The Audacity of John Podesta

He’s driving the White House’s go-it-alone climate strategy, but will any of it stick after the president is gone?

By Ben Geman

On September 4 of this year, John Podesta took the stage at the Mandalay Bay Casino on the Las Vegas strip. The wiry 65-year-old was there for Harry Reid's annual energy conference, where green-tech-industry players, environmentalists, and politicians gather to talk about the agenda they wish Washington would pursue.

It was a familiar scene for Podesta. For years, Reid's event has been cosponsored by the Center for American Progress, a group Podesta launched in 2003 to give the Left some policy and advocacy muscle on par with the conservative Heritage Foundation.

At the lectern this year, though, Podesta was appearing not as CAP's founder or as a veteran of progressive policy-making. He was speaking as counselor to President Obama and the main force behind one the most aggressive policy strategies this White House has deployed.

His address was workmanlike. A briefing, really. Something no one would ever confuse with the speech-making of his presidential bosses—Obama and, before him, Bill Clinton, to whom Podesta was chief of staff. In 10 densely packed minutes of discourse about White House energy and climate policies, Podesta repeatedly glanced at his notes and blew right past chances to set up applause lines. Yet the performance was impressive in another way: as a review of the breadth of Obama's second-term climate-change agenda.

The Environmental Protection Agency is at the center of that agenda, with its controversial rule to limit carbon pollution from coal-fired power plants, but the strategy is much broader than that. The past year has brought a rat-tat-tat burst of environmental policy initiatives and reports from agencies that span the government: the Housing and Urban Development Department, the Council of Economic Advisers, FEMA, and others. Internationally, mid-November brought a surprise joint announcement with China on carbon emissions, the fruit of months of careful negotiations with Chinese officials. It's all part of the administration's stated intent to go around Congress on everything from energy to immigration. And Podesta is elbow-deep in it.

"John has a tremendous understanding of how to make things happen, and how to make things work in an administration and from the perch of the White House," says Todd Stern, the State Department climate envoy, who worked with Podesta in the Clinton administration and later as a senior fellow at CAP.

Indeed, the degree to which Podesta has been entrusted with making things happen has revived the Republican criticism that Obama has a penchant for handing lots of power to people who aren't vetted by or responsive to Congress. "The last thing Americans want now is another unaccountable 'czar' who goes around Congress and the public to push
extreme red tape that destroys more jobs and makes it even harder for our economy to grow," says Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, who is part of the GOP's Senate leadership team.

John Podesta moderates a discussion during a climate-change forum at the National Academy of Sciences in August. (Pete Marovich/Getty Images)

Podesta undoubtedly has been ambitious, his approach both forceful and deliberate. And he's brought to the climate agenda a level of inside clout that has been missing at least since former energy and climate czar Carol Browner left in early 2011. But whether he has created policy that is durable—regulations and initiatives not easily unwound by a freshly anointed GOP Congress or, after 2016, a Republican president—is far less certain. The White House knows this and is racing to get its new EPA rule well-enough rooted in the economy before Obama's term ends that any attempt to yank it up later would be prohibitively difficult.

Podesta is on the clock, too. He signed on for a one-year tour that wraps up at the end of 2014. Another political challenge already beckons: He has long had deep ties to Hillary Clinton, and a source close to her confirms that he's being considered for a senior role in her likely 2016 campaign. Podesta has said he might stay with the administration through Obama's State of the Union address in early 2015. But he isn't denying that a major role with Clinton's campaign may await. "If she runs, as I hope she will, I will do whatever she asks me to do, but right now she has not made a decision to run," Podesta told a Bloomberg journalist in a mid-November interview that aired on the PBS program Charlie Rose. Asked if he has had talks with Clinton about a campaign role, Podesta replied, "I talk with her from time to time," and then broke into a grin.

Maybe that's why, standing on that stage in Vegas, Podesta sounded like a man in a hurry. "We need all levels of government, we need all levels of the economy pulling together to reduce emissions, to build resilience, to deploy more clean energy, to invest in energy efficiency, to build more resilient infrastructure, and to plan for climate impacts that are already here and ones that we know are on their way," Podesta said.

"This," he said, "is an all-hands-on-deck moment."

IT TOOK A LONG TIME for Obama to get Podesta on board. During its first term, the administration moved with a political caution on climate change that disappointed activists. Planned EPA rules for power-plant emissions languished. Major climate legislation fell apart in the Senate in 2010.

The White House did take some big steps on the issue. It imposed much tougher auto mileage rules and pumped roughly $90 billion in stimulus funding and incentives into low-carbon energy and other green programs—moves the president has taken pains to highlight. "Right now, America generates more clean energy than ever before, thanks in part to the investments we made in the Recovery Act," Obama said at a League of Conservation Voters dinner in June. Then he paused, and added: "You remember that old Recovery Act. [It] was the largest investment in green energy and technology in U.S. history." Still, Obama accomplished far less than the green movement had hoped, and many in the activist community blame the team that surrounded the president in his first term. "Rahm Emanuel was no John Podesta," says one environmental-movement veteran, convinced that the president's original chief of staff kept climate on the back burner.
Insiders credit Podesta with ensuring that climate policy hasn’t gotten blown off course.

Everything shifted after Obama's reelection. In June of 2013, the White House released a broad climate policy blueprint, accompanied by what was considered a major speech dedicated solely to global warming. In it, the president committed to imposing the long-awaited mandatory carbon-pollution standards on coal-fired power plants, which are the country's largest source of unchecked emissions. The plan also called for new strategies for cutting emissions of methane and hydrofluorocarbons, both potent planet-warming gases. Other parts of the strategy included stepped-up work with the private sector and local governments on energy-efficient buildings; a commitment to stronger international efforts with China and other countries; and a major, multiagency focus on helping communities harden their defenses against the effects of climate change.

The White House had by then decided it needed to pursue a go-it-alone approach on policy in general and would aggressively employ executive orders to bypass a Congress that was intent on yielding no ground, on any issue. To help the White House see this through (and recover from a botched health care law rollout), Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, a CAP alum, urged Podesta to come aboard. He agreed, but only to a short posting, which would include a strong focus on climate.

"He probably recognized that President Obama needed exactly the talents and skills that he could bring," says Al Gore, former vice president and a leading U.S. voice in support of action to curb climate change. "I think he has made a tremendous difference. I don't think it, I know it."

Gore spoke to National Journal in an overhauled warehouse space in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he was staging his annual "24 Hours of Reality" multimedia broadcast on climate change in mid-September. Shortly after the interview, Podesta would appear on the broadcast via video to preview another climate initiative, which turned out to include an executive order weaving "climate resilience"—that is, the ability to withstand the consequences of climate change—into U.S. international development aid.

"We laid out a lot in June of 2013, and John has been driving everybody ... across the government to make sure that we are executing on that," says Dan Utech, a senior White House climate policy aide. He credits Podesta with pushing forward the major pillars of the second-term plan, including the power-plant rules and a strategy on methane pollution, but says Podesta has gone further, too. "I think he said, 'Look, the plan is great and that is job No. 1, but let's look for ways to increase ambition, to do even more anywhere that we can do that.' And so he really challenged everybody here at the White House who works on those issues, everybody across the Cabinet that has a part of these issues, to think about what are additional things we can do, what are ways we can either do additional policy steps from here or engage with the private sector."

Utech, speaking in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building next to the White House, ticks off several examples of ways that Podesta has driven a muscular implementation of the June 2013 plan or gone beyond it. There's the suite of commitments on solar power the White House secured in May, from affordable-housing providers as well as corporate behemoths such as Wal-Mart. And the "Climate Action Champions" competition to help as many as 15 tribal and local governments battle global warming.

Plus, Podesta's fingerprints are on the White House push to emphasize what advocates say will be the large economic costs of failing to stem emissions. That effort has yielded a widely publicized "cost of inaction" report by the White House Council of Economic Advisers and, more recently, speeches by Treasury Secretary Jack Lew and White House budget chief Shaun Donovan.

"John has made those messages come to the fore because he has brought all of the administration together to understand the full breadth of the challenge," EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy says.

But beyond any one initiative, administration insiders credit Podesta with ensuring that climate
policy hasn't gotten blown off course by the churn of the news cycle—or by the other parts of his own White House portfolio. Over the past few months, Podesta has been in the room for high-level meetings on Ebola and ISIS, and in late September he led the U.S. delegation to Afghanistan for the delicate power transfer to the new president, Ashraf Ghani. But the pace of climate-change initiatives has remained brisk nonetheless.

"The decision to bring him in, I think, has had a pronounced effect in terms of continuing to drive through times when there are other issues that are on the president's plate," says Democratic Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, a self-described "climate hawk" who was among the lawmakers who wanted more from Obama's first term.

IT IS ONE THING to announce new policies, and quite another to see them rolled out nationwide. The administration's various energy and environmental programs now face a challenge greater than the competition for Obama's attention—they face a Congress that will be run by Republicans who have vowed to unwind the president's efforts.

Consider the most sweeping and controversial piece of the second-term climate plan: carbon-emissions standards for power plants. On Podesta's watch, EPA met its June deadline to release a draft of the new rule. That was crucial to the administration's attempt to get the regulations implemented before Obama moves out of the White House. If the rule is finalized next June as planned, that sets in motion a timeline for states to start submitting plans in June of 2016 explaining how they will comply.

Already, though, incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is promising to throw up roadblocks. In an interview with the Lexington Herald-Leader after Republicans defeated enough Democrats to secure control of the next Senate, McConnell said a top priority is "to try to do whatever I can to get the [Environmental Protection Agency] reined in." Some incoming GOP senators have echoed him. "We've been picked as a loser, and I'm not going to stand for it," said Rep. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, who will shift from the House to the Senate in the next Congress.

The White House is pushing the bounds of what's achievable without Congress.

McConnell has signaled that he will seek to thwart EPA regulations with restrictions, or "riders," attached to spending bills. And Oklahoma Republican Sen. James Inhofe, who calls climate change a "hoax," will regain the gavel of the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, giving him a platform from which to attack White House policy as well.

New congressional battles over climate and energy policy have already begun. Earlier this week, the Senate narrowly rejected legislation to force approval of the controversial Keystone XL oil sands pipeline, a bill the White House had repeatedly bashed, arguing that the administration's years-long review should be allowed to play out. That fight is sure to resume next year; the GOP's midterm election gains created a pro-pipeline filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, and the president has hinted that he would veto such legislation if it passes. (Podesta opposes Keystone, but according to the White House he told McDonough last December
that he would not get involved in the fight while working for Obama.)

But when it comes to the administration's climate agenda, the White House says it's not yielding to the newly powerful Republicans, especially on EPA's rule to cut power-plant pollution. "The president is fully committed to implementing his Climate Action Plan, which uses long-standing executive authorities to cut carbon pollution, build resilience in American communities already feeling the impacts of climate change, and to lead on the international stage," the White House said in a statement the week after the midterm elections. "We will continue to move forward on this vital issue," the White House added. "We're confident we can prevail." It's unlikely that Republicans will be able to overcome a presidential veto, if it comes to that.

Another part of the looming battle with Republicans will center on a related focus of Podesta's tenure: international climate policy, including new cooperation with China, the world's biggest greenhouse-gas polluter. (The United States is No. 2.) This month, while Obama was in China for meetings with President Xi Jinping, the White House announced major new pledges from each side. For the first time, Beijing offered a deadline—2030—for a peak in its soaring carbon emissions, and both sides expressed hope that China could reach the goal even sooner. America offered a pledge to slash its emissions by 26 percent to 28 percent by 2025 relative to 2005 levels, going beyond the existing pledge of a 17 percent cut by 2020. China also agreed to dramatically expand its use of renewable and nuclear energy. The two nations expressed hope that the pledges would "inject momentum" into the often-rocky United Nations negotiations aimed at finalizing a new global climate pact in Paris late next year.

The surprise deal marked a win for Podesta, who was deeply involved in months of talks, and for Secretary of State John Kerry, who has made climate change a focus at State. But Republicans immediately panned it. Rep. Fred Upton, the Michigan Republican who leads the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee, called the agreement lopsided in favor of China, where emissions will keep climbing. "Just when we are finally getting back on firmer economic footing, thanks in large part to our game-changing energy boom, a lame-duck president is working to stack the deck against American jobs, wage increases, and affordable energy," he said in a statement.

PODESTA'S ALLIES like to talk about him in ways that call to mind Democrats' favorite TV drama: The West Wing.

"He was actually making decisions as you're walking down the hallways," says climate activist Brad Johnson, who once worked for CAP's political arm.

"You can have these incredibly intense, productive, really tight encounters with him where he sort of can flip an issue and point the person he is engaging with in a really new, productive, and creative direction," says Peter Ogden, who was chief of staff at CAP under Podesta and is now a senior fellow on climate and energy at the think tank.

But the same civics textbooks brought to life on the hit show reveal the limits of Podesta's power. The White House is pushing the bounds of what's achievable without Congress. Its resultant policies are narrower, and certainly less durable, than what major legislation would allow. That's one reason the climate agenda Podesta is rushing to carry out doesn't contain several big-ticket things that many activists—Podesta among them—want.

(Illustration by Robert Carter)

In his 2008 book, The Power of Progress, which calls for a post-Bush progressive resurgence on a suite of issues, Podesta lays out an array of climate and energy policy goals. One of the biggies—much tougher mileage rules for cars—has already been implemented by the Obama administration. But two
other major ideas are politically moribund. A bill to create a national cap-and-trade program to limit greenhouse-gas emissions fell apart in the Senate in 2010. (Other ways to impose an explicit cost on carbon emissions, such as a tax or fee, would also require legislation, an impossible prospect these days.)

The other goal once shared by Obama that's now gathering dust is a national "renewable-electricity standard" that would force power companies to supply escalating amounts of electricity from such sources as wind and solar energy. That, too, has no future on Capitol Hill under GOP control.

Although they can't hold Podesta responsible for a Congress that won't touch climate legislation, some environmentalists argue that he's promoting a White House energy strategy that itself hurts the climate agenda: the "all of the above" approach that cheers domestic drilling. Podesta, like his boss, speaks enthusiastically about the surge in U.S. natural-gas and oil production. He supports the use of natural gas, which produces far less carbon when burned than coal, as a tool to help lower emissions from the nation's electricity production. But he has also championed tougher steps to prevent methane leaks during the gas-development process.

How aggressively the administration ultimately pursues methane curbs will be one barometer of Podesta's influence. As of mid-November, EPA had not said whether it would impose new regulations or go with a softer approach based on voluntary efforts. And even tough new regulations would not completely bridge the gap between the White House and activists over domestic drilling.

As his time in Obama's White House winds down, Podesta is making the case that the administration has made lasting changes to the nation's energy economy. The topic surfaced when he appeared on Charlie Rose and fielded a question about whether China would hold up its end of the new long-term emissions pact that he played a lead role in brokering. "I think that China does not take these undertakings or commitments lightly," he said. "It is hard to get them to make commitments, but once they make them, they are pretty good at keeping them."

In the U.S., he acknowledged, a future president could throw the carbon-reduction pledge off course. But then he underscored the value of the administration's overall work on climate regulations, fuel economy and energy efficiency, and renewable power: "This is setting off a cycle of real innovation and investment in America," Podesta said. "So, we can meet [our pledge] as long as the next president doesn't reverse course and throw the car into reverse."

Whatever the future holds, it is clear that Podesta has already had an outsized effect. Environmentalist and Democratic strategist Glenn Hurowitz, the executive director of the firm Catapult, describes Podesta's time at the White House in epochal terms. "You can divide the Obama administration's environmental policy-making into BP and AP," he says. "Before Podesta and After Podesta."