

## Trump to McConnell: 'Get back to work...You can do it!'

By: *Stephen Loiaconi*

President Donald Trump challenged Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell Thursday to advance his stalled agenda on health care, taxes, and infrastructure, refusing to say whether the Kentucky Republican should step down if he fails.

Tweeting from his private golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, where he is spending more than half of August, Trump demanded that McConnell get back to work.

It was the third time in two days that Trump has used his Twitter megaphone to shame the top Republican in the Senate in front of his 35.5 million followers.

Asked by reporters later in the afternoon whether McConnell should abdicate his leadership position, Trump was non-committal.

"I'll tell you what, if he doesn't get repeal and replace done, and if he doesn't get taxes done, meaning cuts and reform, and if he doesn't get a very easy one to get done, infrastructure, he doesn't get them done, then you can ask me that question," he said.

McConnell has not directly responded to Trump's insults. The White House confirmed that the two men spoke prior to Trump's first Twitter attack on Wednesday.

The tension between the president and McConnell comes as a CNN poll shows 68 percent of Americans feel this Congress has been a failure so far and approval of Republican congressional leaders has fallen to 24 percent. In comparison, Trump's 38 percent approval rating does not look so bad.

According to the poll, 38 percent of Americans place blame on Republicans in Congress for the lack of major legislation this term, while 26 percent blame Trump. A quarter of respondents said Democratic opposition was responsible.

As far as criticisms of President Trump go these days, McConnell's comments to a Rotary Club in Kentucky on Monday were fairly tame.

"Our new president, of course, has not been in this line of work before," he said, according to the Cincinnati Enquirer. "And I think he had excessive expectations about how quickly things happen in the democratic process. So part of the reason I think people think we're under-performing is because of too many artificial deadlines unrelated to the reality or complexity of the legislature may not have been understood."

He also noted that he is "not a fan of tweeting," and said, "I think it would be helpful if the president would be a little more on message."

Although McConnell insisted that he and Trump "get along good," his mild critique of the president's understanding of the legislative process drew the ire of the White House.

Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters Thursday that Trump has "some frustration" with McConnell, but there is no indication yet of a complete breakup. Earlier this week, Trump endorsed McConnell's preferred candidate for the Alabama special election to fill Attorney General Jeff Sessions' Senate seat.

The GOP primary for the seat is next week, and the race has at times seemed to be a proxy fight over McConnell's leadership. The majority leader is backing the seat's current holder, Sen. Luther Strange, but Strange's opponents have run ads blasting McConnell's failures.

Pro-Trump media has taken aim at the majority leader as well.

"You just sound like you lived in the swamp your entire life, and it sounds pathetic," Sean Hannity said on the radio Wednesday, urging McConnell to retire.

"Ditch Mitch and Soon," Fox Business anchor Lou Dobbs tweeted.

According to the Alliance for Securing Democracy, use of the hashtag "#DitchMitch" surged Wednesday among bots and trolls "linked to Russian influence operations."

Even some Trump critics have acknowledged that after seven years of Republicans incessantly vowing to repeal and replace Obamacare, expecting them to repeal and replace Obamacare was not "excessive."

"There is no way to sugarcoat this: The Republican Party promised for eight years to repeal and replace Obamacare. We failed, and if we give up, shame on us," Sen. Lindsey Graham told Fox News' Brian Kilmeade.

With the Senate out of session and Trump in Bedminster, it is unclear how serious this feud is or how far its ramifications will stretch when they return to Washington. A few errant tweets in early August may be forgotten by Labor Day, but a deeper schism could derail the GOP's priorities at a crucial time.

“The legislative agenda only becomes more difficult and the timeline more condensed when Congress is back after Labor Day,” said Republican strategist Matt Mackowiak, host of the “Mack on Politics” podcast.

Raising the debt ceiling and passing a continuing resolution to fund the government will by necessity be the top priorities for Congress when they return. Accomplishing more than that will require the White House and Republicans on Capitol Hill to work together more effectively than they have so far.

“Senate Republicans need to admit they over-promised on Obamacare and failed in their first attempt to repeal and replace, while committing not to give up,” Mackowiak said. “The White House needs to be more disciplined and begin working with Congress in a more constructive way.”

The relationship between Trump and the Republican establishment has always been a marriage of convenience at best, but experts say the open antagonism of McConnell is a new and ill-advised development.

“Both sides are clearly frustrated, but a public spat between Senate Republicans and the President is a road to nowhere,” Mackowiak said. “They may not like each other, but undoubtedly they need each other.”

Democratic strategist Matt McDermott struggled to see much political benefit in Trump’s behavior.

“Honestly, I can’t think of a single, politically-sound explanation for Trump’s public hostility towards Mitch McConnell,” he said. “At the moment, McConnell essentially holds the keys to Trump’s agenda. Without his enthusiastic support, Trump is a lame duck president.”

Trump could be out holding town halls and press conferences to sell Republican policies to voters, but instead, according to McDermott, “he hides away at his golf course and threatens other people to do the job he’s proven he can’t do.”

“The reality is that picking fights and boasting about his own amazingness is all Trump knows how to do, so it’s all he has done,” he said.

Bob Mann, a former Senate press secretary and a professor at Louisiana State University, said Trump’s ability to credibly cyberbully Congress is somewhat limited, as evidenced by the open defiance he has faced from some members in recent weeks.

“For McConnell and Republicans, this is more of an annoyance than a real problem at this point,” he said.

Mann doubts Trump can goad McConnell into picking up the Obamacare repeal ball and running with it again. The majority leader already devoted much more time and effort to getting a bill passed than most expected.

“Trump is becoming less and less significant as a political figure, at least for now, and McConnell’s got a lot more latitude than he might have had six months ago or even three months ago,” he said.

Despite his ongoing Twitter rage over the failed repeal, Mann

said Trump’s behavior is not that of a man who actually wants to pass a health care reform plan. Instead, he sees a preemptive effort by the president to shirk the blame for premium hikes and the potential collapse of the ACA markets.

“This is more about trying to insulate himself from the blowback that comes when things really start going south...,” Mann said. “If he were really trying to pass a bill, you wouldn’t be insulting your leadership in the Senate.”

For advocates of tax reform hoping for progress this year, the GOP infighting comes at an unfortunate time. Under the best of circumstances, revising the tax code is a heavy lift.

Mann, who worked for Sen. Russell Long during the 1986 tax reform debate, recalled, “That was really difficult and complex. It was a long, long, long process.”

Conservative advocacy group FreedomWorks and the Job Creators Network recently launched an “Axes2Taxes” tour promoting tax reform. At the Nashville stop, experts emphasized the importance of tackling the issue.

“At the very least we need to lower taxes for working and middle-class families,” Andy Puzder, Trump’s former nominee for secretary of labor, told WZTV at the event. “We need to lower taxes for small businesses, and we need to do something to incentivize companies to bring back dollars they have overseas. If we can do just those three things, I think we’re going to see a dynamic impact on economic growth.”

With Republican control of the House, Senate, and White House, Puzder, former CEO of CKE Restaurants, remains optimistic.

“Look, if Republicans can’t enact tax reform, why did we elect them?” he asked.

Alfredo Ortiz, president and CEO of the Job Creators Network, acknowledged Thursday that it is late in the year to realistically expect full-scale tax reform by December.

“What we’re pushing for is tax cuts at a minimum,” he said. Specifically, JCN is fighting for a significant tax cut for the middle class and small businesses.

Broader reforms of the tax system, including a corporate tax rate cut, are still on his wish list, but a cut aimed at the middle class and business owners would benefit 85 million people.

“I think it would be enough to get the economy in better shape than it is right now,” Ortiz said.

More importantly, a tax cut for the middle class has the potential to win bipartisan support, especially if it is divorced from more politically dicey cuts aimed at the wealthiest Americans.

“We believe that’s one thing that everybody can agree on,” he said.

Health care remains a top priority for many voters, and Ortiz believes it is something Congress can work on while it advances tax reform, but he sees a narrow tax cut as Republicans’ best chance for a victory to bring home to their constituents this fall.

“I do believe they need to walk out of 2017 with a legislative win,” he said.