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John Boehner's shrinking power

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House Speaker John Boehner, who by title and position should be the second most powerful person in Washington, sure doesn't seem or sound like it.

He has little ability to work his will with fellow House Republicans. He has quit for good his solo efforts to craft a grand bargain on taxes and spending. And he hasn't bothered to initiate a substantive conversation with President Barack Obama in this calendar year.

All of this recently prompted Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, herself a former speaker, [to declare](#) on MSNBC that if Boehner were a woman, he would be known as the weakest speaker in U.S. history.

[\(Also on POLITICO: Why the GOP thinks it could blow it\)](#)

So is Boehner weak?

"You're missing my style, all right?" Boehner told us in an interview. "I don't need to be out there beating the drum every day. My job as the leader is to build my team, encourage my members, help provide leadership to my members and committee chairs and let the institution work.

"It doesn't need the heavy hand of the speaker all over everything."

His style, in short, is not lean in. Or lean on. It's lean back — and wait.

[\(PHOTOS: 12 lawmakers who didn't back John Boehner\)](#)

So, yes, Boehner by recent historic standards and measures is a relatively weak speaker right now. But, in fairness, it's not clear a more bullying or forceful leader would fare much better with this gang of Republicans or in this dysfunctional Congress.

Boehner runs a House in which many of the traditional levers of power are gone and of little use: earmarks for members' districts, important committee assignments and the backing of party leaders for reelection. Most young conservatives don't care about any of the three — and, in fact, see all of them as manifestations of what's wrong with and corrupt about Congress and their party. They get more mileage from snubbing their leaders.

[\(Also on POLITICO: Amid probes, Boehner pushes jobs\)](#)

Boehner tested the lead-from-the-top model for more than a year, working with the White House to craft the grand bargain. It was a flop.

"I tried as hard as I could, but the divide was just too far apart, and I could not have tried harder," Boehner said. "There are no ifs, ands or buts about it, but the president was just never going to go somewhere where I thought was acceptable."

So, he has adopted an entirely different style this year, one of deference: deference to members, deference to committees, and deference to others in leadership.

"He has realized that directed leadership isn't going to work with this conference," said a top leadership aide. "So he has taken a more organic approach, and it's working pretty well."

(Also on [POLITICO: Scandal politics sweep Capitol Hill](#))

This puts him back in his comfort zone. Boehner is a laid-back guy. In the 15 years these reporters have covered him, he has rarely flashed a temper or gotten too worked up — even off the record — when people are trashing him or making his life difficult. He clearly likes power but doesn't get the charge most others do about actually using it. He would much rather drink wine with members at night than twist their arms in the daytime.

This can make him look, well, weak. Or, at best, like a bystander in the House he runs.

We had an interesting exchange with him about his power and relationship with Obama that captured this.

Boehner said he hasn't spoken a word of substance with Obama since the grand bargain collapsed in 2012.

We asked the speaker if he had talked to anyone in the White House in 2013. He paused for several seconds, looked over at two aides, and they all racked their brains. Former White House chief of staff Jack Lew had visited once, after he became treasury secretary. And Boehner said chief of staff Denis McDonough "has called a couple of times. I can't think of any other."

"That's kind of weird, right?" we asked. "You're the speaker of the House. He's the president. He has not had a substantive conversation with you in 2013. That's weird, on both ends. Have you called him?"

"No."

"Why not? You've never called the president and said, 'Let's talk about immigration so when it hits the floor ... ' "

"I'm busy trying to organize my own guys," the speaker replied.

Think about this for a moment: The two most powerful men in the world's most powerful country haven't bothered to talk to each other about drones, immigration, debt, taxes or anything else for nearly five months. No wonder Washington is such a mess.

And Boehner's candid explanation to us: Why bother? "I'm always available to talk to the president," he said. "I'll talk to him any time he'd like."

A White House official said the two men have actually talked at least five times this year, including one-on-one over the phone last month. But the official pointed to Boehner's declaration after the fiscal cliff that he was done with one-on-one negotiations with Obama.

In short, Boehner is happy to lean back, wait for his members to decide what they want to do on the debt ceiling and immigration — and take a call from Obama if the president ever decides he wants to chat.

And things will probably get worse between the two men. Boehner started the interview by saying he cares most about jobs, before quickly outlining how he thinks this White House has grown arrogant and possibly deceptive. “There’s an arrogance of power here,” he said. “They’re just not leveling with people.”

Boehner confirmed what a Republican aide had described to POLITICO as his “obsession” with Benghazi. “Four Americans lost their lives,” he said. “And what’s irritating to me to no end is that, for eight months, the administration refuses to tell the truth of why there wasn’t more security there, why the rescuers weren’t allowed to go in to help.”

“I talked to a retired general,” Boehner continued. “We had soldiers in Somalia fighting on the ground for 16 hours to try to recover two dead bodies, and yet we send no one to go in and help, and there are so many unanswered questions that the American people are demanding the truth, and so am I.”

Boehner will even press to know the president’s location on the night of the attacks, which the White House has not disclosed. “I do think it matters,” he said. “When did the president know that this was an organized terrorist attack? I think that’s a legitimate question. Why did the president, for 15 days, try to describe it as something other than what it was? We’re going to get to the bottom of it.”

Boehner said the IRS scandal will only get worse, saying he finds it very unlikely the president, or people very close to him, did not know more, sooner, than they are letting on.

But he added about the trio of controversies: “Some of this could just be gross incompetence.”

In some ways, the damage is already done, he said. His members — and much of the public — see everything that is happening as more evidence that government cannot be trusted with power or big things. This in turn, makes policies such as new immigration laws harder to swallow, because they rely on trusting government to do things like securing the border and punishing lawbreakers.

“When people see these abuses, when they see these problems, it just confirms in their mind that their skepticism is well-founded,” he said. “So, it will make it harder.”

Either way, they give the speaker something to talk about while his members decide what he should do next.

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