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The White House's G.O.P. Mainstay? Maybe Not

By **SHERYL GAY STOLBERG**

WASHINGTON — Senator [Lindsey Graham](#) makes no pretense about it. He wants to be where the action is.

“I’m in the center of a lot of important debates — I like that,” Mr. Graham, a South Carolina Republican who has carved out a role for himself as this city’s resident maverick, said in an interview on Monday. “I want to be a conservative who can put conservative principles in play on hard issues.”

So Mr. Graham, a cherubic-looking 54-year-old, has been busy this year, reaching out to Democrats in an effort to broker deals on hot-button issues like energy and [immigration](#) and closing the prison at Guantánamo Bay. As the rare member of his party who is consistently willing to cross the aisle, he has filled a niche once occupied by his close friend and mentor, Senator [John McCain](#), the Arizona Republican.

Now, though, Mr. Graham’s position as the go-to Republican for the Obama White House is in doubt. Over the weekend, he abruptly reversed course, backing out of plans to unveil a long-awaited bipartisan energy bill — a high priority for [President Obama](#). He has scheduled a news conference for Tuesday to urge the Senate Democratic leadership to put off debate on another of his priorities, an immigration overhaul.

Mr. Graham says he had received assurances from the Senate majority leader, [Harry Reid](#), that energy would come first and accuses him of making a sudden push for immigration — an effort Mr. Graham says will only divide the country — to appease Hispanic voters in an election year.

“I was mad, because they brought immigration up in the 11th hour,” the senator said, adding, “If you’re going to do business with people, they’ve got to understand that you can push back.”

His reversal has thrown official Washington into a tizzy, raising questions about his motives.

Some Democrats whisper that he must be trying to spare Mr. McCain, who is facing a tough primary challenge from the right, an uncomfortable vote on immigration. Others openly surmise that Mr. Graham must have caved in to his Republican critics.

“There has been enormous back pressure against the kind of bipartisan cooperation that Senator Graham has engaged in,” [Lawrence H. Summers](#), Mr. Obama’s top economics adviser, said Sunday on “Face the Nation” on CBS. “And that perhaps has made this a more complex situation and more difficult for him than it would otherwise be.”

Mr. Graham says he has not caved in to anybody, but his cross-party cooperation has clearly come at a price. At home, passions are running high. Locals derisively call him “Graham-nesty” for his work on immigration. He has been censured by three chapters of the [South Carolina Republican Party](#). At a town-hall-style meeting in Greenville last fall, constituents angrily shouted him down.

“You and Obama — guilty of treason!” one hollered.

“Why do you think it’s necessary to get in bed with people like [John Kerry](#)?” demanded another, referring to Mr. Graham’s Democratic co-sponsor on the energy bill.

David Woodard, a former campaign manager for Mr. Graham who teaches at [Clemson University](#), says Mr. Graham is “in real trouble.” Hogwash, says the senator, who won re-election in 2008 and does not face voters again until 2014. In an interview earlier this month in his Senate office, sipping from a bottle of Coke Zero (his beverage of choice), he sounded liberated.

“I’m in the mid- to high 60s, and my negatives are in the 20s,” he said, referring to his job approval ratings. “Now, what I’ve done is, I used to be in the 80s. But what’s the use of being here if you can’t move the ball forward?”

A former military prosecutor with a clever wit and Southern charm, Mr. Graham comes off more like the boy next door than a United States senator. His snappy sound bites (he recently referred to Mr. Obama’s health care bill as “a [Ponzi scheme](#)” on NBC’s “Meet the Press”) and willingness to buck his own party have made him a favorite on the Sunday talk show circuit.

“I like dealing with him because he makes me laugh,” [Carol M. Browner](#), Mr. Obama’s top environmental adviser, said in an interview this month. “He’s kind of self-deprecating.”

His easy manner belies a tough upbringing as the son of bar owners in the tiny town of Central, S.C. Mr. Graham’s parents died when he was in college, leaving him responsible for his 13-year-old sister — an experience that may also account for his independent streak, Mr. Woodard said.

“Where a lot of kids at that age had parental guidance, he had to make his own decisions,” he said.

His ties to another onetime Republican maverick, Mr. McCain, date to the 2000 presidential race, when Mr. Graham defied the conservative wing of his party to support the Arizona senator. After Mr. Graham joined the Senate in 2002, the two became fast friends and international traveling buddies, often spending their Congressional recesses together traveling to various war zones.

The reasons for the bond are obvious; both are creatures of the military, and both like to have fun. Some say the ties may go deeper. At 73, Mr. McCain, is nearly 20 years Mr. Graham’s senior. “In some ways I think John is a father figure to Lindsey,” said Senator [Susan Collins](#), Republican of Maine, who is close to both.

Conservative blogs dubbed Mr. Graham “McCain’s Mini-Me” — a description his friends reject. As Senator [Joseph I. Lieberman](#) of Connecticut, one of Mr. Graham’s partners on the energy bill, said: “He’s a maxi-Lindsey. He’s not a mini-anybody.”

For Mr. Obama, who has struggled to keep his campaign promise to change the tone in Washington, Mr. Graham has been something of a godsend. [Rahm Emanuel](#), the president’s chief of staff, began cultivating the South Carolina senator even before Mr. Obama took office, inviting him in to talk about issues like Afghanistan and closing the prison at Guantánamo Bay.

The president, Mr. Emanuel said in a recent interview, views Mr. Graham as “a gutsy guy.”

But on Monday, as the White House tried to nudge Mr. Graham back into the fold, some Democrats were privately wondering how gutsy he really is. Mr. Graham says he still wants to work with the White House, adding, “it’s not over yet.”

His legislative partners, like Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#) of New York, who had been working with Mr. Graham on immigration, tried to sound optimistic. But asked what would happen next, Mr. Schumer responded with a sigh — and a cryptic answer.

“Lindsey Graham is one of the most adept legislators I’ve met,” he said, “and he will figure out a way to solve these problems.”