

Obama calls astronauts aboard shuttle Atlantis

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President Barack Obama talks on the phone to the crew of the Space Shuttle Atlantis in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, Wednesday, May 20, 2009. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama told the astronauts aboard space shuttle Atlantis on Wednesday that they are an example of the dedication and commitment to exploration that represents America.

During a lighthearted afternoon phone call from the Oval Office, the president also asked them to check that someone was taking care of his home back in Chicago.

"Did you guys see my house?" Obama joked with the crew, which flew over Illinois earlier in the mission. "I'm trying to figure out if my lawn is

getting mowed there. I haven't been back in a couple months."

More seriously, Obama told the astronauts that their dedication and commitment to exploration are traits that have always made the nation strong.

"Like a lot of Americans, I've been watching with amazement the gorgeous images that you've been sending back," the president told the astronauts as they passed over the Pacific Ocean, with the [Galapagos islands](#) some 200 miles below.

The [astronauts](#) were sent to repair the [Hubble Space Telescope](#), a job they completed on Tuesday. Obama said his young daughters have many of the images.

"Well, I know you've excited my 10-year-old and my 7-year-old. They've got some images like that, that they prize whenever we talk about space and so by allowing Hubble to continue on its journey, you've really allowed all of us to continue on our journey for growth and exploration."

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration remains without a top official, although the president met on Tuesday with Charles Bolden, a former shuttle commander and retired Marine major general. The 62-year-old from Houston is a leading candidate to head the space agency; he would become NASA's first black administrator and second astronaut in the post.

Obama said he would nominate a candidate soon. The position requires Senate confirmation.

"I can't disclose it to you because I've got to have some hoopla on the announcement back here on Earth. But I can assure you that it's a high priority of mine to restore that sense of wonder that space can provide,"

Obama said.

The crew asked Obama whether any of them in space were a candidate.

"I'm not going to give you any hints," he said with a laugh.

Atlantis is due to return to Earth on Friday, weather permitting.

On the Web:

NASA's shuttle mission site: <http://www.nasa.gov/mission-pages/shuttle/main>

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