

Immigration

Obama Vows To Back Reform

BY JIM KUHNHENN
Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — President Barack Obama on Friday tailored his economic message to the Hispanic voters who could help swing the election, saying he would build up-middle-class opportunity for Latinos while Republican rival Mitt Romney would gut it with “top-down economics” favoring only the rich.

“These are all our kids,” Obama declared as the nation’s first black president lobbied for support in strikingly personal terms.

When he meets young people of different backgrounds, Obama said, “I see myself.”

“Who knows what they might achieve if we just give them a chance?” the president asked. “That’s what I’m fighting for. That’s what I stand for.”

Obama spoke to the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials near Orlando, his first speech to a Hispanic group since he decreed that many young illegal immigrants brought to the United States as children would be exempted from deportation and granted work permits valid for two years.

He defended that decision as “the right thing to do” while conceding it was only a temporary patch. Romney attacked it as a “stop-gap measure” in his own speech to the association one day earlier as both men, locked in a tight battle, courted voters from a Hispanic population growing in size and influence.

Obama challenged Republicans in Congress to join him finally on a big, broad fix of the U.S. immigration laws.

“To those who are saying Congress should be the one to fix this, absolutely,” Obama said. “For those who say we should do this in a bipartisan fashion, absolutely. My door has been open for three and a half years. They know where to find me.”

Hispanic voters are a vital constituency in states that could swing the election, from Florida to Nevada to Virginia.

The president said the nation needs ideas and policies that build up the middle class and “our current immigration system doesn’t reflect those values.” The system punishes immigrants who play by the rules and drives away entrepreneurs who can get an education in America but cannot stay here legally, he said.

Obama has faced heat from his own Hispanic supporters for not having fulfilled a pledge to deliver a comprehensive immigration overhaul deal. Obama has, in turn, pointed blame at Republicans for blocking him.



JOE BURBANK/ORLANDO SENTINEL/MCT
President Barack Obama addresses the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials conference Friday at the Contemporary Resort at Walt Disney World, in Lake Buena Vista, Fla.

He said anew on Friday that as long as he is president “he will not give up the fight” on a broad fix.

And he made another pitch for legislation called the DREAM Act that would create a path to citizenship for some children of illegal immigrants.

Obama said Romney has promised to veto such a bill and “we should take him at his word.”

Obama’s immigration initiative, announced less than five months before the November elections, delighted many in the Latino community and drew renewed attention to the key Hispanic voting bloc and its potential for affecting the presidential election with its turnout and energy.

Obama won 67 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2008, and aides believe he could do even better this time.

Romney on Thursday backed off the tough anti-illegal immigrant rhetoric of the Republican primaries and vowed to address illegal immigration “in a civil but resolute manner.” He outlined plans to overhaul the green card system for immigrants with families and end immigration caps for their spouses and minor children.

But he was vague about how he would treat immigrant children brought to the country illegally by their parents and refused to say whether he would reverse Obama’s policy.

On Friday, the Obama campaign released a 110-second online video with a montage of news clips depicting Romney sidestepping questions on whether he would repeal Obama’s policy if elected. “Why won’t Mitt Romney give a straight answer?” the video asks.

Sources: U.S. Mulls New Convert Pakistan Raids

BY KIMBERLY DOZIER
AP Intelligence Writer

WASHINGTON — U.S. military and intelligence officials are so frustrated with Pakistan’s failure to stop local militant groups from attacking Americans in neighboring Afghanistan that they have considered launching secret joint U.S.-Afghan commando raids into Pakistan to hunt them down, officials told The Associated Press.

But the idea, which U.S. officials say comes up every couple of months, has been consistently rejected because the White House believes the chance of successfully rooting out the deadly Haqqani network would not be worth the intense diplomatic blowback from Pakistan that inevitably would ensue.

Members of the Haqqani tribe have been targeted by pilotless U.S. drone aircraft, but sending American and Afghan troops into Pakistan would be a serious escalation of the hunt for terrorists and could potentially be the final straw for Pakistan, which already is angered over what it sees as U.S. violations of its sovereignty.

The al-Qaida-allied Haqqani tribe runs a mafia-like smuggling operation and occasionally turns to terrorism with the aim of controlling its territory in eastern Afghanistan. The Haqqanis use Pakistani towns to plan, train and arm themselves with guns and explosives, cross into Afghanistan to attack NATO and Afghan forces, then retreat back across the border to safety.

The latest round of debate over

whether to launch clandestine special operations raids into Pakistan against the Haqqanis came after the June 1 car bombing of Forward Operating Base Salerno in eastern Afghanistan that injured up to 100 U.S. and Afghan soldiers, according to three current and two former U.S. officials who were briefed on the discussions. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the still-evolving debates.

Also, Pentagon spokesman George Little pointed to a lakeside hotel bombing outside Kabul Friday — which killed 18 people — as the latest example of a Haqqani attack that targets Afghan civilians.

The officials who were briefed told the AP that recent discussions of clandestine ground attacks have included Gen. John Allen, the senior U.S. commander in Afghanistan, as well as top CIA and special operations officials.

Allen’s spokesman, Navy Cmdr. Brook DeWalt, said Allen “has not and does not intend to push for a

cross-border operation.”

The White House and the CIA declined to comment.

Little said the U.S. was still focused on U.S.-Pakistan cooperation.

“The key is to work together with Pakistan to find ways of fighting terrorists who threaten both the United States and Pakistan, including along the Afghan-Pakistan border, where extremists continue to plot attacks against coalition forces and innocent civilians,” he said.

The U.S. relationship with Pakistan is arguably at its lowest point over the continuation of drone strikes to hit terror targets in Pakistan, the successful Navy SEAL raid in Pakistan to kill Osama bin Laden that was carried out without a heads-up to the country’s leaders and the U.S. refusal to apologize for a border skirmish in which the U.S. mistakenly killed 24 Pakistani troops. On Thursday, the State Department’s inspector general accused the Pakistani government of harassing U.S. Embassy personnel.

Pakistan has done little in response to repeated U.S. requests for a crackdown on the Haqqanis, and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta surprisingly voiced that frustration in a visit to Kabul this month.

He said the U.S. was “reaching the limits” of its patience with Pakistan’s failure to tackle the tribe’s safe havens. He added that the U.S. was “extraordinarily dissatisfied with the effect that Pakistan has had on the Haqqanis.” He also made fun of Pakistan’s ignorance over the bin Laden raid at a speech in India, Pakistan’s archival.

Pakistan’s army has attacked militant strongholds across the tribal areas, except for North Waziristan, where the Haqqanis hold sway and shelter both al-Qaida and Taliban militants. Pakistani officials say that they intend to hit North Waziristan but that their army is too overstretched to move as fast as the U.S. demands.

Poll: Gay Marriage Issue Still Sharply Divided

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama’s endorsement of gay marriage appears to have made Americans on both sides of the issue even more entrenched in their positions, firing up his young, liberal backers and intensifying opposition from Republicans and conservatives, according to a new poll.

Overall, his announcement last month that he supported gay marriage did little to shift the nation’s views on the subject, with the country remaining evenly divided on it, the Associated Press-GfK survey found. And people still seem to favor him over Republican presidential rival Mitt Romney when it comes to handling social issues.

Even so, the poll, out Friday, found stronger approval from Democrats and liberals for the way he’s handled gay marriage over the last year and deeper discontent over that performance from the other side.

In the poll, 42 percent of respondents oppose gay marriage, 40 percent support it and 15 percent are neutral. Last August, the country was similarly divided over whether same-sex couples should be allowed to be legally married in their state, with 45 percent opposing, 42 percent favoring and 10 percent neutral.

The country’s divisions — and conflicts — are clear in the voices of Americans.

Compromise On Student Loan Rate Hike Near?

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional bargainers seem near an agreement that would avert a July 1 doubling of interest rates on federal loans to 7.4 million college students and end an election-year battle between President Barack Obama and Congress, Senate aides from both parties said Friday.

Both sides said they were moving toward a deal on how to pay the measure’s \$6 billion price tag, the chief source of partisan conflict.

The goal is to push legislation through Congress next week so the current 3.4 percent interest rate on subsidized Stafford loans can be preserved for another year. A 2007 law gradually reduced interest rates on the loans but required them to balloon back to 6.8 percent this July 1 in a cost-saving maneuver.

On another front, the two sides were also close to an agreement to overhaul federal transportation programs, according to House and Senate aides from both parties. Negotiations were expected to continue through the weekend, with votes expected next week on either a major transportation bill or an extension of current programs, said the aides, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the talks.

For weeks, Obama has ridiculed Republicans for not moving quickly to prevent student loan interest rates from doubling, a stance that Democrats have hoped will boost his support among young voters who broadly backed him in the 2008 election. With college costs and student debt growing steadily, the issue ties directly into concerns about the economy and jobs that polls show dominate voters’ worries.

Clergy Convicted For Covering Up Complaints

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — A Roman Catholic church official was convicted of child endangerment but acquitted of conspiracy Friday in a landmark clergy-abuse trial, making him the first U.S. church official branded a felon for covering up abuse claims.

Monsignor William Lynn helped the archdiocese keep predators in ministry, and the public in the dark, by telling parishes their priests were being removed for health reasons and then sending the men to unsuspecting churches, prosecutors said.

Lynn, 61, served as secretary for clergy from 1992 to 2004, mostly under Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua.

“Many in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia hierarchy had dirty hands,” Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams said. “They failed to realize that the church is its people.”

Williams said he did not have sufficient evidence last year to charge other officials, including Bevilacqua, who died in January at age 88.

Ex-Tampa Area Principal Charged In Rampage

LEALMAN, Fla. (AP) — Authorities say an ex-middle school principal who lost his job over a drug arrest five years ago has fatally stabbed two people and then driven his car into a porch full of people several miles away near Tampa, Fla.

The Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office reported Friday night that 45-year-old Anthony Giancola has been charged with two counts of first-degree murder and two counts of attempted first-degree murder.

Authorities say Giancola went to a group home for the hearing impaired in Lealman, where he stabbed four people, killing a man and a woman.

Later, authorities say, Giancola injured four people when he crashed into the porch. He also hit a boy on a bike as he was fleeing. Authorities say he also attacked two people at a Pinellas Park motel.

Mary Cheney, Ex-VP’s Daughter, Weds Partner

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mary Cheney, daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, has married her longtime partner, Heather Poe.

In a statement, Cheney and his wife, Lynne, said the couple got married in Washington on Friday. The Cheneys said the two had been in a committed relationship for many years and they were delighted that they could take advantage of the “opportunity to have the relationship recognized.” The District of Columbia and six states — Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Vermont — have legalized gay marriage.

Mary Cheney and Poe have two children.

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