

Gas Prices Cloud Obama's Future

BY TOM RAUM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Soaring gasoline prices are threatening to undercut President Barack Obama's re-election prospects and offering Republicans an easy target. With prices pushing \$4 a gallon and threatening to go even higher, Obama sought Thursday to confront rising public anxiety and strike back at his GOP critics.

"Only in politics do people root for bad news, do they greet bad news so enthusiastically," Obama said of Republicans. "You pay more; they're licking their chops."

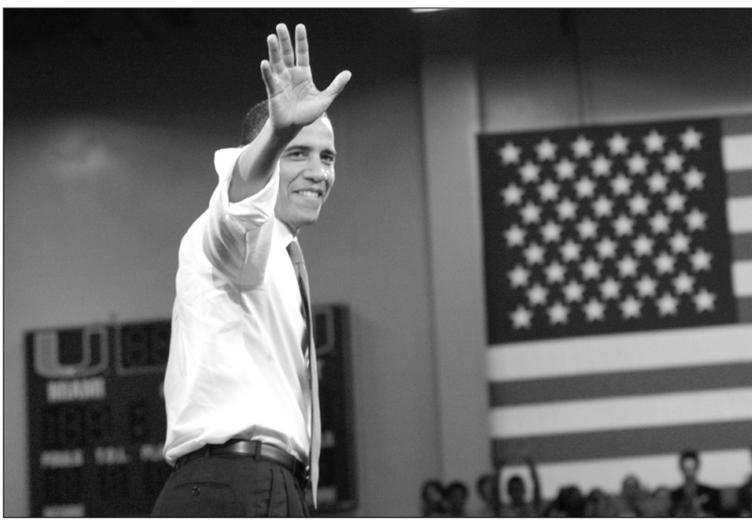
Obama said dismissively that all the Republicans can talk about is more drilling — "a bumper sticker ... a strategy to get politicians through an election" — when the nation's energy challenges demand much more. In a speech in Miami, he promoted the expansion of domestic oil and gas exploration but also the development of new forms of energy.

For all the political claims, economists say there's not much a president of either party can do about gasoline prices. Certainly not in the short term. But it's clear that people are concerned — a new Associated Press-GfK poll says seven in 10 find the issue deeply important — so it's sure to be a political issue through the summer.

"Right now, we're experiencing yet another painful reminder of why developing new energy is so critical to our future," the president said. At an average of \$3.58 a gallon, prices are already up 25 cents since Jan. 1, and experts say they could reach a record \$4.25 a gallon by Memorial Day.

Those higher prices could hurt consumer spending and unravel some of the recent improvements in the economy. And they could also be a daily reminder to voters to question Obama's contention that he's making the nation — and them — more secure.

While motorists are already starting to complain, many economists see the \$4-a-gallon mark as a breaking point above which the economy starts to suffer real pain. Analysts estimate that every one-cent increase is roughly a \$1.4 billion drain on the economy.



U.S. President Barack Obama waves to the crowd as he visits the University of Miami on Thursday, February 23, 2012, in Coral Gables, Florida.

Obama's Republican challengers aren't letting it all slide by. They have stepped up their attacks on his energy policies, including his rejection last month of a pipeline to carry oil from Canada to refineries on the U.S. Gulf Coast. And they're full of promises.

"I've developed a program for American energy so no future president will ever bow to a Saudi king again, and so every American can look forward to \$2.50-a-gallon gasoline," former House Speaker Newt Gingrich said in the Wednesday night GOP debate in Mesa, Ariz. He calls his strategy "Drill Here, Drill Now."

At the same event, former Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania — who has warned of \$5-a-gallon gas — asserted that "we have a lot of troubles around the world, as you see in the Middle East in flames and what's going on in this country with gas prices and the economy." And former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt

Romney suggested that even more troubling than rising gasoline prices was Iranian President Mahmoud "Ahmadinejad with nuclear weapons."

In his speech at the University of Miami, Obama sought to draw a contrast with his GOP challengers and made a pointed reference to what he suggested was Republican glee at rising gas prices.

"And you can bet that since it's an election year, they're already dusting off their three-point plans for \$2 gas," Obama said. "I'll save you the suspense. Step one is drill, step two is drill, and step three is keep drilling. ... We've heard the same thing for 30 years. Well, the American people aren't stupid."

Addressing the rising public anxiety, Obama said, "There are no quick fixes to this problem, and you know we can't just drill our way to lower gas prices." Anyone suggesting otherwise was not being honest, he said.

Obama Apologizes For Quran Burning In Afghanistan

BY AMIR SHAH
AND PATRICK QUINN
Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — President Barack Obama apologized Thursday for the burning of copies of the Muslim holy book at a U.S. military base this week, as violent protests raging nationwide led a man dressed in an Afghan army uniform to kill two U.S. troops.

The Afghans' furious response to the Quran burning — three days of riots in several cities nationwide — reflected the anger at what they perceive as foreign forces disrespect for Afghan laws and culture.

In a letter sent to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Obama expressed his administration's "regret and apologies over the incident in which religious materials were unintentionally mishandled," White House national security council spokesman Tommy Vietor said. He added that the letter was delivered by Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Thursday afternoon.

Karzai's office said Obama called the Quran burnings "inadvertent," adding that the U.S. "will take the appropriate steps to avoid any recurrence, to include holding accountable those responsible."

U.S. apologies for the desecration — and an appeal from Karzai for calm — have failed to temper the anger of Afghans, who staged



Afghan men shout slogans during a demonstration against Quran desecration in Herat, Afghanistan, February 23, 2012. The protests over the Quran burning by U.S. military have entered its third day on Thursday. During Wednesday's demonstrations, seven people were killed and 30 others sustained injuries.

rallies in seven provinces Thursday, sparking clashes with Afghan police and security forces that left at least five demonstrators dead. Seven protesters were killed in clashes on Wednesday.

The two NATO service members were killed in eastern Afghanistan by a man dressed in an Afghan army uniform. Both troops were Americans, according to a U.S. official, who confirmed their nationalities on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to disclose the information.

Mohammad Hassan, an official in Nangarhar province where the shooting took place, said the

two Americans were shot by an Afghan soldier after soldiers fired in the air to disperse protesters outside a U.S. base in the Khogyani district. Two protesters were also killed in the ensuing gunfire, Afghan officials said.

A rising number of Afghan security forces, or militants wearing their uniforms, have shot and killed U.S. and NATO service members.

The Taliban on Thursday called on Afghans to attack foreign troops, and their spokesman has issued a statement ordering its commanders to embrace and protect the families of any Afghan policeman or soldier who

turns his gun on foreign troops. "Call them heroes," he said.

Protesters also rioted outside a U.S. base in Mehterlam, the capital of Laghman province. Police broke up a demonstration using water cannons and batons after protesters tried to storm the base.

"Hundreds of our people in Laghman province gathered because of the burning of the holy book by the Americans," said protester Mohammad Issa.

"Everyone is so emotional. The burning of the Quran broke our hearts and we are attacking the PRT because they are American," he said, using the acronym for the provincial reconstruction team.

In Oslo, Norwegian military spokesman Ivar Moen said a Norwegian soldier was wounded after demonstrators threw a hand grenade into a military base in Maimanah, in northwestern Faryab province where Norwegian, Latvian, Afghan and U.S. troops are deployed.

The soldier was wounded after up to 200 demonstrators hurled rocks at the base and shouted epithets. Norwegian troops responded with warning shots and tear gas. Moen said the demonstration was over, but new protests are expected tomorrow.

In the city of Baghlan in the north, clashes between police and protesters attacking the police headquarters left one person dead. Police said 10 officers were also wounded, two from gunshot wounds.

Romney Pounces On Santorum's Senate Compromises

BY KASIE HUNT
AND CHARLES BABINGTON
Associated Press

MILFORD, Mich. — Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney tried to upend Rick Santorum's image as a principled defender of conservative ideals Thursday, telling voters in Arizona and Michigan that the former senator is just another give-and-take politician.

Romney's team believes Santorum opened himself to the attacks with a somewhat anguished explanation of his reluctant vote for a Bush-era school program in Wednesday's televised debate. Romney hoped to stop his chief rival's momentum on a day when Santorum was quietly raising money.

But President Barack Obama wasn't helping. His allies aired anti-Romney ads in Michigan while the president campaigned in Florida, a crucial swing state that GOP candi-



Romney

dates can't afford to re-visit until their nominee is settled.

A Romney setback in either Michigan's primary or Arizona's on Tuesday would be embarrassing, or worse. His campaign seemed grateful for Santorum's unsteady showing in what may have been the GOP campaign's last big debate.

Romney pounced on Santorum's explanation for supporting President George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" program, now disliked by many conservatives. "It was against the principles I believed in," Santorum said in the debate. "But, you know, when you're part of the team, sometimes you take one for the team."

"I wonder which team he was taking it for," Romney said Thursday at an Associated Builders and

Contractors meeting in Phoenix, before heading to Michigan. "My team is the American people, not the insiders in Washington."

Santorum also struggled in the debate to explain his congressional votes for earmarked spending and for a bill that included money for Planned Parenthood despite his "personal moral objection" to the organization, which provides abortions for low-income women.

"I don't know that I've ever seen a politician explain in so many ways why he voted against his principles," Romney said Thursday.

The issue could prove troubling for Santorum, who lacks the money to match Romney's TV ads. Santorum's chief strengths include his image as a courageous social conservative willing to confront voters about the moral implications of birth control, abortion, divorce and other issues.

At a tea party rally in Tucson

shortly before the debate, Santorum said he was "unafraid to go out and fight on all the issues we care about." He referred to Romney as "a well-oiled weather vane" that shifts with political winds.

Romney's focus on Santorum reinforced the notion that the GOP race is mostly a two-man contest heading toward the 10-state "Super Tuesday" primary on March 6. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, trying to stay within striking distance, campaigned Thursday in Washington state and Idaho. Rep. Ron Paul, like Santorum, had no public events Thursday.

Given Arizona's significant Mormon population, a Romney loss there on Tuesday would be stunning. Nearly as crucial is Michigan, where Romney was born and his father was a three-term governor and top auto executive. Santorum has drawn enthusiastic crowds, and Romney planned to address a tea party gathering later Thursday in Milford, Mich.

Homs Being Destroyed 'Inch By Inch'

BEIRUT (AP) — Medics stitch wounds with thread used for clothing. Hungry residents risk Syrian government sniper fire or shelling to hunt for dwindling supplies of bread and canned food on the streets of the besieged city of Homs.

The opposition stronghold was being destroyed "inch by inch," by government forces, with collapsed walls and scorched buildings, according to accounts Thursday, while Western and Arab leaders hoped to silence the guns long enough to rush in relief aid.

The pressure for "humanitarian corridors" into the central Syrian city of Homs and other places caught in President Bashar Assad's crushing attacks appeared to be part of shifts toward more aggressive steps against his regime after nearly a year of bloodshed and thousands of deaths in an anti-government uprising.

In back-to-back announcements, U.N.-appointed investigators in Geneva said a list for possible crimes against humanity prosecution reaches as high as Assad, and international envoys in London — including U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton — made final touches to an expected demand for Assad to call a cease-fire within days to permit emergency shipments of food and medicine.

Washington and European allies remain publicly opposed to direct military intervention. But there have been growing signs that Western leaders could back efforts to open channels for supplies and weapons to the Syrian opposition, which includes breakaway soldiers from Assad's military.

7 Marines Killed During Night Training Exercise

SAN DIEGO (AP) — Two Marine Corps helicopters collided over a remote section of the California desert during a nighttime exercise, killing seven Marines in one of the Corps' deadliest training accidents in years.

There were no survivors in the latest in a series of crashes involving troops from Camp Pendleton, officials said Thursday.

Two Marines were aboard an AH-1W Cobra and the rest were in a UH-1 Huey utility helicopter when the crash occurred Wednesday night near the Chocolate Mountains along the California-Arizona border, said Lt. Maureen Dooley with Miramar Air Base in San Diego.

Six of the victims were from Camp Pendleton — the largest base on the West Coast — and one was from Marine Corps Air Station Yuma in Arizona. Their identities will not be released until their families have all been notified.

Officials were still scrambling after sunrise to gather evidence at the crash site in a remote section of the Yuma Training Range Complex.

Study: Tax Plans Would Cause Hike In Deficit

WASHINGTON (AP) — Massive tax cuts proposed by GOP presidential candidates Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum would cause the national debt to explode while Mitt Romney's budget plan could generate red ink in line with current projections, according to a new study released Thursday.

The nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, a Washington-based budget watchdog group, estimates that the wrenching budget cuts proposed by Ron Paul would lessen the flow of red ink compared with current policies but still leave the government running a sizable deficit.

The candidates' budget plans provide a sharp contrast with President Barack Obama, who released his latest fiscal blueprint just last week. Like Obama, the GOP candidates have the luxury of suspending political reality and assuming lawmakers would quickly enact their ideas into law.

That translates into a tax code in which taxes on investments and capital gains are sharply reduced or eliminated. Each candidate would eliminate inheritance taxes on large estates. And tax rates on individuals would be cut as well — all in the face of deficits that economists say would eventually cripple the economy.

The results, according to the study, would be higher deficits, except in the case of Paul, whose spending cuts dwarf anything being considered by his three rivals.

Fury, Ridicule Doomed Virginia Ultrasound Bill

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Once the word "transvaginal" became a big joke on "Saturday Night Live" and "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart," it wasn't long before Virginia's conservative Republicans realized they had overreached on abortion.

Gov. Bob McDonnell and GOP state lawmakers Wednesday abandoned a bill requiring women to undergo an intrusive type of sonogram before an abortion — an abrupt reversal that demonstrated the power of political satire and illustrated again how combustible the issue of women's reproductive health has become over the past few weeks.

"You never want to get on the wrong side of popular culture," said Steve Jarding, a professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a Democratic consultant who has run campaigns in Virginia. He added: "When people are laughing at you, you know you've gone too far."

At issue was a bill pushed by anti-abortion lawmakers that would have required women seeking an abortion to undergo a transvaginal sonogram, in which a wand is inserted in the vagina to yield an image of the fetus. The procedure differs from an abdominal sonogram, in which a wand is rubbed over the woman's belly.

Seven states have laws mandating some form of pre-abortion ultrasound exam. The Guttmacher Institute, which researches abortion-related issues, said none of the ultrasound laws in other states explicitly require the transvaginal procedure.

Accused Murderer Gave Birth After Arrest

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — An Alabama woman is under guard at a hospital after she gave birth following her arrest in the death of her 9-year-old stepdaughter, who authorities say was forced to run for three hours as punishment for lying about eating a candy bar.

Jessica Mae Hardin, 27, was transferred from the Etowah County Detention Center to a hospital on Wednesday, sheriff's office spokeswoman Natalie Barton said. Etowah County District Attorney Jimmie Harp confirmed that Hardin had given birth hours after she was arrested. He said he didn't know whether the newborn was a boy or a girl.

Hardin and her mother-in-law, 46-year-old Joyce Hardin Garrard, were arrested and charged with murder on Wednesday in the death of Savannah Hardin.

Roger Simpson, who lives up the hill from the doublewide trailer where Savannah lived with Jessica and her father Robert Hardin, said he saw the girl running in the yard. When emergency vehicles arrived at the home hours later, he said he thought they were there for the pregnant woman.

Alabama law requires people who are arrested to be informed of the charges against them in an initial appearance within 72 hours. Barton said Jessica Hardin's hearing will likely be held once she is released from the hospital.

OBITUARIES

Eleanor Lindner

Eleanor Edith Lindner, 71, of Yankton died of natural causes on Wednesday, Feb. 22, 2012, at the Avera Yankton Care Center, Yankton.

Funeral services are at 11 a.m. Monday at Riverview Reformed

Church, Yankton, with the Rev. Rodney Veldhuizen celebrating. Burial will be in the Aten Cemetery, Aten, Neb.

Visitation is 5-6 p.m. Sunday at Opsahl-Kostel Funeral Home and Crematory, Yankton. Visitation will resume one hour prior to the service at the church.

Friday Night Fish Fry
All-U-Can-Eat \$10.95
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