

### Slow Economic Recovery Hurting Obama

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mired in economic worry, Americans are growing gloomier about where the country is headed and how President Barack Obama is leading it. Opinions of the economy are at the lowest of the year as high gas prices, anemic hiring and financial turmoil abroad shake a nation's confidence.

Obama has hit new highs he'd like to avoid — in public disapproval over his handling of the economy in general and unemployment in particular — according to a new Associated Press-GfK poll. In addition, more disapprove of his handling of health care and the federal budget deficit than in the past.

The poll shows that four out of five people now believe the economy is in poor shape. And, separately, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke said Wednesday that some causes of the slowdown, including a depressed housing market, could persist into next year. Bernanke said the Fed believes growth will pick up going into 2012 but at a slower pace than expected.

How slow is a matter of high interest at the White House. A little more than 16 months before the November 2012 election, the public is split on whether the president deserves a second term.

For the first time this year in AP-GfK polling, respondents who say Obama deserves re-election have fallen below 50 percent into a virtual split of 48-47 in favor, a demanding challenge for him. Economic concern has quickly stripped away the gloss he briefly gained after the death of Osama bin Laden.

### Police Arrest Man In Pharmacy Shootings

MEDFORD, N.Y. (AP) — Police on Wednesday arrested a 33-year-old man in the shooting deaths of four people at a pharmacy during a botched weekend painkiller robbery.

David Laffer was taken in handcuffs from his home in Medford, about a mile and a half from the crime scene, earlier in the day. Jack Eddington, chairman of the Suffolk County Legislature's public safety committee, confirmed Laffer's arrest late Wednesday afternoon.

About 30 to 40 officers converged on the home before bringing Laffer out, said Peter Spano, who was working on the lawn next door. A woman was also escorted out of the brown and yellow ranch-style house.

Spano said the "distracted" man taken from the home resembled the suspect shown in surveillance photos, except without a beard.

Zaida Ayala, a longtime neighbor, said the suspect in the photos didn't look like Laffer, who is "a guy that I feel comfortable with. A guy that I could be out, I o'clock in the morning in my backyard, and he could be in his backyard and I wouldn't run inside and go get my husband."

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### Glittering Becomes Guerrilla Tactic Of Choice

NEW YORK (AP) — Many VIPs have gotten a pie in the face from protesters: Bill Gates, for one, and years earlier, Anita Bryant. President George W. Bush dodged a shoe hurled at him. This year, for some liberal activists, the guerrilla tactic of choice is a shower of glitter tossed from close range.

So far, three Republican presidential candidates — Newt Gingrich, Tim Pawlenty and Michele Bachmann — have been targeted by the so-called glitterati, primarily because of their opposition to various gay-rights causes.

Among the public, there's been lively online debate about whether the tactic is refreshing and effective, childish and rude, or even worse. Some critics wanted the perpetrators manhandled, Tasered and jailed.

Among gay activists, the question is whether to extend the glittering campaign or call it off.

"I think some glitter brings some magic into the debate," said Michael Mitchell of Stonewall Democrats, a network of gay and lesbian Democratic clubs. "But it has to be done strategically and backed up by effective messages."

### Study Says Potato Chips Factor In Weight Gain

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Blame the potato chip. It's the biggest demon behind that pound-a-year weight creep that plagues many of us, a major diet study found. Bigger than soda, candy and ice cream.

And the reason is partly that old advertising cliché: You can't eat just one.

"They're very tasty and they have a very good texture. People generally don't take one or two chips. They have a whole bag," said obesity expert Dr. F. Xavier Pi-Sunyer of the St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York.

What we eat and how much of it we consume has far more impact than exercise and most other habits do on long-term weight gain, according to the study by Harvard University scientists. It's the most comprehensive look yet at the effect of individual foods and lifestyle choices like sleep time and quitting smoking.

The results are in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine.

### N.H. Woman Falls To Bottom Of Waterfall

DIXVILLE NOTCH, N.H. (AP) — A Nashua woman is hospitalized in serious condition after falling about 60 feet down a cliff to the bottom of a waterfall in Dixville Notch in northern New Hampshire.

Fish and Game officials say Jennifer L. Tate was hiking with friends on Wednesday when she left them to take a photograph of Cascade Falls. She told rescuers the ground gave way at the edge and she fell down the cliff.

Fire and Rescue crews climbed to the top of the waterfalls and repelled down to Tate, who was conscious at the bottom of the falls. Details on where she landed were not available Wednesday.

She was brought up the cliff face and taken to Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon.

Officials say Tate had broken bones, lacerations and chest pain.

# CBO: Debt Crisis Looms Without Changes

BY ANDREW TAYLOR  
Associated Press



Biden

WASHINGTON — The rapidly growing national debt could soon spark a European-style crisis unless Congress moves forcefully, the Congressional Budget Office warned Wednesday in a study that underscored the stakes for Vice President Joe Biden and negotiators working on a sweeping plan to reduce red ink.

Republicans seized on the report to renew their push to reduce costs in federal benefit programs such as Medicare.

The report said the national debt, now \$14.3 trillion, is on pace to equal the annual size of the economy within a decade. It warned of a possible "sudden fiscal crisis" if it is left unchecked, with investors losing faith in the U.S. government's ability to manage its fiscal affairs.

The study reverberated throughout the Capitol as Biden and senior lawmakers spent several hours behind closed doors. The talks are aimed at outlining about \$2 trillion in deficit cuts over the next decade, part of an attempt to generate enough support in Congress to allow the Treasury to take on new borrowing.

Biden made no comment as he departed, except to say the group would meet again on Thursday and probably Friday as well.

President Barack Obama plans to meet with House Democratic leaders Thursday to discuss the status of the ongoing talks. The meeting comes as Democrats want the president to rule out Medicare benefit cuts as part of any budget deal.

CBO, the non-partisan agency that calculates the cost and economic impact of legislation and government policy, says the nation's rapidly growing debt burden increases the probability of a fiscal crisis in which investors lose faith in U.S. bonds and force policymakers to make drastic spending cuts or tax increases.

"As Congress debates the president's request for an increase in the statutory debt

ceiling, the CBO warns of a more ominous credit cliff — a sudden drop-off in our ability to borrow imposed by credit markets in a state of panic," said House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis.

The findings aren't dramatically new, but the budget office's analysis underscores the magnitude of the nation's fiscal problems as negotiators struggle to lift the current \$14.3 trillion debt limit and avoid a first-ever, market-rattling default on U.S. obligations. The Biden-led talks have proceeded slowly and are at a critical stage, as Democrats and Republicans remain at loggerheads over revenues and domestic programs like Medicare and Medicaid.

With Republicans insisting that the level of deficit cuts at least equal the amount of any increase in the debt limit, it would take more than \$2 trillion in cuts to carry past next year's elections. House GOP leaders have made it plain they only want a single vote before the elections.

That \$2 trillion-plus goal is proving elusive. And a top Senate Democrat warned Wednesday that it would be insufficient anyway.

"While I am encouraged by the bipartisan nature of the leadership negotiations being led by Vice President Biden, I am concerned by reports the group may be focusing on a limited package that will not fundamentally change the fiscal trajectory of the nation," said Senate budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad, D-N.D. "That would be a mistake."

Democratic leaders, however, held a news conference Wednesday to argue for more economic stimulus measures such as a proposal floated by the White House to extend a payroll tax cut enacted last year. The move demonstrates the continuing appeal of deficit-financed policy solutions — suggested even as warnings of the dangers of mounting debt grow louder and louder.

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"We absolutely need to reduce our deficit. We know that," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev. "But economists tell us that reducing spending is only half the equation. The other half is measures to create jobs."

With the fiscal imbalance requiring the government to borrow more than 40 cents of every dollar it spends, CBO predicts that without a change of course the national debt will rocket from 69 percent of gross domestic product this year to 109 percent of GDP — the record set in World War II — by 2023.

CBO's projections are based on a scenario that anticipates Bush-era tax cuts are extended and other current policies such as maintaining doctors' fees under Medicare are continued as well. The debt would far more stable under the budget office's official "baseline" that assumes taxes return to Clinton-era rates and that doctors absorb unrealistic fee cuts.

Economists warn that rising debt threatens to devastate the economy by forcing interest rates higher, squeezing domestic investment, and limiting the government's ability to respond to unexpected challenges like an economic downturn.

But most ominously, the CBO report warns of a "sudden fiscal crisis" in which investors would lose faith in the U.S. government's ability to manage its fiscal affairs. In such a fiscal panic, investors might abandon U.S. bonds and force the government to pay unaffordable interest rates. In turn, the report warns, Washington policymakers would have to win back the confidence of the markets by imposing spending cuts and tax increases far more severe than if they were to take action now.

"Earlier action would permit smaller or more gradual changes and would give people more time to adjust to them, but it would require more sacrifices sooner from current older workers and retirees for the benefit of younger workers and future generations," CBO Director Douglas Elmendorf said in a blog post.

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## Troops

From Page 1

Obama's announcement from the White House came in a perilous political environment, with Americans soured on the war and the economy, many members of Congress pushing him to get troops home even faster, and his Republican presidential rivals taking shots at his leadership at every chance.

Disgruntled Democrats took Obama to task, however politely, for not withdrawing more troops more quickly.

"I am glad this war is ending, but it's ending at far too slow a pace," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. Added the House Democratic leader, Nancy Pelosi of California: "We will continue to press for a better outcome."

At least 1,500 members of the U.S. military have died and 12,000 have been wounded since the American invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001. The financial cost of the war has passed \$440 billion and is on the rise, jumping to \$120 billion a year, twice the total of two years ago. Those costs have risen in importance as a divided U.S. government struggles to cut its budget deficits.

Conceding the economic strain of waging war at a time of rising debt and fiscal constraint, Obama said it was time for America "to focus on nation building here at home." The president's chances for re-election rest largely on his ability to show faster job growth in a time of

deepening economic pessimism.

The withdrawal is supported by the bold bottom-line claims of his security team: Afghanistan, training ground for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on America, is no longer a launching pad for exporting terrorism and hasn't been for years. But that could also fuel arguments for even greater withdrawals by voters wondering what the point of the war is after all these years, especially since the face of the enemy — al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden — was killed by American forces this spring during a raid in Pakistan.

Yet the White House insists the U.S. must maintain a strong fighting force in Afghanistan for now to keep the country from slipping back into a haven for al-Qaida terrorists.

The initial withdrawal is expected to happen in two phases, with 5,000 troops coming home this summer and an additional 5,000 by the end of the year.

Obama said the materials recovered during the raid to get bin Laden showed that the al-Qaida terror network was under deep strain. He said bin Laden himself expressed concern that his organization would be unable to effectively replace senior leaders that had been killed.

The president declared, "We have put al-Qaida on a path to defeat, and we will not relent until the job is done."

Even after the troops come home, the war will remain expanded on Obama's watch. He approved 21,000 additional troops for Afghanistan shortly after taking office in 2009, bringing the total number to 68,000. That means he is likely to face

re-election with more troops in Afghanistan than when he took office, although he has also dramatically reduced the U.S. footprint in Iraq.

The president spoke for about 13 minutes from a silent East Room. It was a strategic moment for him to try to explain a turning point in the war effort without elevating it to a major Oval Office address — more of a stay-the-course case of progress and resilience.

"Of course, huge challenges remain," the president said. "This is the beginning — but not the end — of our effort to wind down this war. We will have to do the hard work of keeping the gains that we have made while we draw down our forces and transition responsibility for security to the Afghan government."

Significant questions still loom, including whether Afghanistan's government and security forces will be up to enormous job ahead.

Yet Obama made clear the United States was ready to move on from a decade defined by wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, at a cost of thousands of lives lost and more than \$1 trillion spent.

"We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place," Obama said flatly.

Potential GOP presidential candidates were quick to weigh in with criticism of Obama's plan — but they did not speak with one voice.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney accused Obama of proposing an "arbitrary timetable" and said the decision on withdrawing troops "should not be based on politics or economics." Former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman said the approach in Afghanistan should be focused on counterterrorism, "which requires significantly fewer boots on the ground than the president discussed tonight."

Back on Capitol Hill, Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, accused Obama of acting based on political considerations. "I am increasingly concerned by the lagging public support for the mission, and it was disappointing that the president failed to bring more clarity to the situation," said Cornyn, who heads the Senate Republicans' campaign committee.

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