

Skydiver Lands Smoothly After Daring Leap

ROSWELL, N.M. (AP) — Extreme athlete Felix Baumgartner landed gracefully on Earth after a 24-mile jump Sunday from the stratosphere in a daring, dramatic feat that officials said made him the first skydiver to fall faster than the speed of sound.

Baumgartner came down safely in the eastern New Mexico desert about nine minutes after jumping from his capsule 128,100 feet, or roughly 24 miles, above Earth. He lifted his arms in victory, sending off loud cheers from jubilant onlookers and friends inside the mission’s control center in Roswell, N.M.

“When I was standing there on top of the world, you become so humble, you do not think about of breaking records anymore, you do not think of about gaining scientific date. The only thing you want is to come back alive,” he said after the jump.

Brian Utley, a jump observer from the International Federation of Sports Aviation, said preliminary figures show Baumgartner reached a maximum speed of 833.9 mph. That amounts to Mach 1.24, which is faster than the speed of sound. No one has ever reached that speed wearing only a high-tech suit.

Baumgartner says that traveling faster than sound is “hard to describe because you don’t feel it.” With no reference points, “you don’t know how fast you travel,” he told reporters.

Syria Accused Of Bombing Its Own People

BEIRUT (AP) — The Syrian regime was accused Sunday of dropping cluster bombs — indiscriminate scattershot munitions banned by most nations — in a new sign of desperation and disregard for its own people.

The international group Human Rights Watch cited amateur video and testimony from the front lines in making the allegation against the government of President Bashar Assad.

Syria and Turkey, meanwhile, declared their skies off-limits to each other amid mounting cross-border tensions in Syria’s 19-month-old conflict, now a civil war. Turkey is an outspoken backer of rebels trying to oust Assad.

The weekend’s mutual ban on overflights is part of Turkey’s increasingly assertive stance toward Syria that has stirred concerns about a regional conflagration. In the past two weeks, Turkey has retaliated for stray Syrian shells and mortar rounds, intercepted a Syrian passenger plane on suspicion it carried military equipment, and — according to a Turkish newspaper Sunday — sent more warships to naval bases north of the Syrian coastline.

Inside Syria, rebel fighters and regime forces have been locked in a bloody stalemate for weeks, with rebels holding large rural stretches in the heavily populated western area, but unable to dislodge Assad’s troops from urban centers. During the summer, the regime escalated shelling and airstrikes on rebel-held neighborhoods.

Expect Small ’13 Social Security Benefit Raise

WASHINGTON (AP) — Social Security recipients shouldn’t expect a big increase in monthly benefits come January.

Preliminary figures show the annual benefit boost will be between 1 percent and 2 percent, which would be among the lowest since automatic adjustments were adopted in 1975. Monthly benefits for retired workers now average \$1,237, meaning the typical retiree can expect a raise of between \$12 and \$24 a month.

The size of the increase will be made official Tuesday, when the government releases inflation figures for September. The announcement is unlikely to please a big group of voters — 56 million people get benefits — just three weeks before elections for president and Congress.

The cost-of-living adjustment, or COLA, is tied to a government measure of inflation adopted by Congress in the 1970s. It shows that consumer prices have gone up by less than 2 percent in the past year.

“Basically, for the past 12 months, prices did not go up as rapidly as they did the year before,” said Polina Vlasenko, an economist at the American Institute for Economic Research, based in Great Barrington, Mass.

This year, Social Security recipients received a 3.6 percent increase in benefits after getting no increase the previous two years.

GOP Senator Alleges Cover-Up On Libya

WASHINGTON (AP) — A senior Republican senator is alleging the Obama administration deliberately covered-up the details of the attack on a U.S. Consulate in Libya that killed four Americans, including the U.S. ambassador.

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham told CBS’ “Face the Nation” that he believes the administration knew within 24 hours that the Sept. 11 attack in Benghazi was a coordinated militia assault. He says the administration described the attack as a spontaneous protest gone awry so that voters would think al-Qaida had been dismantled by President Barack Obama.

Graham said: “Either they are misleading the American people or are incredibly incompetent.”

The White House declined to comment on Graham’s allegations. It has said previously that an investigation is under way and officials have spoken to the matter as intelligence became available.

Democrats shrugged off the allegations.

“This conspiracy stuff is kind of ridiculous to be honest with you, and I’ve been kind of surprised that they’ve gone to these lengths. But you know that’s what they do,” said Rep. Elijah Cummings of Maryland, the top Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which is investigating the incident.

Space Shuttle Arrives At Los Angeles Museum

LOS ANGELES (AP) — It took much longer than expected, but the Space shuttle Endeavour has finally reached its permanent resting place at a Los Angeles museum.

After a 12-mile journey through city streets that included thousands of adoring onlookers, flashing cameras and even the filming of a TV commercial, Endeavour arrived at the California Science Center Sunday to a greeting party of city leaders and other dignitaries that had expected it many hours earlier.

The Endeavour was still slowly moving toward a hangar on the grounds of the museum mid-Sunday afternoon.

Organizers had planned a slow trip, saying the spacecraft that once orbited at more than 17,000 mph would move at just 2 mph in its final voyage.

But that estimate turned out to be generous, with Endeavour often creeping along at a barely detectable pace when it wasn’t at a dead stop due to difficult-to-manuever obstacles like trees and light posts.

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Longtime Senator Specter Dies

BY PETER JACKSON
Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Former U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, the outspoken Pennsylvania centrist whose switch from Republican to Democrat ended a 30-year career in which he played a pivotal role in several Supreme Court nominations, died Sunday. He was 82.

Specter, who announced in late August that he was battling cancer, died at his home in Philadelphia from complications of non-Hodgkins lymphoma, said his son Shanin. Over the years, Arlen Specter had fought two previous bouts with Hodgkin’s disease, overcome a brain tumor and survived cardiac arrest following bypass surgery.

Specter rose to prominence in the 1960s as an aggressive Philadelphia prosecutor and as an assistant counsel to the Warren Commission, developing the single-bullet theory that posited just one bullet struck both President Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally — an assumption critical to the argument that presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. The theory remains controversial and was the focus of Oliver Stone’s 1991 movie “JFK.”

In 1987, Specter helped thwart the Supreme Court nomination of former federal appeals Judge Robert H. Bork — earning him conservative enemies who still bitterly refer to such rejections as being “borked.”

But four years later, Specter was criticized by liberals for his tough questioning of Anita Hill at Clarence Thomas’ Supreme Court nomination hearings and for accusing her of committing “flat-out perjury.” The nationally televised interrogation incensed women’s groups and nearly cost him his seat in 1992.

Specter, who had battled cancer, was Pennsylvania’s longest-serving senator when Democrats picked then-U.S. Rep. Joe Sestak over him in the 2010 primary, despite Specter’s endorsements by



RAFAEL SUANES/MCT
Former U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, shown in this 2010 file photo, died on Sunday, Oct. 14, of cancer at 82. He served five terms in the U.S. Senate representing Pennsylvania.

President Barack Obama and other Democratic leaders. Sestak lost Specter’s seat to conservative Republican Rep. Pat Toomey by 2 percentage points.

A political moderate, Specter was swept into the Senate in the Reagan landslide of 1980.

He took credit for helping to defeat President Clinton’s national health care plan — the complexities of which he highlighted in a gigantic chart that hung on his office wall for years afterward — and helped lead the investigation into Gulf War syndrome. Following the Iran-Contra scandal, he pushed legislation that created the inspectors general of the CIA.

As a senior member of the powerful Appropriations Committee, Specter pushed for increased funding for stem-cell research, breast

cancer and Alzheimer’s disease, and supported several labor-backed initiatives in a GOP-led Congress. He also doggedly sought federal funds for local projects in his home state.

The former Democrat was not shy about bucking fellow Republicans.

In 1995, he launched a presidential bid, denouncing religious conservatives as the “fringe” that plays too large a role in setting the party’s agenda. Specter, who was Jewish, bowed out before the first primary because of lackluster fundraising.

Despite his tireless campaigning, Specter’s irascible independence caught up with him in 2004. Specter barely survived a GOP primary challenge by Toomey by 17,000 votes of more than 1.4 mil-

lion cast. He went on to easily win the general election with the help of organized labor, a traditionally Democratic constituency.

Specter startled fellow senators in April 2009 when he announced he was switching to the Democratic side, saying he found himself “increasingly at odds with the Republican philosophy.” Earlier in the year, he had been one of only three Republicans in Congress — and the only one facing re-election in 2010 — who voted for President Barack Obama’s economic stimulus bill.

He also said he had concluded that his chance of defeating a GOP challenger in the 2010 party primary was bleak. But he said the Democrats couldn’t count on him to be “an automatic 60th vote” to give the party a filibuster-proof majority.

Specter outspent Sestak, a retired Navy vice admiral, but Sestak attacked him as a political opportunist who switched parties to save his job. A memorable campaign ad used Specter’s own words against him: “My change in party will enable me to be re-elected.”

Specter was diagnosed in February 2005 with stage IV Hodgkin’s disease, a cancer of the lymphatic system. Announcing the diagnosis with his trademark doggedness, Specter said: “I have beaten a brain tumor, bypass heart surgery and many tough political opponents and I’m going to beat this, too.”

He wrote of his struggle in a 2008 book, “Never Give In: Battling Cancer in the Senate,” saying he wanted to let others facing similar crises “ought to know they are not alone.”

Cancer handed him “a stark look at mortality” and an “added sense of humility,” Specter told The Associated Press.

Intellectual and stubborn, Specter played squash nearly every day into his mid-70s and liked to unwind with a martini or two at night. He took the lead on a wide spectrum of issues and was no stranger to controversy.

Debate Preparation Trumps 2012 Campaigning Sunday

BY STEVE PEOPLES AND JULIE PACE
Associated Press

BURLINGTON, Mass. — As Mitt Romney’s campaign claimed new momentum in the race for the White House, President Barack Obama’s political advisers on Sunday promised the incumbent would unleash his more aggressive side in Tuesday’s debate to prevent their Republican rival from delivering another “magical and theatrical performance.”

Obama and Romney hunkered down in private debate preparation for much of the day as aides offered a pre-debate sparring match on television.

They disagreed on much, but agreed that Romney bested Obama in their first meeting nearly two weeks ago — a performance that shifted the direction of a race that had favored the president but has since tightened in national and battleground state polls.

“He knows Mitt Romney had a better night at the first debate,” Obama spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki said of the president. “The American people should expect to see a much more energized President Obama.”

Ed Gillespie, senior adviser to the Romney campaign, quipped that the former Massachusetts governor would be prepared regardless of Obama’s adjustments: “The president can change his style. He can change his tactics. He can’t change his record.”

Obama spent the day with aides in swing state Virginia, while Romney stayed close to his Boston-area home ahead of Tuesday’s prime-time, town hall-style debate at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., exactly three weeks before the Nov. 6 election.

Romney’s advisers suggested the Republican nominee would continue to moderate his message — in tone, if not substance — as he did in the Oct. 3 meeting to help broaden his appeal to the narrow slice of undecided voters.



In recent days, Romney has promised his tax plan would not benefit the wealthy, emphasized his work with Democrats as Massachusetts governor and downplayed plans to strengthen the nation’s abortion laws.

He told an Iowa newspaper this week, for example, that he would not pursue abortion-related legislation if elected.

That’s in direct conflict with last year’s pledge to the anti-abortion group, the Susan B. Anthony List, to cut federal funding from Planned Parenthood and support legislation to “protect unborn children who are capable of feeling pain from abortion.”

“I think Mitt Romney’s performance was, indeed, magical and theatrical. Magical and theatrical largely because for 90 minutes he walked away from a campaign he had been running for more than six years previous to that,” Obama senior campaign adviser Robert Gibbs said of the first debate.

While the debates have proved critical, they are one element in larger campaigns that involve extensive ground games in virtually every state across the nation and a television ad war that may consume \$1 billion before Election Day.

Through Monday, either absentee or in-person early voting has begun in 43 states.

Romney on Sunday released a new television spot showcasing footage from running mate Paul Ryan’s first and only faceoff with Vice President Joe Biden last week. The ad features clips of Ryan saying the government “can’t keep spending money we don’t have.”

The comments are juxtaposed with video from the debate of Biden laughing.

CDC Scientists Fight Fungus Blamed For Meningitis Outbreak

ATLANTA (AP) — Scattered across the carefully landscaped main campus of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are the staff on the front lines fighting a rare outbreak of fungal meningitis: A scientist in a white lab coat peers through a microscope at fungi on a glass slide. In another room, another researcher uses what looks like a long, pointed eye dropper to suck up DNA samples that will be tested for the suspect fungus.

Not far away in another building is the emergency operations center, which is essentially the war room. There’s a low hum of voices as employees work the phones, talking to health officials, doctors and patients who received potentially contaminated pain injections believed to be at the root of the outbreak. Workers sit at rows of computers, gathering data, advising doctors and reaching out to thousands of people who may have been exposed.

Overall, dozens of people are working day and night to bring the outbreak under control. More than 200 people in 14 states have been sickened, including 15 who have died.

There is a sense of urgency — people are dying, and lives could be saved if those who are sickened get treated in time. But it’s not a race against a fast-spreading illness like avian flu or SARS — or even the fictional virus the CDC fails to unravel in the popular TV series “The Walking Dead.” Unlike those outbreaks, this strain of meningitis isn’t contagious and doesn’t spread between people. It is likely isolated to the contaminated steroid, produced by the New England Compounding Center in Framingham, Mass.

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