

PRESIDENT-ELECT BARACK OBAMA FIRST PRESS CONFERENCE

Chicago, Illinois - November 7, 2008

CHICAGO, Illinois (CNN) — Sen. Barack Obama spoke at his first news conference as president-elect Friday afternoon. The following is a transcript of the conference:

Obama: Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you very much.

This morning, we woke up to more sobering news about the state of our economy. The 240,000 jobs lost in October marks the 10th consecutive month that our economy has shed jobs. In total, we've lost nearly 1.2 million jobs this year, and more than 10 million Americans are now unemployed.

Tens of millions of families are struggling to figure out how to pay the bills and stay in their homes. Their stories are an urgent reminder that we are facing the greatest economic challenge of our lifetime, and we're going to have to act swiftly to resolve it.

Now, the United States has only one government and one president at a time. And until January 20th of next year, that government is the current administration.

I've spoken to President Bush. I appreciate his commitment to ensuring that his economic policy team keeps us fully informed as developments unfold. And I'm also thankful for his invitation to the White House.

Immediately after I become president, I'm going to confront this economic crisis head on by taking all necessary steps to ease the credit crisis, help hardworking families, and restore growth and prosperity.

And this morning, I met with members of my Transition Economic Advisory Board, who are standing behind me, alongside my vice president-elect, Joe Biden.

They will help to guide the work of my transition team, working with Rahm Emanuel, my chief of staff, in developing a strong set of policies to respond to this crisis. We discussed in the earlier meeting several of the most immediate challenges facing our economy and key priorities on which to focus on in the days and weeks ahead.

First of all, we need a rescue plan for the middle class that invests in immediate efforts to create jobs and provide relief to families that are watching their paychecks shrink and their life savings disappear.

A particularly urgent priority is a further extension of unemployment insurance benefits for workers who cannot find work in the increasingly weak economy.

A fiscal stimulus plan that will jump-start economic growth is long overdue. I've talked about it throughout this — the last few months of the campaign. We should get it done.

Second, we have to address the spreading impact of the financial crisis on the other sectors of our economy: small businesses that are struggling to meet their payrolls and finance their holiday inventories; and state and municipal governments facing devastating budget cuts and tax increases.

We must also remember that the financial crisis is increasingly global and requires a global response.

The news coming out of the auto industry this week reminds us of the hardship it faces, hardship that goes far beyond individual auto companies to the countless suppliers, small businesses and communities throughout our nation who depend on a vibrant American auto industry.

The auto industry is the backbone of American manufacturing and a critical part of our attempt to reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

I would like to see the administration do everything it can to accelerate the retooling assistance that Congress has already enacted. In addition, I have made it a high priority for my transition team to work on additional policy options to help the auto industry adjust, weather the financial crisis, and succeed in producing fuel-efficient cars here in the United States of America.

And I was glad to be joined today by Governor Jennifer Granholm, who obviously has great knowledge and great interest on this issue.

I've asked my team to explore what we can do under current law and whether additional legislation will be needed for this purpose.

Third, we will review the implementation of this administration's financial program to ensure that the government's efforts are achieving their central goal of stabilizing financial markets while protecting taxpayers, helping homeowners, and not unduly rewarding the management of financial firms that are receiving government assistance.

It is absolutely critical that the Treasury work closely with the FDIC, HUD, and other government agencies to use the substantial authority that they already have to help families avoid foreclosure and stay in their homes.

Finally, as we monitor and address these immediate economic challenges, we will be moving forward in laying out a set of policies that will grow our middle class and strengthen our economy in the long term. We cannot afford to wait on moving forward on the key priorities that I identified during the campaign, including clean energy, health care, education, and tax relief for middle-class families.

My transition team will be working on each of these priorities in the weeks ahead, and I intend to reconvene this advisory board to discuss the best ideas for responding to these immediate problems.

Let me close by saying this. I do not underestimate the enormity of the task that lies ahead. We have taken some major action to date, and we will need further action during this transition and subsequent months.

Some of the choices that we make are going to be difficult. And I have said before and I will repeat again: It is not going to be quick, and it is not going to be easy for us to dig ourselves out of the hole that we are in.

But America is a strong and resilient country. And I know we will succeed, if we put aside partisanship and politics and work together as one nation. That's what I intend to do.

With that, let me open it up for some questions. And I'm going to start right here with you.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President-elect. I wonder what you think any president can accomplish during their first 100 days in office to turn the economy around? How far can you go? And what will be your priorities on day one?

Obama: Well, I think that a new president can do an enormous amount to restore confidence, to move an agenda forward that speaks to the needs of the economy and the needs of middle-class families all across the country.

I've outlined during the course of the campaign some critical issues that I intend to work on.

We have a current financial crisis that is spilling out into rest of the economy, and we have taken some action so far. More action is undoubtedly going to be needed. My transition team is going to be monitoring very closely what happens over the course of the next several months.

The one thing I can say with certainty is that we are going to need to see a stimulus package passed either before or after inauguration.

We are going to have to focus on jobs, because the hemorrhaging of jobs has an impact, obviously, on consumer confidence and the ability of people to — to buy goods and services and can have enormous spillover effects.

And I think it's going to be very important for us to provide the kinds of assistance to state and local governments to make sure that they don't compound some of the problems that are already out there by having to initiate major layoffs or initiate tax increases.

So there are some things that we know we're going to have to do, but I'm confident that a new president can have an enormous impact. That's why I ran for president.

Question: (off-mike) ... from House Democrats that the stimulus package may be in trouble, that it's going to be a hard time getting out of a lame-duck session. Are you still confident that you would be able to get something done before you actually take office?

Obama: I want to see a stimulus package sooner rather than later. If it does not get done in the lame-duck session, it will be the first thing I get done as president of the United States.

Question: Senator, for the first time since the Iranian revolution, the president of Iran sent a congratulations note to a new U.S. president. I'm wondering if, first of all, if you responded to President Ahmadinejad's note of congratulations and, second of all, and more importantly, how soon do you plan on sending low-level envoys to countries such as Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, to see if a presidential-level talk would be productive?

Obama: I am aware that the letter was sent. Let me state — repeat what I stated during the course of the campaign.

Iran's development of a nuclear weapon I believe is unacceptable. And we have to mount a international effort to prevent that from happening.

Iran's support of terrorist organizations I think is something that has to cease.

I will be reviewing the letter from President Ahmadinejad, and we will respond appropriately. It's only been three days since the election. Obviously, how we approach and deal with a country like Iran is not something that we should, you know, simply do in a knee-jerk fashion. I think we've got to think it through.

But I have to reiterate once again that we only have one president at a time. And I want to be very careful that we are sending the right signals to the world as a whole that I am not the president and I won't be until January 20th.

Question: Picking up what we were just talking about, your meeting with President Bush on Monday. When — he is still the decider, obviously, stating the obvious. When you disagree with decisions he makes, will you defer? Will you challenge? Will you confront? And if it becomes confrontational, could that rattle the markets even more?

Obama: Well, President Bush graciously invited Michelle and I to — to meet with him and First Lady Laura Bush. We are gratified by the invitation. I'm sure that, in addition to taking a tour of the White House, there's going to be a substantive conversation between myself and the president.

I'm not going to anticipate problems. I'm going to go in there with a spirit of bipartisanship and a sense that both the president and various leaders in Congress all recognize the severity of the situation right now and want to get stuff done.

And, you know, undoubtedly there may end up being differences between not just members of different parties, but between people within the same party.

The critical point and I think the critical tone that has to be struck by all of us involved right now is the American people need help. This economy is in bad shape. And we have just completed one of the longest election cycles in recorded history.

Now is a good time for us to set politics aside for a while and think practically about what will actually work to move the economy forward. And it's in that spirit that I'll have the conversation with the president.

Question: Thank you, Mr. President-elect. With the country facing two wars and a financial crisis, do you think it's important for you to move especially quickly to fill key cabinet posts, such as treasury secretary and secretary of state?

Obama: When we have an announcement about cabinet appointments, we will make them. There is no doubt that I think people want to know who's going to make up our team.

And I want to move with all deliberate haste, but I want to emphasize "deliberate" as well as "haste." I'm proud of the choice I made of vice president, partly because we did it right. I'm proud of the choice of chief of staff, because we thought it through.

And I think it's very important, in all these key positions, both in the economic team and the national security team, to — to get it right and not to be so rushed that you end up making mistakes.

I'm confident that we're going to have an outstanding team, and we will be rolling that out in subsequent weeks.

Question: Yes, sir. To what extent — to what extent are you planning to use your probably pretty great influence in determining the successor for your Senate seat? And what sort of criteria should the governor be looking at in filling that position?

Obama: This is the governor's decision; it is not my decision.

And I think that the criteria that I would have for my successor would be the same criteria that I'd have if I were a voter: somebody who is capable; somebody who is passionate about helping working families in Illinois meet their — meet their dreams.

And I think there are going to be a lot of good choices out there, but it is the governor's decision to make, not mine.

Lynn Sweet?

Question: Mr. President-elect ...

Obama: What happened to your arm, Lynn?

Question: I cracked my shoulder running to your speech on election night.

Obama: Oh, no.

(Laughter)

Question: (inaudible)

Obama: I think that was the only major incident during the — the entire Grant Park celebration.

Question: Thank you for asking. Here's my question. I'm wondering what you're doing to get ready. Have you spoke to any living ex-presidents, what books you might be reading?

Everyone wants to know, what kind of dog are you going to buy for your girls? Have you decided on a private or public school for your daughters?

Obama: Let — let me list those off.

In terms of speaking to former presidents, I've spoken to all of them that are living. Obviously, President Clinton — I didn't want to get into a Nancy Reagan thing about, you know, doing any seances.

I have re-read some of Lincoln's writings, who's always an extraordinary inspiration.

And, by the way, President Carter, President Bush, Sr., as well as the current president have all been very gracious and offered to provide any help that they can in this transition process.

With respect to the dog, this is a major issue. I think it's generated more interest on our Web site than just about anything.

We have — we have two criteria that have to be reconciled. One is that Malia is allergic, so it has to be hypoallergenic. There are a number of breeds that are hypoallergenic.

On the other hand, our preference would be to get a shelter dog, but, obviously, a lot of shelter dogs are mutts like me. So — so whether we're going to be able to balance those two things I think is a pressing issue on the Obama household.

And with respect to schools, Michelle will be — will be scouting out some schools. We'll be making a decision about that in the future.

Question: You are now privy to a lot of intelligence that you haven't had access to before, in fact, much of what the president sees, I'm sure all of it.

First of all, do you — what do you think about the state of U.S. intelligence, whether you think it needs beefing up, whether you think there's enough interaction between the various agencies?

And, second of all, has anything that you've heard given you pause about anything you've talked about on the campaign trail?

Obama: Well, as you know, if — if there was something I had heard, I couldn't tell you. But...

Question: (off-mike)

Obama: I have received intelligence briefings. And I will make just a general statement.

Our intelligence process can always improve. I think it has gotten better. And, you know, beyond that, I don't think I should comment on the nature of the intelligence briefings.

That was a two-parter. Was there another aspect to that?

Question: Well, just whether — you know, absent what you've heard...

Obama: OK, I get you.

Question: ... whether anything has given you pause.

Obama: I'm going to skip that.

Question: Mr. President-elect, do you still intend to seek income tax increases for upper-income Americans? And if so, should these Americans expect to pay higher taxes in 2009?

Obama: The — my tax plan represented a net tax cut. It provided for substantial middle-class tax cuts; 95 percent of working Americans would receive them.

It also provided for cuts in capital gains for small businesses, additional tax credits. All of it is designed for job growth.

My priority is going to be, how do we grow the economy? How do we create more jobs?

I think that the plan that we've put forward is the right one, but, obviously, over the next several weeks and months, we're going to be continuing to take a look at the data and see what's taking place in the economy as a whole.

But, understand, the goal of my plan is to provide tax relief to families that are struggling, but also to boost the capacity of the economy to grow from the bottom up.

All right. Thank you very much, guys