencies' accusations that Russia hacked and leaked emails, spread "fake news" and took other actions to interfere with the U.S. election.

Tillerson wasted no time in accepting the findings. He even went further than Trump, conceding it's a "fair assumption" the hacking couldn't have taken place without Putin's consent.

Not Trump, who has repeatedly praised Putin's leadership. While he said at a news conference Wednesday that "I think it was Russia," Trump sidestepped the question of Putin's responsibility. Instead, he argued, "If Putin likes Donald Trump, guess what, folks? That's called an asset, not a liability."

THE MUSLIM BAN

During the campaign, Trump called for a temporary ban on Muslims immigrating to the U.S. The proposal then evolved into halting immigration from countries linked to terrorism. Trump later suggested he was reconsidering the Muslim ban.

"I do not support a blanket type rejection of any particular group of people," Tillerson said categorically at his hearing. He said the U.S. should "support those Muslim voices" that reject extremism and insisted Americans shouldn't be scared of Muslims.

RAPISTS AND CRIMINALS

Trump started his presidential bid by taking aim south of the border, accusing Mexico of sending "rapists" and criminals with drugs into the U.S.

Asked about those sentiments, Tillerson said he would "never characterize an entire population with any single term at all."

Mexico and other Latin American nations are anxious about Trump's campaign pledges to build a border wall and deport millions of immigrants illegally in the U.S.

Tillerson, by contrast, said he would engage closely with Mexico. "Mexico is a long-standing neighbor and friend of this country," he said.

DEFENDING ALLIES

Trump sent chills through much of Europe when he suggested the U.S. might not defend its NATO allies if they came under attack, unless they'd contributed enough to the alliance's collective defense costs.

He later qualified his comments, while insisting NATO's future depended on members paying their fair share.

Tillerson offered ironclad support for NATO's Article 5, which obligates the allies to treat an attack on one as an attack on all. If a NATO member is invaded, the oil man said, the U.S. would join other members in coming to its defense.

"The Article 5 commitment is inviolable, and the U.S. is going to stand behind that commitment," Tillerson said.

SAUDI ARABIA

Trump used Saudi Arabia's shoddy human rights record as a campaign cudgel against Hillary Clinton, pointedly asking why she wouldn't "give back the money" the kingdom gave her family foundation.

He called out Saudi Arabia and other Mideast countries for violence against gays and women, and other human rights violations.

Tillerson played it more conservatively with a country at the heart of the American security strategy for the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia doesn't share American values, he said.

But Tillerson said he needed "greater information" before declaring Saudi Arabia a human rights violator.

It was an answer that wasn't well received by all the senators present. But it was, to use a turn of phrase, diplomatic.

Obama awards Biden the Medal of Freedom

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama awarded Vice President Joe Biden with the highest civilian honor Thursday, commemorating an "extraordinary man with an extraordinary career in public service."

A teary-eyed Biden accepted the Presidential Medal of Freedom at a ceremony at the White House dedicated to honoring the outgoing vice president.

Obama said he is bestowing the honor on Biden for "faith in your fellow Americans, for your love of country and a lifetime of service that will endure through the generations."

Biden praised his wife and children for their support



President Barack Obama presents Vice President Joe Biden with the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Thursday.

throughout his career, and praised the Obama family for their dedication to

country and service.

"I was part of the journey of a remarkable man who

did remarkable things," Biden said.

Speaking ahead of Biden, Obama said the tribute will give the Internet one last chance to joke about the "bromance" the two share. He called Biden the "best possible choice, not just for me, but for the American people."

Obama commended the "Biden heart," listing the influences in Biden's life, from the nuns who taught him in grade school, to his Senate colleagues, to his parents.

Noting that Biden's career is "nowhere close to finished," Obama said his vice president will go on to have an impact in the U.S. and abroad.