

Obama takes 'fiscal cliff' on the road; Republicans stew

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Published Friday, 30 Nov 2012

* Republicans fear being blamed if there is no deal

* Obama to visit factory in Pennsylvania

WASHINGTON, Nov 30 (Reuters) - President Barack Obama, reapplying his re-election campaign theme of protecting the middle class, heads to Pennsylvania on Friday suggesting that Republicans could spoil Christmas by driving the country over the "fiscal cliff."

The president's road trip, visiting a factory that makes Tinkertoys, is infuriating Republicans, with House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner calling it a "victory lap" Thursday as he rejected Obama's proposals to avoid the cliff, which is a combination of tax increases and spending cuts set to start taking effect in January.

But Boehner confronts challenges not only from Democrats but increasingly from other Republicans, some of whom have advocated greater flexibility than their leadership on Obama's demand that Congress approve tax increases for the wealthy as well as extend tax cuts for the middle class as part of a deal to avoid the cliff. Most Republicans oppose raising any tax rates.

While Republicans are unhappy with the Obama's opening bid of deficit reduction measures, drawn mostly from previous presidential budget proposals, they are nervously eyeing the markets as well as polls indicating that the public is likely to blame Republicans if there is no deal at year's end to avoid the tax increases and severe spending cuts that economists say could tip the economy into a recession.

What the president is doing, Republican Representative Lee Terry of Nebraska told MSNBC on Thursday, "is setting us up to be the fall people for going over the fiscal cliff. And, frankly, going over the fiscal cliff is a win for the president. So either way, we're going to get it."

Obama will visit a manufacturing facility in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, operated by The Rodon Group, a plastic-injection molding company that supplies, among other things, Tinkertoys and Angry Birds building sets for children.

"As we move into holiday season, Democrats and Republicans should come together to renew middle class tax cuts so families have more certainty at this critical time for our economy," the White House said in announcing Friday's trip.

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