



# Obama dominates the room at healthcare summit

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By Caren Bohan

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - It was a unique insight into President Barack Obama's management style.

Obama dominated the debate during Thursday's nearly seven hour cross-party summit on healthcare, always in command not only of the room but also of the most intricate policy details, as he personally rebutted every point he disagreed with.

His tone was at times professorial, occasionally combative and at one point even dismissive of his 2008 rival for the presidency, Republican Senator John McCain.

"Let me just make this point, John, because we're not campaigning anymore," he told McCain. "The election's over."

"Well, I'm reminded of that every day," McCain replied.

It remains to be seen if the American public was more convinced by Obama's detailed exposition of policy or the Republicans' more visceral argument against an expansion of Washington's powers.

What is certain is that there was little progress toward

generating a greater bipartisan consensus around a reform of the mammoth healthcare industry.

"There are some fundamental differences between us that we cannot paper over," Jon Kyl, the No. 2 Senate Republican, told Obama. "We do not agree about the fundamental question of who should be in charge."

Perhaps it was no surprise that there was little progress on Thursday. Democrats said there had already been more than 100 bipartisan meetings on healthcare since Obama came to power a year ago, yet the two sides seem to have drifted further apart than ever.

Arguably the event was more about trying to win popular support for Obama's healthcare plan -- and shoring up his own Democratic base -- than it was about bridging the ever widening gulf between America's two main parties over healthcare.

Convening nearly 40 lawmakers around a cramped square table in the Blair House guest quarters across from the White House, Obama was at his most schoolmasterly as he warned participants against turning the event into "political theater" or an exercise in pointscoreing.

He was almost scornful of Republican Congressman Eric Cantor for sitting behind a copy of the 2,700-page Democratic legislation the Republicans say is overly complex and beholden to special interests.

"We don't care for this bill," Cantor said.

Obama accused him of using the pile of papers as "a prop".

"The truth of the matter," he added, "is that healthcare is very complicated."

Nevertheless, Obama's fellow Democrats were as guilty of playing to the gallery, as they recounted tales of constituents denied healthcare coverage for pre-existing medical conditions or struggling to cope with rising premium costs.

Congresswoman Louise Slaughter told of one constituent who had to wear the false teeth of her dead sister because she couldn't afford dental care.

And fellow Democrat George Miller offered himself as an example of someone who could be denied coverage for pre-existing health conditions, with a list of ailments including two artificial hips, arthritis and a kidney stone.

Obama himself tried to tug at America's heartstrings with tales of family scares, when his daughter Malia had to be rushed to the emergency room with asthma and the time his other daughter Sasha came down with meningitis as a baby.

"In each of those instances I remember thinking while sitting in the emergency room what would have happened if I didn't have reliable health care," the president said.

The marathon event was inspired by a showdown Obama had with Republican members of the House of Representatives last month at their annual retreat in Baltimore.

The White House felt Obama won the debate in Baltimore, successfully portraying himself as above the partisan fray.

While it had its moments of drama, the Blair House summit had less back-and-forth than Baltimore, with participants resorting to the kind of lengthy statements typical of Capitol Hill hearings.

Obama took notes occasionally, at times resting his head on his hand. He smiled rarely. His most common expression was one of serious contemplation and thoughtful consideration of the opposing arguments.

Only a handful of aides attended the event, in a room barely big enough for those crowded around the table in wooden chairs.

Beneath a crystal chandelier, and between marbled walls, the room echoed and magnified the sounds of people shuffling paper or getting up from their seats for a break.

Several times, Obama reminded them of the need to be more disciplined about keeping their remarks shorter, although he acknowledged he had gone over his allotted time too.

Afterwards, Kyl complained Obama had talked too much.

"I just don't think the president was listening."

(Writing by Caren Bohan and Simon Denyer; editing by Anthony Boadle)

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