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President Trump, with Senate Majority Leader John Thune on Wednesday, surprised fellow Republicans by scrapping plans to sign a housing bill that he previously championed. EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/ REUTERS

Trump Derails Housing Bill, Fueling Strains

GOP meeting turns fiery over Iran war as president again presses voting bill

By Lindsay Wise , Siobhan Hughes and Marianne LeVine

WASHINGTON—President Trump abruptly canceled plans to sign bipartisan housing legislation while again pushing a bill that would impose strict new voter-eligibility rules, and hours later engaged in a fiery clash with one of his top Republican critics over the Iran war.

Trump's blindsiding of lawmakers and his contentious lunch meeting with GOP senators on Wednesday heightened tensions within the Republican Party as November elections edge closer. Frustrations have been mounting for months while the White House ignored Congress on the Iran war and Trump targeted some longtime lawmakers for defeat over what he deemed insufficient loyalty. More recently, Trump derailed plans to extend a key surveillance power and install a new intelligence chief.

The lunch meeting with GOP senators was called to focus on the SAVE America Act, which Trump sees as critical to helping Republicans win in midterm elections. But the bill is opposed by some Republicans and all Democrats and doesn't have enough support to pass. Inside the room, Trump quickly turned the conversation to Iran. The president and Sen. Bill Cassidy (R., La.) shouted at each other about the war and the senator's recent vote to rein in the president's war powers.

Trump, a Republican who engineered Cassidy's defeat in his primary last month, called the outgoing senator a "loser" and told him to sit down, according to people familiar with the exchange. Cassidy replied that no one tells him to sit down.

The president also ripped into Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and chided Rand Paul of Kentucky, people familiar with the matter said. The two GOP senators voted with Cassidy, Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine) and most Democrats to pass a nonbinding resolution on Tuesday that would direct Trump to remove U.S. troops from hostilities against Iran. The House had earlier passed the measure.

Speaking after the lunch, Cassidy said he had lost his temper. He said that Trump had brought up the Iran war powers resolution, asking why anyone would have voted for it. So Cassidy stood up. "You have not told the American people what's going on," he said he told Trump. "It was supposed to last four weeks, it's lasted four months."

Trump raised his voice, and Cassidy said he matched his tone and his volume. At one point, Trump mocked him for losing his primary election, Cassidy said. "Which, of course, I lost the election! Way to observe that," Cassidy scoffed. "I made it clear that I wasn't going to be bullied, and made it clear that I think we need answers," Cassidy said.

Trump signed last week a memorandum of understanding with Iranian leaders to reopen the Strait of Hormuz and to begin talks aimed at ending Tehran's nuclear program. Despite Trump's goal of destroying Iran's stock of ballistic missiles, he said last week that it was fair for the regime to maintain some of the weapons.

In comments to reporters, Trump said it was a "really great meeting" and didn't address the intraparty debate over Iran. He backed Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R., S.D.), whom Trump has pressed for months to find the votes to pass the SAVE America Act, which requires proof of citizenship to register to vote and tightens other voting rules nationwide. "We like everybody really in the room," Trump said. "I don't like a few people, but that's OK."

Republicans have a 53-47 majority in the Senate, but the SAVE America Act requires 60 votes to advance, due to the chamber's longstanding filibuster rule. No Democrats support the proposal. That has prompted Trump to press Republicans to eliminate the filibuster rule, but Thune has rejected the idea.

The more than hourlong meeting was dominated by Trump speaking, according to senators who attended. Thune said the discussion didn't solve anything, but it helped "get some of the issues out there, air 'em out. And in that respect it accomplished the objective."

In a series of social-media messages early Wednesday, Trump canceled plans to sign the bipartisan housing legislation that the House and Senate passed this week. He said he would refuse to take action on the measure until Congress passes the SAVE America Act.

Trump has previously warned that Republicans will lose the midterm elections unless they pass the bill into law. But many GOP senators have told him it has no path to passage and have instead pushed the White House to extricate the country from the Iran war and to focus on the economy ahead of the midterms.

Democrats have a strong shot at taking back the House in the midterms. In the Senate, Republicans are increasingly nervous that their majority also could be at risk.

"I mean, my goodness, I thought that we were happy about addressing affordability," said Sen. Thom Tillis (R., N.C.), who has clashed with the White House and is retiring after this term. "I don't know why you're holding a bill that's ready for signature hostage over a bill that will never pass in this Congress."

In the closed-door meeting, Trump dismissed the housing bill. "At my rallies, no one cares about the housing bill. They're falling asleep," Trump told senators, according to a person briefed on his remarks. "But when I say SAVE America, I can't get them to sit down," the person said.

Under the Constitution, a bill passed by Congress becomes law in about two weeks if the president doesn't sign or veto the measure. The GOP-controlled Congress also could delay sending the bill to the White House indefinitely.

The Senate passed the housing bill with a 85-5 majority. Sens. Mike Lee (R., Utah), Rick Scott (R., Fla.), and Ron Johnson (R., Wis.), who have advocated for using more floor time to try to pass the SAVE America Act, were among the handful of lawmakers to vote no. Scott had invited Trump to the lunch meeting Wednesday.

The housing bill is a package of more than 50 provisions aimed at making it easier to build homes and make housing more affordable. It includes measures speeding up federal environmental reviews for certain housing projects, removing restrictions on building manufactured homes, and tying cities' federal funding to their housing production.

Trump's social-media post canceling the signing came as House Speaker Mike Johnson (R., La.) was holding a news conference touting the bill. Johnson called it "great policy," and said he expected Trump ultimately would sign it.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.), an architect of the bill, said the measure is "about doing good things, and Donald Trump says he just doesn't care."

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