

# This Week in Washington

April 6, 2012

## DOMESTIC POLICY MATTERS

Congress is in recess, returning April 16<sup>th</sup>. Late last week, newly-appointed Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough released a procedural opinion that last summer's deal on the debt ceiling and spending caps – the **Budget Control Act** – does not preclude the Senate from taking up other budget resolutions this year. Any Senator now can place a budget proposal on the Senate calendar, although Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) may choose not to bring proposals to the floor for consideration.

**Supreme Court: Health Care Law Case.** On Monday, President Obama stated that the Supreme Court overturning the health care reform law passed by an elected Congress would constitute “an unprecedented, extraordinary step”. Those remarks drew heavy criticism from Republican lawmakers, many of whom have argued against the constitutionality of the law. On Thursday, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) accused the President of trying to intimidate the Justices and suggested he “back off.” U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder elaborated on the President's remarks in a letter Thursday affirming the Court's power to review the constitutionality of legislation while defending President Obama's statement that courts should show strong deference to Congress' Commerce Clause-based laws.

In the wake of controversy surrounding reports of excessive spending at a recent **General Services Administration (GSA)** training conference outside Las Vegas, GSA Administrator Martha Johnson announced her resignation on Monday. The House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee has scheduled a hearing April 19<sup>th</sup> to examine GSA spending decisions. On Wednesday, the Department of Defense authorized a **new military trial at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba**, for Khalid Sheik Mohammed and four co-defendants accused of helping to orchestrate the attacks on September 11, 2001. The suspects were first charged in a military commission in 2008, but the case was suspended after the Obama Administration unsuccessfully moved to have them tried in U.S. federal court in New York. On Thursday, the House Natural Resources Committee issued a subpoena to the Department of the Interior for documents related to the Obama Administration's ongoing rewrite of a **2008 coal mining regulation**. Meanwhile, **environmental and health groups sued the EPA** Thursday for the Agency's alleged failure to regulate a coal combustion byproduct known as “coal ash.” Also on Thursday, Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley confirmed that the Department of Defense has eliminated a formal schedule for “initial operational capability” of the **F-35 fighter jet**, following several delays. President Obama signed two pieces of bipartisan legislation this week: the **Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge (STOCK)** Act of 2012 on Wednesday and the **Jumpstart Our Business Startups (JOBS)** Act on Thursday.

The Labor Department released its **March jobs report** on Friday, which shows the economy added a lower-than-expected 120,000 jobs for the month, and the unemployment rate fell slightly to 8.2 percent. While the unemployment rate is the lowest since January 2009, the March decrease was attributed primarily to fewer people searching for jobs.

**Political News.** Last Friday, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett announced that he will run in the Democratic primary for the right to face Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker (R) in a recall election scheduled for June 5<sup>th</sup>. Senator Dick Lugar (R-Indiana), who faces a competitive primary against state Treasurer Richard Mourdock, paid approximately \$15,000 to the federal treasury last Friday after an investigation initiated at his request found that he owed additional money for hotel stays in the Indianapolis area. On Tuesday, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney won Republican presidential nominating contests in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Wisconsin, after which challengers Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich announced they would remain in the race. Representative Tim Johnson (R-Illinois) announced Wednesday that he will not seek re-election to his redrawn, Democratic-leaning district in 2012. A USA Today/Gallup poll released Monday revealed women in swing states favor President Obama over Governor Romney by 18 points, while all voters nationwide favor the President by four points. On Friday, the White House hosted a forum on Women and the Economy, where the President made remarks highlighting the Administration's efforts to ensure women's economic security.

## FOREIGN POLICY MATTERS.

**Syrian Conflict.** Next Tuesday (10<sup>th</sup>) is the effective deadline for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces to halt the use of heavy weapons and pull back from population centers in compliance with the six-point peace plan proposed by U.N. and Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan. Last Sunday in Istanbul, Secretary Clinton met

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with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan. At the Friends of Syria Conference Sunday, Secretary Clinton criticized Assad's troops for launching new assaults on Syrian cities and called for new steps to "ratchet up pressure on the regime, provide humanitarian relief ..., and support the opposition ...." Secretary Clinton also met with Arab League Secretary General Nabil Al-Araby, and she met separately with the Syrian National Council. Today, at least 24 Syrians were reportedly killed in violence allegedly perpetrated by Syrian forces. Meanwhile, thousands of Syrian refugees continue to cross the border seeking a safe haven in Turkey.

**Iran.** Late last Friday, President Obama said there is enough oil available globally to enable countries to find suitable non-Iranian energy sources. Prospects for next week's scheduled resumption of P-5+1 Talks on Iran's nuclear program receded Thursday, when the Iranians objected to Turkey as the location for the talks. Meanwhile, reports suggest President Obama, with support from Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, is open to accepting an Iranian civil nuclear program, if the international community will be able to verify an Iranian commitment to refrain from building nuclear weapons.

The State Department said Thursday that **North Korea's** reportedly upcoming satellite launch would be in violation of existing U.N. Security Council resolutions, since the United States and its allies believe the launch would be designed to test a long-range missile.

**Burma Bilateral Developments.** Last Sunday, the people of Burma went to the polls for a parliamentary by-election, resulting in the opposition party securing 43 of the 44 contested seats. On Monday, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney congratulated "the people of Burma on their participation in the electoral process, and Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy on their strong showing in the polls." Secretary Clinton announced Wednesday the Administration will ease some sanctions on Burma, including by removing travel bans on some Burmese officials, recalibrating a ban on investments, and pledging to open up parts of Burma's banking sector to foreign banking services.

On Thursday, Vice President Biden welcomed **Kosovo's Prime Minister** Hashim Thaçi, congratulating the Prime Minister "on the recent progress in the European Union-facilitated Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as the start of the EU's feasibility study on next steps toward Kosovo's European integration." Secretary Clinton met the day before with Prime Minister Thaçi, affirming her support for Kosovo's "aspiration to become a full partner in the international community and a member of the European Union, and eventually, NATO."

**Africa News.** Tuesday, the State Department urged Captain Amadou Sanogo and his supporters to release their "illegitimate grip" on **Mali**, imposing visa restrictions on Sanogo and his followers. On Friday, Tuareg rebels in northern Mali declared they had formed an independent state of Azawad. Monday, House Homeland Security Committee Chair Peter King (R-New York) and Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence Chair Patrick Meehan (R-Pennsylvania) wrote to Secretary Clinton to urge her to consider designating Nigerian-based **Boko Haram**, which reportedly has ties to al-Qaeda, as a terrorist organization. On Monday, President Obama called President Salva Kiir of **South Sudan**, welcoming President Kiir's commitment to moving forward with a summit between **Sudan** and South Sudan on peace and oil issues.

This week, officials in the **United Arab Emirates** reportedly briefly detained foreign employees of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The State Department noted, "We will continue to support civil society in the UAE and across the region." Late Thursday, the State Department condemned what appeared to be an assassination attempt Wednesday against **Lebanese politician** Samir Geagea, an opponent of Syria's Assad and Hizballah.

Monday, President Obama, along with Secretary Clinton, hosted **Canadian Prime Minister** Stephen Harper and **Mexican President** Felipe Calderon for the North American Leaders' Summit. President Obama called **Prime Minister** Nouri al-Maliki on Tuesday to congratulate the Iraqi people on the success of the Arab Summit hosted in Baghdad last week and to reaffirm the United States' commitment to a unified, democratic Iraq. On Wednesday, President Obama and Secretary Clinton joined a meeting between Vice President Biden and Masoud Barzani, President of the **Kurdistan Region of Iraq**.

This week, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative released **annual reports** on: (1) Foreign Trade Barriers, (2) Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, and (3) Technical Barriers to Trade. The Labor Department released Tuesday a **Final Determination** revising the *List of Products Requiring Federal Contractor Certification as to Forced or Indentured Child Labor*.