

Obama To Face Huge Challenges In 2012

WASHINGTON (AP) — On a political high, President Barack Obama capped a bruising year by securing a tax cut for millions of Americans — an achievement that overshadowed Washington's deepening dysfunction and the slow progress of the economy on his watch.
The White House has ended a year with a political victory before. This time around the stakes are higher, and the president is by no means assured of carrying the momentum deep into an election year.
Addressing reporters before heading to Hawaii on Friday, Obama looked like a president in command of the stage again, for now. He left the capital after presiding over a two-month extension of a payroll tax cut — about \$40 per paycheck for someone making \$50,000 a year — that came when House Republicans caved on demands for a longer deal.
Yet on this issue, like many, enormous work remains for Obama after the new year, just when voters begin choosing a Republican nominee to try to oust him from his job.
Obama initially had pushed for a year-long extension of both the Social Security payroll tax cut and unemployment benefits. He got only two months on both because Congress could not agree on how to pay the bill for more without gutting their own political priorities — the same problem that awaits all sides in the weeks to come.

Twin Suicide Bombings Kill 44 In Damascus

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Two car bombers blew themselves up Friday outside the heavily guarded compounds of Syria's intelligence agencies, killing at least 44 people and wounding dozens more in a brazen attack on the powerful security directorates, authorities said.
State-run TV said the al-Qaida terrorist network was possibly to blame for the first suicide car bombings in the nine-month uprising against authoritarian President Bashar Assad.
The opposition, however, immediately questioned the government's account and hinted the regime itself could have been behind the attack, noting it came during a visit by Arab League observers investigating Assad's bloody crackdown of the popular revolt.
The government has long contended that the turmoil in Syria this year is not an uprising but the work of terrorists and foreign-backed armed gangs.
Syrian officials said a suicide attacker detonated his explosives-laden car as he waited behind a vehicle driven by a retired general who was trying to enter a military intelligence building in Damascus' upscale Kfar Sousa district. About a minute later, a second attacker blew up his SUV at the gate of the General Intelligence Agency, the officials said.

Prince Philip Hospitalized With Chest Pains

LONDON (AP) — Queen Elizabeth II's husband was hospitalized Friday evening after experiencing chest pains, British royal officials said.
Prince Philip, 90, was taken from Sandringham, the queen's sprawling estate in rural Norfolk, to the cardiac unit at Papworth Hospital in Cambridge for "precautionary tests," a spokeswoman for Buckingham Palace said.
She would not say if other members of the royal family were with the Duke of Edinburgh or if he would stay the night at the hospital. The spokeswoman declined to comment further and spoke on customary condition of anonymity. A hospital spokeswoman referred all calls back to the palace.
Philip has been at Sandringham since Monday for the royal family's Christmas festivities, Buckingham Palace said. It was unclear if Philip's health would alter the royal family's plans for the weekend — which typically include a public appearance before church services and then a private family lunch.
Papworth Hospital's website says it is the U.K.'s largest specialist cardiothoracic hospital and the country's main heart and lung transplant center, offering services such as cardiology, respiratory medicine and cardiothoracic surgery and transplantation.

Justice Department Rejects S.C. Voter ID Law

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina's attorney general says he will fight the Justice Department in federal court over South Carolina's voter ID law.
The federal agency on Friday rejected the law, saying it makes it harder for minorities to vote. It was the first voter ID law to be refused by the Obama administration.
Assistant Attorney General Thomas E. Perez says South Carolina's law didn't meet the burden under the Voting Rights Act and may have prevented thousands of minorities from voting because they don't have the right identification.
The Justice Department must approve changes to South Carolina's election laws because of the state's failure in the past to protect the voting rights of blacks.
Republican South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley says the rejection is more proof President Barack Obama is fighting conservative ideas.

CIA Inspector: NYPD Partnership Not A Problem

WASHINGTON (AP) — The CIA says its inspector general has found nothing wrong with the spy agency's close partnership with the New York Police Department.
The inspector general concluded that no laws were broken and there was no evidence the CIA was conducting domestic spying.
The inspector general decided to do a preliminary investigation after a series of stories by The Associated Press revealed how after the 9/11 attacks the CIA helped the NYPD build domestic intelligence programs that were used to spy on Muslims.
The revelations troubled some members of Congress and even prompted the U.S. director of national intelligence, James Clapper, to remark that it did not look good for the CIA to be involved in any city police department.
The NYPD continues to have a close relationship with the CIA.

Coma Patient Wakes Up After Oct. 19 Crash

PHOENIX (AP) — It will be a special Christmas for the family of a 21-year-old University of Arizona student who was nearly taken off life support before awaking from a coma.
Sam Schmid was walking and speaking Friday at a Phoenix hospital. Dressed in a T-shirt, shorts and sneakers, he was able to use a walker and talk in brief sentences.
"Right now, I'm feeling all right... except for the rehabilitation, I'm feeling pretty good," Schmid said.
Doctors at Barrow Neurological Institute say Schmid has a long recovery ahead of him to regain full speech, balance and memory abilities.
Schmid was involved in an Oct. 19 car crash in Tucson that left him with a brain aneurysm, among other life-threatening injuries. Because of the complexity of his brain injury, Schmid was flown to Phoenix.

Three U.S. Citizens Among Mexico Bus Attack

PACHUCA, Mexico (AP) — Three U.S. citizens are among the seven bus passengers who died in shooting attacks on three buses in the northern Mexico state of Veracruz.
An official of the neighboring state of Hidalgo says the U.S. victims were a mother and her two daughters returning to Mexico to spend the holidays with relatives.
Hidalgo state regional assistant secretary Jorge Rocha said Friday the women were originally from the Huasteca region where the shooting occurred Thursday.
A U.S. embassy official confirmed the women's nationalities, but could offer no information on their ages or hometowns. The official was not authorized to be quoted by name.
Five gunmen who allegedly carried out the attacks were later killed by soldiers.

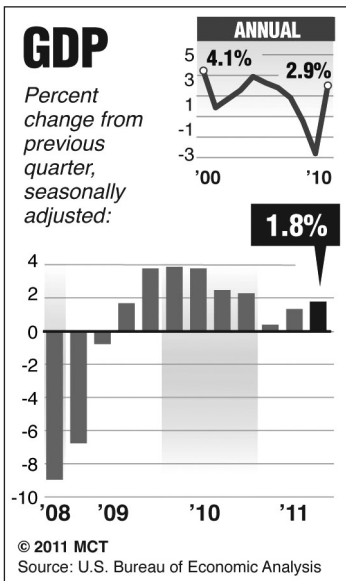
Obama To Face Huge Challenges In 2012

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Joe Biden said Friday that GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney favors economic policies that would help some succeed but leave most others behind. Romney countered that Biden and President Barack Obama are living in a "fantasyland" if they think their policies are helping the economy.
Biden made the claims in an opinion piece published Friday in The Des Moines Register. The vice president singled out Romney in Iowa, where the first votes will be cast in the GOP caucuses in less than two weeks.
For his part, President Barack Obama largely has refrained from

Job Growth Lifts Hopes For Consumer Spending

BY MARTIN CRUTSINGER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — Consumer spending and incomes barely rose last month. Business investment has slowed. New-home sales remain dismal.
Despite all that, some economists say a brightening job market is lifting their hopes for 2012. More aggressive hiring, the thinking goes, would fuel enough spending to boost the economy.



Chris G. Christopher Jr., senior economist at IHS Global Insight, noted that many households are still struggling with slight or no pay increases.
"Gasoline prices have been falling, and that is giving them more money to spend on other items," he said.
The government said Friday that consumer spending rose just 0.1 percent in November, matching the increase in October. Incomes also rose a scant 0.1 percent.
Modest as they were, economists said the figures at least signaled that incomes and spending aren't stalling.
Healthier economic data in recent weeks have helped make the prospect of another U.S. recession seem more remote — as long as Europe's debt crisis doesn't trigger a catastrophe that infects the global economy.

Some economists trimmed their forecasts for growth based on the weaker-than-expected consumer spending data for November. But they said they still expected the economy to expand at a solid annual rate of 3 percent in the current October-December quarter. It would be the best showing since the spring of 2010.
"We are seeing some momentum going into the new year," said Stuart Hoffman, chief economist at PNC Financial. "At least we are not in a tight spot where we are still worried about relapsing into recession."

Hoffman said that a major source of uncertainty for 2012 was removed this week with Congress' agreement to extend a Social Security tax cut for 160 million workers — for two months, anyway.
As part of the deal, Congress also renewed benefits for the long-term unemployed. If that hadn't happened, millions of unemployed people would have begun to lose weekly checks averaging about \$300 — the main source of income for most of them.

And if the payroll tax cut and the long-term unemployment benefits hadn't been renewed for 2012, economists said the modest growth of around 2.5 percent they expect next year would have been a full percentage point lower.
On Friday, the government also released a cautionary report on U.S. manufacturing. Companies' demand for long-lasting manufactured goods rose by the most in four months in November. But so-called core capital goods, a gauge of business investment spending, dropped for a second straight month.
Still, analysts said that with de-

mand for items such as autos still strong, they expect further gains in factory orders and production.
In a third report, sales of new homes rose 1.6 percent in November to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 315,000. Even with that small gain, 2011 is likely to end up as the worst year for new-home sales on records dating to 1963.
More significant for the economy was Friday's report on incomes and spending in November. The scant income gain reflected a decline in wages and salaries. They are the biggest component of incomes.

The sluggish rise in spending was held back by a 0.3 percent drop in spending on non-durable goods such as food, clothing and gasoline. Spending on durable goods rose 0.8 percent. The gain reflected solid auto sales in November.
Spending on services rose a modest 0.1 percent. This category includes such items as medical treatments and rent. The consumer spending report covers all items that households buy, including services, which make up about two-thirds of spending.
After-tax incomes showed no growth in November. The savings rate dipped to 3.5 percent of after-tax incomes, the lowest rate since late 2007. That shows consumers are having to tap their savings to finance their spending because of the weak income growth.
The best antidote for that would be an increase in hiring now that fewer people are being laid off.
"The jobless claims data point to stronger jobs growth emerging," said John Rydning, an economist at RDQ Economics.

Egypt's Women Protest Despite Brutal Military Attacks

BY MOHANNAD SABRY
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CAIRO — Several army soldiers slapped, punched and kicked Mona Seif, hitting her with wooden batons while they dragged her inside the Cabinet Building soon after they raided Tahrir Square. Minutes earlier she had been told to leave, but she refused unless they released a child she was protecting amid the violence.
"The army officer was infuriated when I told them to release the kid," said Seif, a 25-year-old activist who leads the No Military Trials for Civilians movement. "He ordered the soldiers to take me where they will take the child."



Hundreds of men carry a poster saying "One word to the military, our women are a red line." Copies of the poster were handed out all over Cairo before a Friday protest, December 23, 2011, after attacks by the military on female protesters.

A young army officer in charge of the detention room continuously cursed at the female detainees.
"I am as old as your mother; have some respect for me," said Khadiga, a woman in her 60s who sat on the floor beside Seif.
"The officer exploded when she said that. He kept slapping her over and over until she apologized," Seif said. "I thought they distinguished between younger and older women. They don't."

committed during the latest protests. The council affirms its respect and appreciation for Egyptian women and their right to demonstrate and participate positively in political life," said the statement.
Maha el-Samadouni, a 62-year-old female protester, refused to accept any apology.
"Our traditions define women as a red line that should never be crossed," she said. "It's an unprecedented crime in the history of Egypt. The only way to stop this is by making an example of those who committed such a crime."

el-Yazal, a retired military and intelligence officer who now leads a strategic research unit.
But the now-well-known video of the female protester under attack was shot in broad daylight.
"Yes, but she was in other videos at 3 a.m. on Tahrir Square," replied Yazal.
Egypt's military, which took over on Feb. 11 to replace the deposed President Hosni Mubarak, did not take long to prove that it is ruthless.
On March 9, troops raided Tahrir Square and detained more than 150 protesters, including 17 women. After a lengthy torture session at the Egyptian Museum, which was turned into a temporary detention center, seven of the female protesters were forced to undergo virginity tests. Only one pursued legal action.

This week, thousands of Egyptian women protested in Tahrir Square against military generals who silently watched their soldiers lead assaults on female protesters.
The female protest came despite an apology published on the official Facebook page of the ruling military council, a failed attempt to defuse public anger that backfired.
"The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces expresses its deepest regret to the great Egyptian women after the violations

Women came out wearing black to mourn the dignity of Egyptian women that were killed at the hands of the military," added Samadouni. She described the ruling military as "liars who denied any responsibility."
Despite the shock caused by video images showing horrific assaults by soldiers on protesters, some seemed to have little sympathy for the victims.
"I am totally against violence, yet I don't think it was right for this girl to be on the street at 3 a.m.," said Gen. Sameh Seif

"A female protesting in public comes from a background that broke the backward constraints of being ashamed of public participation. On the other hand, the community considers them sluts and the military shares the same view," said Abolkomsan.
She rejected the military's apology as "insufficient and useless."
A representative of Human Rights Watch in Egypt, Heba Morayef, argued that "military officers are preaching to soldiers that protesters are criminals destabilizing the country. It shows in the brutal attacks on protesters. It's not an attempt to disperse a protest, but it's a hostile personal attack. They are filled with rage and hate toward protesters."
As for the fair and transparent investigations promised by the military, Morayef said, "We don't know the names of a single officer that is standing trial for any violation, in cases of serious violations such as murder and sexual assault. It means that the military decides the accusation and the flow of trial without any civilian, independent judiciary participation."
"See they see themselves as superior," Morayef said. "They never see themselves as subject to any form of civilian monitoring, investigation or prosecution."

Biden: Romney Content With Limited Success Stories

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Joe Biden said Friday that GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney favors economic policies that would help some succeed but leave most others behind. Romney countered that Biden and President Barack Obama are living in a "fantasyland" if they think their policies are helping the economy.
Biden made the claims in an opinion piece published Friday in The Des Moines Register. The vice president singled out Romney in Iowa, where the first votes will be cast in the GOP caucuses in less than two weeks.
For his part, President Barack Obama largely has refrained from

counterattacking Republicans, saying he will wait until there is a nominee. But Obama's re-election campaign has not, and Biden's column is the latest sign the Obama team believes Romney will emerge from the field.
Biden said Romney's economic proposals "would actually double down on the policies that caused the greatest economic calamity since the Great Depression and accelerated a decades-long assault on the middle class."
"Romney also misleadingly suggests that the president and I are creating an 'Entitlement Society,' whereby government provides everything for its people without regard to merit, as

opposed to what he calls an "Opportunity Society," where everything is merit-based and every man is left to fend for himself," Biden wrote.

Romney, campaigning in New Hampshire, said Biden and Obama don't "understand from fantasyland what it's like in real America."

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