

NATION/WORLD DIGEST

Holder Made Choice To Charge Dec. 25 Bomber

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Eric Holder said Wednesday he made the decision to charge the Christmas Day terrorist suspect in civilian court rather than the military system, with no objection from all the other relevant departments of the government.

In a letter to Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, the attorney general wrote that the FBI told its partners in the intelligence community on Christmas Day and again the next day that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab would be charged criminally.

Holder's letter was the latest volley in a vigorous counterattack by the Obama administration to Republican charges that the arrest and FBI interrogation of the Detroit suspect was a mistake that cost a chance to learn key information.

The letter followed less than 24 hours after senior administration officials disclosed that the suspect had resumed talking to U.S. interrogators last week after breaking off his discussions the day of his arrest.

Abdulmutallab has discussed his contacts in Yemen and provided intelligence in multiple terrorism investigations, officials say.

Senator-Elect Brown Demands Seating

BOSTON (AP) — Massachusetts Republican Scott Brown changed course and demanded he be sworn in to replace the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy on Thursday, an accelerated timetable that conservatives had been clamoring for and one that Democrats quickly accepted — and had already been moving to accommodate.

Brown said he wanted to be present for unspecified votes, and his swearing-in would give the GOP 41 votes in the Senate — the precise number it needs to sustain a filibuster of Democratic initiatives.

Jim Manley, a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, said he expected a ceremony at 5 p.m. Thursday.

"If that's what he wants to do, I expect he'll be sworn in as early as (Thursday) afternoon," Manley said.

The demand reversed Brown's earlier declaration that he did not want to be sworn in until Feb. 11, a grace period he said he needed to hire a staff and prepare for his new responsibilities. That timetable was reiterated Tuesday morning on Brown's Facebook page.

Study: Some Vegetative Brains Self-Aware

NEW YORK (AP) — Scientists have detected glimmers of awareness in some vegetative brain-injury patients and have even communicated with one of them — findings that push the boundaries of how to assess and care for such people.

The new research suggests that standard tests may overlook patients who have some consciousness, and that someday some kind of communication may be possible.

In the strongest example, a 29-year-old patient was able to answer yes-or-no questions by visualizing specific scenes the doctors asked him to imagine. The two visualizations sparked different brain activity viewed through a scanning machine.

"We were stunned when this happened," said one study author, Martin Monti of Medical Research Council Cognitive and Brain Sciences Unit in Cambridge, England. "I find it literally amazing. This was a patient who was believed to be vegetative for five years."

Ever since a research paper four years ago showed apparent signs of awareness in a vegetative patient — one who was included in the new study — families of patients have been clamoring for brain scans, said Dr. James Bernat of Dartmouth Medical School, a spokesman for the American Academy of Neurology.

Gunman Kills Self At Illinois Store

MACOMB, Ill. (AP) — Police say a man who opened fire in a western Illinois farm supply store didn't hold hostages before killing himself, but some employees and customers were afraid to leave the building.

No one else was injured in the standoff at the Farm King store in the western Illinois city of Macomb.

Macomb Police Chief Curt Barker says the man was found dead Wednesday evening in the store's housewares section. Barker identified him as 19-year-old Jonathan Labbe from nearby Tennessee, Ill.

Authorities and witnesses say Labbe earlier fired a semiautomatic weapon inside the store, sending some terrified customers bolting for exits. Police later helped four adults and a small child escape from an office where they'd taken cover.

Barker says Labbe isn't associated with the store.

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Obama To Dems: Start Leading

President Demands His Party Go All Out, Expose GOP Obstruction

BY BEN FELLER
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — In a blunt election prescription for his own skittish party, President Barack Obama on Wednesday implored Democratic leaders to swing big, be honest with an angry public and expose any obstructionism by Republicans.

"We still have to lead," Obama told Democratic senators in a pep talk that unfolded on live TV.

That line alone revealed how much the political dynamic has changed in just two weeks, as Senate Democrats watched their voting numbers slip from 60 to 59 in a special Massachusetts election that sent shudders through the party. That one vote cost them the muscle to overcome Republican stalling tactics, forcing the Democratic president to adapt in hopes of salvaging this year and his agenda.

His advice: Get results, and this year's midterm elections will work out fine.

Let policy be our politics, Obama told the senators, and make sure everyone knows about petty acts by the opposition.

Obama's mission is to stiffen the resolve of his own party as he pursues an agenda that is consistent — creating jobs, overhauling health insurance, regulating Wall Street — yet is also cast in more personal, real-life terms.

So Obama went into detail in offering tactical guidance to a room full of senators with decades of election experience, including a

handful who face difficult campaigns this year and got most of the camera time with Obama.

The president said lawmakers should do more business in the public eye; tell voters honestly that some problems will take a long time to solve; stop listening to cable TV shows that obsess about Washington's politics; make a case for health care reform without getting bogged down by insider minutia, and call out Republicans when gamesmanship holds up votes.

Obama said he's still confident the American people will re-elect leaders who do the right thing and explain it well. The 2010 agenda is to be the topic Thursday when Obama meets with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., at the White House.

There was no mention Wednesday of the many other factors, rightly or not, that drive elections, from personalities and negative ads to local issues to a sense of national drift.

"I hope we don't lose sight of why we're here," Obama said. "We've got to finish the job on health care. We've got to finish the job on financial regulatory reform. We've got to finish the job, even though it's hard."

The election season could be hard for Democrats, too. The party in power traditionally sustains midterm losses, and the public is in a sour mood.

Obama's new bipartisanship — cooperative offers laced with criticism — was on display. When he recounted the expensive steps Democrats took to halt a deeper recession, he said, "We led." The suggestion was that

Republicans did not.

The president said he meant it when he told House Republicans that he wants to work with them. Then he sharply added: "We'll call them out when they say they want to work with us, and we extend a hand and get a fist in return."

Obama called on senators to remember the ideals that propelled them to run for office in the first place.

"If anybody is searching for a lesson from Massachusetts, I promise you the answer is not to do nothing," Obama said. He later told senators to avoid their instinct in tough times to "tread lightly, keep your head down and to play it safe."

The message was also about Obama himself. His comments had echoes of his own presidential campaign as he strives, in a series of recent appearances, to recharge his agenda and shore up his party in the face of potential election losses this year.

He said Democrats must rise above ideology ("I just want to find out what works"), accept responsibility as they dish blame for deficits ("We have been complicit in some ways") and tell people hard truths ("You can have an adult conversation").

Expect Obama to make the same case, emphasizing Democratic efforts on politically tough items, when he campaigns for candidates this year. The White House's thinking is that Democrats took the heat in 2009, but that when voters have choices on the ballot this year, Republicans will face consequences if they don't work with Obama on fixing problems.

Toyota Probe Expands; Prius Brakes Questioned

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans should park their recalled Toyotas unless driving to dealers for accelerator repairs, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood warned Wednesday — then quickly took it back — as skepticism of company fixes grew and the government's probe expanded to other models in the U.S. and Japan. Questions now are being raised about the brakes on Toyota's marquee Prius hybrid.

The Prius was not part of the most recent recall, but Japan's transport ministry ordered the company to investigate complaints of brake problems with the hybrid. LaHood said his department, too, was looking into brake problems. About 100 complaints over Prius brakes have been filed in the U.S. and Japan.

At a congressional hearing, LaHood said his advice to an owner of a recalled Toyota would be to "stop driving it. Take it to a Toyota dealer because they believe they have a fix for it." His comments prompted new questions and rattled Toyota stockholders, causing shares to plunge 8 percent before they recovered, declining 6 percent for the day.

LaHood later told reporters,

"What I said in there was obviously a misstatement. What I meant to say ... was if you own one of these cars or if you're in doubt, take it to the dealer and they're going to fix it."

Adding to Toyota's woes, LaHood said his department had received new complaints about electronics and would undertake a broad review, looking beyond Toyota vehicles, into whether automobile engines could be disrupted by electromagnetic interference caused by power lines or other sources. Toyota has said it investigated for electronic problems and failed to find a single case pointing that direction.

Since October, Toyota first recalled about 5 million vehicles over problems with floor mats trapping gas pedals and now, in a recall announced Jan. 21, some 2.3 million vehicles amid concerns that gas pedals could become stuck or slow to return to the idle position. The latest recall involves 2009-10 RAV4 crossovers, 2009-10 Corollas, 2009-10 Matrix hatchbacks, 2005-10 Avalons, 2007-10 Camrys, 2010 Highlander crossovers, 2007-10 Tundra pickups and 2008-10 Sequoia SUVs.

THE WINTER CAPITAL



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The U.S. Capitol is pictured after another snowstorm hits the nation's capital, Wednesday in Washington, D.C.

Defense Sect. Gates: Don't Rush To Lift Ban On Gays In Military

BY ANNE GEARAN
AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON — The United States should not rush into a change as large as repealing the ban on gays serving openly in the military without making sure the people it affects are on board, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Wednesday.

Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said an 11-month study into the effects of lifting the ban will examine practical questions such as how the change would affect the numbers of people who decide to remain in the service when their terms expire.

"There is very little objective data on this. It is filled as you know with emotion and strongly held opinions and beliefs," Mullen said a day after announcing his own opposition to the ban as unfair to gay troops.

"That's the work we have to do over the course of this year. We need to understand that in terms of what the senior military leadership's principal concern is, which is the readiness and military effectiveness of the force," he said.

The study is seen by advocates of a quick repeal as an unnecessary delay, or a political convenience designed to stretch any real action to lift the ban until after congressional elections this fall.

Answering critics from both parties during testimony on the proposed defense budget for next year, Gates offered his own resume as a cautionary tale. He noted that he has unusually broad management experience, having run three large public institutions — the CIA, Texas A&M University and the Defense Department.

"In each of those I have led and managed change," Gates told the House Armed Services Committee. "I've done it smart and I've done it stupid. Happily, I think the stupid was early."

Gates said he learned that imposing change from on high does not work, and he is determined not to repeat that mistake. Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said later that Gates was referring to a period in the early 1980s when he headed the CIA's analytical division and made policy changes and sometimes

harsh assessments that he came to regret.

"Stupid was trying to impose a policy from the top without any regard for the views of the people who were going to be affected or the people who would have to effect the policy change," Gates said.

Gates has commissioned two reviews, one by the outside consultant Rand Corp. and one to be led by a four-star Army general and the Pentagon's top lawyer. The reviews will look at attitudes about openly gay service among the armed forces, with particular emphasis on those in combat.

The reviews are supposed to look at the effect that lifting the ban could have on soldiers' trust and reliance on one another, as well as practical and legal issues, military officials said.

Mullen is the president's senior military adviser, but he said he does not speak for all the Pentagon top brass. Several of the top uniformed leaders in the military services have deep reservations about repealing the policy known as "don't ask, don't tell," and Mullen was unable to unite them behind his view before Tuesday, when he became the first sitting chairman of the Joint Chiefs to say the policy should be changed.

The attitudes of troops under fire, the ramifications for recruiting, family benefits and other considerations are likely to get a fuller examination later this month, when leaders of the Army, Marine Corps and other services testify separately on Capitol Hill.

"I have discussed this with them at considerable length," Mullen said of the Joint Chiefs leaders. "I would sum up their view to say that they need to understand that impact as well, should this policy change."

President Barack Obama pledged to work this year to repeal the 17-year-old policy that says gays may serve in the armed forces only if they keep their sexuality private. In the decades before that, the Pentagon expelled gay troops but the policy was not written into law.

Congress enacted the ban in 1993 as a compromise short of fully allowing openly gay military service, as then-President Bill Clinton had said he wanted.

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