WASHINGTON MEMO

Despite Major Plans, Obama Taking Softer Stands

By DAVID M. HERSZENHORN and JACKIE CALMES

WASHINGTON — President Obama is well known for bold proposals that have raised expectations, but his administration has shown a tendency for compromise and caution, and even a willingness to capitulate on some early initiatives.

It was inevitable that Mr. Obama’s lofty pledge to change the ways of Washington would crash into the realities of governing, including lawmakers anxious to protect their constituents and an army of special-interest lobbyists.

Mr. Obama has not conceded on any major priority. His advisers argue that the concessions to date — on budget items, for instance — are intended to help win the bigger policy fights ahead. But his early willingness to deal or fold has left commentators, and some loyal Democrats, wondering: where’s the fight?

“The thing we still don’t know about him is what he is willing to fight for,” said Leonard Burman, an economist at the Urban Institute and a Treasury Department official in the Clinton administration. “The thing I worry about is that he likes giving good speeches, he likes the adulation and he likes to make people happy.”

So far, he said, “It’s hard to think of a place where he’s taken a really hard position.”

In some of his earliest skirmishes, Mr. Obama eventually chose pragmatism over fisticuffs.

Congressional Democrats effectively killed his proposal to slash farm subsidies by nearly $1 billion a year, and forced him to retreat partially on a plan to require private insurers to pick up more of veterans’ health costs. They also got him to shelve the idea of a commission to buttress Social Security’s finances.

And Thursday, Mr. Obama suggested that he would not fight in Congress to renew an assault weapons ban that expired in 2004. It was the latest example of the pragmatic approach he adopted after winning the presidency by promising to challenge entrenched interests and put the public good ahead of political expedience.
Mr. Obama’s top aides dismiss suggestions that he has shied from confrontation, saying they ignore his achievements, the need to move quickly to address economic woes and the fights he has picked against some big interest groups in Washington, including components of the Democratic base, like organized labor.

Pragmatism, they add, is an Obama hallmark, and among the changes he promised — and has delivered — is a break from his predecessor’s often uncompromising style.

The extent to which he is willing to yield to lobbyists, Congressional committee leaders and interest groups, however, will be determined as the White House tackles health care and other big issues on a list that seems to grow: immigration, for instance, is now in the mix.

“We’re not taking on a fight; we’re taking on a multiple-front fight because we’ve taken on a series of entrenched interests across the waterfront — from education to health care, and the defense industry, and the lobbying industry as a whole,” the White House chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, said. “There will be a scorecard at the end of which ones we won and which ones we didn’t, but every one of those policy challenges have been initiated by us.”

Mr. Obama’s allies point to his winning the second $350 billion in financial bailout money from a reluctant Congress; a pay-equity law for women; expanded government health insurance for children, including — at his insistence — legal immigrant children; and the $787 billion economic recovery bill that reached his desk, as demanded, by mid-February.

All that may end up looking easy compared with the fight on health care, which will most likely require him to stand up to hospitals, doctors, insurance companies and their patrons in Congress. He might have to finance the plan in a way that raises costs for the middle class, perhaps by taxing employer-provided health benefits — an idea he attacked in the campaign.

Facing Democratic opposition in Congress, the White House seems prepared to give up on several tax proposals, including a limit on deductions that the wealthiest taxpayers can claim for charitable donations and state and local taxes, which was supposed to help pay for health care legislation — raising doubts about how the president will finance it.

Wider Democratic majorities in Congress, while beneficial to the White House agenda, also mean a wider range of demands to be met.

Representative Charlie Melancon, a Louisiana Democrat and leader of the fiscally conservative Blue Dog coalition, praised the president’s willingness to make concessions. “If you go into the budget, you’ll see there were concessions that were agreed to by the White House that were allowed to be put in by the Blue Dogs,” he said. “There was a little pushback, but they understood.”

Experts on the presidency say that Mr. Obama, after promising profound change during the campaign last year, may have no choice but to continue talking big.
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“If Obama is too timid, if the White House is too cautious,” said Robert Dallek, a presidential historian, “it is going to make him look too opportunistic. He made all these promises during the campaign, he talked so boldly, he stirred all our hopes, and now he is not following through.”

On complex issues like health care, Mr. Dallek said, there is advantage in angling for the final say.

“It’s kind of a technique to keep power in your hands,” he said. “Let these guys in the House, let the folks in the Senate battle with one another, battle it out. They are going to have to come to the president and have him adjudicate.”

Administration officials say the approach to the economic stimulus bill is likely to be a model for dealing with Congress and interest groups, reflecting a style that fits the president’s temperament and a West Wing with deep experience on Capitol Hill. Even before Mr. Obama took office, the stimulus started with a draft in the House that reflected his bottom line, his spending priorities and more tax cuts than many liberal Democrats wanted. Harder negotiations occurred in the Senate, where Democrats remain short of the votes needed to overcome Republican filibusters.

In the end, there was no grandstanding about big ideas. Instead, Mr. Emanuel and the budget director, Peter R. Orszag, set up shop in the office of the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, and worked through the final demands to get the votes to clinch an agreement.

The administration seems content to let Democrats like Senator Max Baucus of Montana, a moderate to conservative, and Representative Henry A. Waxman, a California liberal, take the lead on health care, knowing that Mr. Obama can flex his political muscle later.

It does not hurt that Jim Messina, once chief of staff to Mr. Baucus, is a deputy White House chief of staff, or that Philip M. Schiliro, Mr. Waxman’s former chief of staff, is Mr. Obama’s chief liaison to Congress.