

Romney's Super Tuesday Wins Underwhelm

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mitt Romney's Super Tuesday victories elicited a collective yawn from his party's superdelegates.

Since Tuesday's voting, Romney has added only a single endorsement to his total among members of the Republican National Committee, the party leaders who automatically attend the national convention this summer. They can support any candidate they choose, so they can play an important role at the convention.

Some of the undecided superdelegates say they expect the former Massachusetts governor to be the eventual nominee but, like many Republican voters, they're not quite ready to embrace him.

"Right now I am comfortable with this going a bit longer," said Jeff Johnson, a national committee member from Minnesota.

In fact, Johnson has endorsed former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and he said he was "hanging tight for now." But, he acknowledged, "There may be a point where it seems all but impossible for him to win."



Romney

Obama Praises Manufacturing Growth In Va.

PRINCE GEORGE, Va. (AP) — President Barack Obama applauded another burst of job growth Friday as proof the economy is rebounding on his watch from a disastrous recession. Bidding for re-election, Obama warned factory workers and campaign donors that Republicans would offer only the policies "that got us into this mess."

"I did not run for this office just to get back to where we were. I ran for this office to get us where we needed to be," Obama told 1,400 people at a rally-style event in a sprawling Rolls-Royce manufacturing plant south of Richmond, Va. "And I promise you, we will get there."

The new monthly jobs report — a barometer of the economy and an important factor in the coming presidential race — showed employers created 227,000 jobs in February. The unemployment rate held steady at 8.3 percent, the result of more Americans looking for work as job growth takes hold month by month.

The president cautioned that too many Americans still long for work. But on the factory floor here, he said the manufacturer of jet-engine parts was a symbol of what American companies can accomplish.



Obama

Syrian Opposition Rejects Calls For Dialogue

BEIRUT (AP) — A high-profile international mission to end the Syrian crisis stumbled Friday before it began as the opposition rejected calls by U.N. envoy Kofi Annan for dialogue with President Bashar Assad as pointless and out of touch after a year of violence.

The dispute exposes the widening gap between opposition leaders who say only military aid can stop Assad's regime, and Western powers who fear more weapons will exacerbate the conflict.

As the prospects for diplomacy faltered, Turkey reported the defections of three high-ranking military officers — two generals and a colonel — as well as two sergeants, a significant development because until now most army defectors have been low-level conscripts. A deputy oil minister also deserted Assad's regime this week, making him the highest-ranking civilian official to join the opposition.

The White House welcomed the reported defections as a sign the regime is cracking from within and that Assad will eventually fall.

Western and Arab powers are backing Annan's two-day trip to Syria, starting Saturday, when he is to meet with Assad. The former U.N. secretary-general — now a special U.N.-Arab League envoy for Syria — has said he seeks to start a "political process" to end the crisis and warned against further militarization of a conflict that appears headed toward civil war.

Israeli Airstrike Kills Militant Group's Leader

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — An Israeli airstrike in Gaza on Friday killed the commander of the militant group behind the abduction of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who was held captive for more than five years and freed in a prisoner swap for more than 1,000 Palestinians.

The midday attack marked the highest profile Israeli strike against the coastal strip in several months and immediately sparked retaliatory rocket attacks toward Israel — raising the specter of a violent escalation after a period of relative calm.

The Israeli military said it targeted Zuhair al-Qaissi, the commander of the armed wing of the Popular Resistance Committee, a large militant group closely aligned with Gaza's Hamas rulers. The explosion tore apart al-Qaissi's blue sedan and killed his son-in-law, Mahmoud Hanini — himself a top PRC field commander. Another low ranking Gaza militant also died.

Hours later, Israeli military killed two more militants that it said were about to launch rockets.

US, Afghanistan Hit Deal On Detention Facility

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The U.S. military and the Afghan government sealed an agreement Friday on the gradual transfer of control of the main U.S. prison in the country, a last-minute breakthrough that brings the first progress in months in contentious negotiations over a long-term partnership.

The compromise deal came on the day Afghan President Hamid Karzai had set as a deadline for the Americans to hand over the Parwan prison.

The agreement gives the U.S. six months to transfer Parwan's 3,000 Afghan detainees to Afghan control. However, the U.S. will also be able to block the release of prisoners, easing American fears that insurgents or members of the Taliban could be freed and return to the fight.

The deal removes a sticking point that had threatened to derail talks that have been going on for months that would formalize the U.S.-Afghan partnership and the role of U.S. forces in Afghanistan after NATO's scheduled transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan government at the end of 2014.

Job Numbers Rose In February

Stats Reflect Strong 3 Months Of Growth

BY CHRISTOPHER S. RUGABER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — The United States added 227,000 jobs in February, the latest display of the breadth and strength of the economic recovery. The country has put together the most impressive three months of job growth since before the Great Recession.

The unemployment rate stayed at 8.3 percent. It was the first time in six months it didn't fall, and that was because a half-million Americans started looking for work. In the past two months, almost a million have started looking.

"I have more optimism," said Freda Bratcher, 54, who had worked as a substance abuse counselor but has been unemployed 16 months. She had stopped searching, but showed up Friday at a Miami career center after some of her friends landed jobs.

"There's something out there for me," she said. "And if other people are getting hired, then why not me?"

The Labor Department, in its monthly jobs report, said Friday that December and January, already two of the best months for jobs since the recession, were even stronger than first estimated.

January job growth was revised higher by 41,000 to 284,000. De-

cember job growth was raised by 20,000 to 223,000. The overall job growth for February of 227,000 beat economists' estimate of 210,000.

"It's a very strong report," said Bob Baur, chief global economist at Principal Global Investors, an asset management company. "I could hardly find anything not to like in it."

Since the beginning of December, the country has added 734,000 jobs. The only three-month stretch that was better since the recession ended was March through May 2010, when the government was hiring tens of thousands of temporary workers for the census.

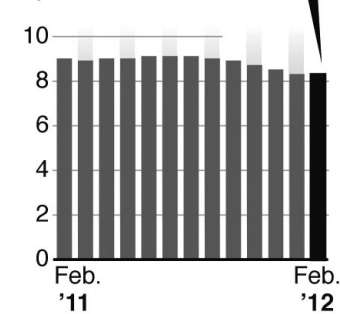
Before that, the last stretch that was better was February through April 2006. A three-month gain of 734,000 is roughly what the country was achieving in the late 1990s, although it is less impressive now because the country holds about 40 million more people.

Stocks rose after the report came out, though they lost most of their gains later in the day. The Dow Jones industrial average closed up 14 points at 12,922. Last week, it closed above 13,000 for the first time since May 2008, four months before the financial crisis.

The improving jobs picture figures to improve the re-election chances for President Barack

Jobless rate

Percent of civilian labor force that is unemployed, by month, seasonally adjusted:



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Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Obama and to complicate the political strategy for the Republicans competing for the right to replace him.

Obama on Friday visited a manufacturing plant run by Rolls-Royce, a maker of aircraft engines, in Virginia, a state expected to be closely contested in November. He told workers there that American manufacturing is adding jobs for the first time since the 1990s.

Santorum: Obama, Romney Share A Distrust Of America

BY JOHN HANNA AND
PHILIP ELLIOTT

Associated Press



Santorum

TOPEKA, Kan. — Hoping to tap into deep distrust of Washington, Republican Rick Santorum suggested Friday that President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney share a top priority: to take away Americans' money and freedom so they can tell them how to live.

A day before Kansas Republicans weigh in on the party's presidential contest, Santorum looked to shore up support in this Midwestern state that seemed ready to give the former Pennsylvania senator yet another win and further challenge Romney's front-runner status. With sharp rhetoric, Santorum likened Romney to Obama and cast both as unacceptable for conservatives.

"We already have one president who doesn't tell the truth to the American people. We don't need another," Santorum said to cheers. "Gov. Romney reinvents himself for whatever the political occasion calls for."

Santorum has hammered Romney for a health care overhaul he signed into law as Massachusetts governor. Santorum's advisers see the issue as Romney's biggest

weakness among conservatives. They make up the bulk of the Republican Party's nominating base but have so far split their votes between Santorum and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

"The worst offender is Gov. Romney. He put the template for Obamacare in place in Massachusetts," Santorum said.

Massachusetts requires citizens to buy health insurance. That mandate is central to Democrats' national plan, and Santorum called it unconstitutional.

Campaigning in Alabama, Romney fired back, characterizing Santorum as coming from the Washington establishment he's worked to distance himself from and reminding the former Pennsylvania senator — and voters — about a delegate count that puts Romney much closer to the nomination.

"Washington insider Rick Santorum is lashing out at Mitt Romney because he can't accept the fact that it's nearly impossible for him to win the number of delegates

needed to secure the Republican nomination," Romney spokeswoman Andrea Saul said.

Romney currently has 422 delegates committed to his nomination, while Santorum has 181 out of the 1,144 needed. Gingrich trails with 107 and Paul has 46, according to Associated Press calculations.

Santorum's small-government message resonated with Allan Holthaus, a 63-year-old Topeka contractor and farmer, who said he views Santorum as the most honest GOP candidate and the one most likely to try to deliver on his campaign promises.

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"Our Canteen Lady" by Sondra Jonson — one of the new 2012 RiverWalk sculptures.

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