

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 7/14/2016

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. I do not have any announcements to make at the top, so we can go straight to whatever questions may be on your mind today.

Darlene, why don't you kick us off?

Q Sure, thanks. Do you have anything to add at the top here to Justice Ginsburg's apology for her comments about Donald Trump?

MR. EARNEST: I do not. Over the last few days, she's spoken at length, and I'll leave her to characterize her comments and her views.

Q Secondly, there are reports about the U.S. offering Russia some sort of military deal to go after the Islamic State group and al Qaeda in Syria. Is that something you can comment on? Or is something like that in the works?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say a couple of things. The first is that, at present, the United States is not conducting or coordinating military operations with Russia. I know there's some speculation that an agreement may be reached to do so, but it's not clear that that will happen. Many of you have written about the extensive diplomatic consultations between the United States and Russia not just over the last several weeks, but over the last several weeks or more about the situation inside of Russia -- about the situation inside of Syria.

The case that we have made for more than a year now, or at least a year now, is that Russia should use the influence they have with the Assad regime to expedite a political solution to the situation inside of Syria. That political solution involves a transition -- moving Assad out of power in Syria. That's something that will only happen once we have been able to bring some stability to the rampant violence on the ground. And earlier this year, there was some progress made in getting many parties to agree to a Cessation of Hostilities. And at the beginning of the implementation of that deal, it exceeded our expectations in terms of the security situation on the ground. That was a positive development.

Since that time, we have seen the security situation and stability erode. And that has dealt a setback to efforts to reach a political agreement.

As it relates to our military coordination, we've always made clear that we would welcome a contribution -- a military contribution from Russia, as long as they were focused on ISIL and al Qaeda's presence in Syria. Unfortunately, we've seen them devote too much of their attention to using their military might to prop up the Assad regime. I think this illustrates the contradiction that I've discussed before. There's a clear contradiction in Russia's approach to this situation. They say that they want a political transition, and they say that they're concerned about the presence of extremists inside of Syria, but yet they actually use their military might to prop up the Assad regime at the expense of -- or, in some cases, even to the detriment of -- our effort to go after extremists.

So the situation that we find ourselves in now is Russia is at a crossroads. Russia has to decide for themselves if they're prepared to take the kinds of actions that we've been hoping they would take for quite some time now. And the consequences for Russia are quite grave. The security situation inside of Syria continues to erode. That's a problem for Russia for two reasons. The first is, they've got a substantial military investment inside of Syria, and the pressure and stress that their host government is under right now is not good for their strategic interests in the country or in the broader region. There also is a persistent extremist threat inside of Syria that we know is capitalizing on the chaos in that country. And that chaos poses a significant threat to Russia's security situation.

So it's in their interest to begin pursuing a strategy that addresses that. That's certainly what the United States has done -- because we're aware of the threat that is posed by extremists inside of Syria that emanates not just from ISIL, but also al Qaeda's presence there. Russia faces that same threat; in some ways, it could be even described as worse. But their approach has been different than ours. And that's why it's time for Russia to make some serious decisions about how they want to use their influence inside of Syria, both when it comes to their diplomatic influence, but also when it comes to their military capabilities.

So that was a long answer to your question, Darlene. But the situation there is complicated, and I want to try to give you a detailed understanding of what our approach has been and the basic questions -- the strategic questions that Russia is facing right now.

Q Wouldn't such a partnership between the U.S. and Russia sort of undercut everything the U.S. has been saying all along about Russia's military involvement in Syria in the first place?

MR. EARNEST: What we've been saying about Russia's military involvement in Syria in the first place, from the beginning, has been that they have to decide if they're going to use that military to prop up the Assad regime, or if they're going to use their military to go after extremists. And our case is that you can't do both. In some cases, Russia -- I guess to be fair to them -- they have tried to do both. But trying to do both -- trying to go after

both, trying to accomplish both goals -- is a fundamental contradiction. Because to prop up the Assad regime worsens the chaos inside of Syria, and extremist organizations rely on that chaos to thrive.

So this is the strategy that contains this glaring contradiction that Russia has pursued for more than a year. And we've seen in that time the security situation in Syria deteriorate. We've made progress against ISIL in that time, but it's been in spite of Russia's presence and actions -- not because of them. And we are still quite concerned about the broader threat that is posed by ISIL and by al Qaeda extremists inside of Syria. And that threat is not just limited to Western targets. It's not just limited to targets in NATO countries. There's a persistent threat in Russia that they risk exacerbating as long as they use their influence to prop up the Assad regime.

Q Finally, really quickly, has the President -- or do you know when he will call Theresa May to congratulate her on becoming Prime Minister of Britain?

MR. EARNEST: The President had an opportunity earlier this morning to telephone the new Prime Minister of the UK, Theresa May. The President called to offer his congratulations to her on her new leadership position. The President reiterated our oft-stated commitment to not just protecting but deepening the special relationship between the United States and the UK. And the President certainly looks forward to working with Prime Minister May in the six months that he has remaining in office to advance that goal.

We'll see later today if we can provide you a little bit more detail about their call.

Jeff.

Q Josh, sort of a continuation on that. How does the White House feel about Prime Minister May's selection of Boris Johnson as the foreign secretary? He's been fairly critical of President Obama and made some controversial remarks about him. Is that an individual that you see this administration being able to work well with?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, let me start by saying that I got questions of this variety when Prime Minister Netanyahu had announced that Ambassador Dermer would be the Israeli envoy to the United States. And what I said in that situation is a thing that I -- the same thing that I'll say here, which is to restate a principle about the importance of the U.S.-UK special relationship. That relationship transcends any single personality, and choices that are made by the British government about who will represent them on the international stage are rightly choices that should be made by British leaders, and British leaders alone.

But whomever they choose is up to them. The decision that we will make is to seek to deepen and strengthen our special relationship with the UK, regardless of who serves in a position as prominent as foreign minister.

Q But they have chosen, and they chose someone who has said some pretty controversial things about the President. Is that awkward for the White House? Would you like to hear words of apology, perhaps, from the new foreign secretary before starting fresh? How do you respond to that?

MR. EARNEST: No, I did not come out here prepared to demand an apology. I came out here to express our firm commitment to moving forward with the new leadership of the UK, to further strengthen and deepen the special relationship that exists between the UK and the United States. And the President is committed to that relationship and believes it is possible for us to strengthen that relationship because of the collective and historic commitment by leaders in the UK and by the UK people and by leaders in the United States and by the American people.

So we're confident that we can do this work and we'll pursue it, irrespective of specific personalities.

Q All right. And one follow up on the question that Darlene asked about Russia. Are the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department all on the same page about what Secretary Kerry is bringing to those talks in Moscow?

MR. EARNEST: Jeff, the President and his national security team -- well, let me say it this way. When the President is making important decisions about our foreign policy, he elicits people with different perspectives and encourages them to share their opinion. And that's the most effective way to make complicated decisions, is to draw upon the advice and insight of people with different areas of expertise and people that have different perspectives.

At the same time, I can tell you that when the President makes a decision, that the institutions of our country's national security are fully aligned and focused on achieving the objective that the President has laid out. And the President has got complete confidence in people like Secretary Kerry and Secretary Carter and the men and women who serve this country, under their leadership, to address these impossibly complex problems. The President has a lot of confidence and is deeply appreciative of the service of the men and women in the intelligence community and the Department of Defense and at the State Department.

Q Is the President concerned that opposition to this proposal from the military might be undermining the ability to make it happen?

MR. EARNEST: No, the President is -- again, the President is confident that he's getting good advice, that the efforts that are being undertaken by national security professionals - - our diplomats, military leaders, intelligence officials and other parts of his national security team -- are focused on the right things. And they've got the right priorities; they're loyal to their country. These are professionals who are grappling with a difficult problem that's got significant consequences -- not just for the millions of people inside of Syria who have been displaced, but also for broader questions about U.S. national security, particularly as it relates to the extremists inside of Syria that are trying to capitalize on the chaos.

So, look, I got asked this line of questioning a few weeks ago when there was the leak of a so-called dissent cable from the State Department. You heard me say at that point that the President welcomes dissenting views. The President believes that there should be a

channel where people who may disagree can express their opinion. That is a valuable thing to somebody like the President of the United States who is interested in trying to make the right decision. He wants to hear the informed perspective, even of people who may not agree with him. So that's, again, that's particularly true when you're dealing with a problem as complex and as difficult as the situation in Syria.

April.

Q Josh, I want to go back to the issue of race that the President dealt with for a very long time yesterday -- almost five hours. There are expected to be more protests -- protests continue. What's the President's thought about that as he had Black Lives Matter, police, civil rights, faith leaders, local and state officials at that table who were said to have had real conversations -- and at sometimes very pointed and tense? What are his thoughts about these protests that continue after this conversation, and the conversations -- and the others that are supposed to follow next week?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start out by reiterating something that the President said on a number of occasions. The President believes that those demonstrations and those expressions of protest should be peaceful. There's no justification for carrying out an act of violence against a police officer just because that person is wearing the badge.

As it relates to the conversation that the President had last night, you heard the President himself describe it as thoughtful and respectful, and the kind of conversation that people across the country could be proud of. This was a roomful of people with a variety of viewpoints on a very different but similarly complex topic. And if we're going to make progress on this issues, we're going to have to have conversations like the one the President convened yesterday -- a conversation that's not focused on winning a contest of talking points; a conversation that's not just rooted in giving people an opportunity to voice the particular emotion that they may be feeling at that point, but rather a laser-like focus on solutions. And that certainly is the focus that the President has. And you'll have an opportunity to hear more from the President tonight when he talks about this at a town hall meeting hosted by ABC.

Q We would love to have a town hall meeting for American Urban Radio networks, as well.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. Thank you for the invitation.

Q You're very welcome. I hope you accept it. Now, going in a little deeper on this -- so we're told by some of the participants that there are going to be more conversations. Will the President be leading these conversations? Will it be led by White House officials? How far is he willing to lean in on this himself?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think over the last week now, you've seen the President's willingness to lean in pretty significantly. But this is not something the President is going to do on his own. This is not the kind of thing that we accomplish through the sheer force

of will of one person. This is the only thing that's accomplished when men and women -- black, white, brown -- in communities all across the country respond to their own conscience.

And that's where solutions are going to come from. And there has to be a courage and an openness to hearing the perspectives of others and expressing one's own perspective in a thoughtful way. And that has to take place in conversations that aren't just led by the President. So one example of that is, we saw yesterday an announcement, I believe from the U.S. Conference of Mayors, indicating that they expect over the course of the next month or two to host 100 conversations all across the country. That's a start. That's something. And if those conversations are convened in the spirit of the meeting that the President had in the EEOB yesterday, then that will be a good thing. That will be an opportunity for some progress. And as I noted yesterday, each community is a little different, and so the kinds of solutions -- the kinds of perspectives that are offered, the kinds of solutions that are found are going to vary by community.

But ultimately, the prescription for making that progress is the same everywhere. And it's rooted in empathy and a commitment to understanding the perspective of human beings that look and think differently than we do. But trying to doggedly find that common ground is what will be required. And that's not something that the President of the United States is going to do alone. It's not something that the President of the United States is going to be able to do just by delivering a thoughtful, eloquent, powerful speech. It's not something that the President of the United States is going to be able to do in a secret meeting. It's not something that the President of the United States is going to be able to do in a nationally televised town hall meeting, whether it's on television or the radio. This is something that people across the country -- people of goodwill, people who have had their conscience aroused -- are going to have to engage in.

Q So what you just said -- and you gave a lot, but I'm picking out a piece to the question I asked. So this could possibly be -- this meeting could be it for the President actually leaning in, actually convening and talking himself when it comes to issues of race, having these race discussions. Is this right now where you are leaving it?

MR. EARNEST: No. I think the President has shown -- one of the things the President understands is that -- and he noted this in his remarks to all of you at the end of the meeting yesterday -- follow-through is going to be required. Again, this is not something that we're going to be able to solve in the context of one meeting or one speech, or one nationally televised primetime event. This is going to require the dogged, persistent follow-up and follow-through of people all across the country.

So the President will do his part. And he's the President of the United States, so his share is bigger than anybody else's. But he's not at all going to be able to do this alone. He's not even going to be able to do most of it. This is mostly going to fall on the shoulders of men and women of good will -- in law enforcement, in elected office, in faith communities, churches and mosques and synagogues, at universities, at high schools, in homes. And that's what will be required.

This is not the President is staying up all night to work on a speech. This is going to require the action of big-hearted Americans. And the good news is, there are a lot of big-hearted Americans out there. And that's what gives the President some confidence that while this problem is not going to be solved next week or next month or next year, or by the next President -- maybe not even in the next generation -- but over a period of time, we surely are going to make some progress. Based on the amount of progress that we've made thus far, there's the opportunity for us to continue the effort to form a more perfect union.

Q And last question. I talked to Marc Morial, one of the participants yesterday -- the head of the National Urban League. He deals with economics and civil rights. And that's another component when you deal with this broader race issue. And I asked him -- I said, did you talk about that piece, and is that piece something that this administration will be able to tackle? He said he doesn't think so. He said it will come to the next President who will have to deal with that, because right now we have to deal with this issue. Is that the case? Is it right now we just have to focus on this piece versus bringing it all in and putting it all on the table?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, I think the President alluded to this in his remarks on Tuesday in Dallas -- that right now we're asking our police officers to do a lot. We're asking them to do too much in many communities. There are too many communities that have been neglected and they don't have access to the kinds of schools and health care facilities and job training facilities, drug treatment facilities that other communities have the access to. And the people who live in those communities don't have access to the kind of economic opportunity that many other people do. And those are the problems that we ask our police officers to solve. And that's not fair. And there needs to be a concerted effort to try to address the root causes of inequality that many communities across the country suffer from.

And again, when the President made that observation in Dallas on Tuesday, he didn't get disagreement from a lot of police officers. There were a lot of nodding heads. So I guess the point is, I think it's unwise to try to separate those two things.

Now, Congress hasn't demonstrated the capacity to do much of anything. So if the question you're asking me is, does the President expect to be able to pass a significant legislative package that would begin addressing these inequities -- no, I don't think that's going to happen in his presidency. That is something that hopefully the next President will prioritize. Maybe that's what Mayor Morial was referring to.

Olivier.

Q Thanks, Josh. Two questions for you. Regarding the fate of Assad, as a matter of principle, does the President believe that Bashar al-Assad should be tried for war crimes?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't heard the President express a view on this. Obviously, the position of the United States is that it's quite obvious that the Assad regime has lost the legitimacy to lead Syria because of their willingness to use that country's military might

against innocent civilians. And that is morally reprehensible. It is a failed leadership strategy. And it is what has caused Syria to devolve into the condition that it's in right now. And it's exacerbated a terrible humanitarian situation. It's prompted millions of Syrians to flee their homes. That has destabilized other countries not just in the region, but even in countries farther away. It has created -- it has sown sufficient chaos that extremist organizations like ISIL and al Qaeda have sought to establish a safe haven in a way that, again, threatens other countries in the region but also threatens people around the world.

So there are a lot of concerns, significant concerns, about what Bashar al-Assad has done and what the consequences of his actions have been. But I haven't heard the President render an opinion on this specific question.

Q And on a different subject. Our diligent colleagues at CNN are reporting that as early as Friday, the administration will be releasing the so-called 28 pages, the classified section of one of the 9/11 reports. How is the White House preparing for the potential fallout from that decision diplomatically with the Saudis?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Olivier, I don't have a specific date to confirm for you. The Director of National Intelligence has obviously been leading a process to consider the declassification of some of that material. Once that process has been completed, then the DNI will provide the declassified document to Congress. Obviously, this is a congressional document. And then ultimately leaders in Congress will have to determine how to make it public. But the question that the DNI was focused on was administering an interagency process to determine what could be released if leaders in Congress so chose.

Obviously, any time we're talking about declassifying and releasing sensitive national security information, we want to make sure that we factor in the diplomatic equities into a decision like that. So when that process is completed, we'll obviously coordinate not just with the DNI, but also with the Congress to make sure that the diplomatic equities are properly factored in.

Q So if you know that it's not complete, can you say what remaining steps there are?

MR. EARNEST: As it relates to the process, I'm not even in a position to confirm that it's not complete. I'd just refer you to DNI for an update.

Ron.

Q Just to clarify, Secretary Kerry -- is there an agreement? Is he negotiating an agreement with the Russians about military -- what exactly -- I'm a little bit confused about where things stand.

MR. EARNEST: Where things stand is that, right now, the United States is not conducting or coordinating military operations with Russia in Syria. It's also not clear at this point whether or not we'll be able to reach an agreement to begin doing that.

Q -- he's involved in a process now of trying to work out an agreement.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there's been extensive diplomatic outreach for more than a year now with the Russians about the situation inside of Syria. Obviously we read out phone calls that the President has with President Putin with some regularity. One took place within the last couple of weeks. So I'll leave it to State Department officials to describe in more detail exactly what Secretary Kerry expects to do in his meetings. But I can tell you in general that diplomatic conversations with the Russians about Syria are the kinds of conversations that have been going on for quite some time.

Q Did you see the interview that President Assad did with NBC?

MR. EARNEST: I saw parts of it.

Q The whole thing is available on the Web.

MR. EARNEST: Okay, I'll take a look.

Q One thing he said is that he believes that the war can be won in a few months, and that he will remain in power. Does that sound about right?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our view has been for quite some time that there is no military solution to the situation inside of Syria. And as long as Assad tries to hang on to power, there will still be chaos and violence inside of Syria that's destabilizing to the broader region and that creates an opening for extremist organizations to establish a safe haven and propagate their hateful ideology.

So we're quite concerned about Assad remaining in power for those reasons. And that's why we have made such a strong case to the Russians to use their influence with the Assad regime to get him to step down so that we can effectuate the kind of political transition inside of Syria that can begin to stabilize the situation there.

Q So he pointed out that the reason that's going to happen, that he's going to stay in power and war will be won, in his view, is because of the Russians.

MR. EARNEST: Yeah, and I think it's understandable why he might be getting some mixed signals from them -- because there continues to be an inherent contradiction in their approach. On the one hand, they say they're concerned about extremists inside of Syria, but yet they use -- devote significant resources to propping up Bashar al-Assad, whose mere presence exacerbates the kind of chaos that we know these extremist organizations thrive on.

Q But what's in the use about what Russia is doing there? It's been pretty clear that you've said, others, the Defense Department -- they clearly have been supporting the regime, they have not been attacking ISIL -- ISIS. I mean, there's no ambiguity about what the Russians have been doing. Well, I think there is. Because what the Russians say, at least, is that they are quite interested in a political transition. They acknowledge that that is necessary inside of Syria.

To Russia's credit -- I alluded to this earlier -- we have seen incidents, isolated situations, in which Russia has taken strikes against extremist organizations. But that's undermined by the way that they either carry out their own military operations or support Syrian operations that are focused on opposition fighters because they're trying to prop up the Assad regime.

So again, this is an inherent contradiction in the Russian strategy. It's not a new contradiction, but it is one that is starting to come to a head. Because ultimately, Russia needs to make a decision about how they want to confront a situation that has serious consequences for their own security. We know there are a significant number of ISIL extremists inside of Syria that travel to Syria from Russia or from areas around Russia. So they are rightly concerned about the extremist situation in Syria, as is the United States. And that's why Russia has to sort of decide what approach they want to take and what approach is going to be in their best national security interest.

Q What about Assad more generally? He seemed very comfortable, he was very confident, he was very dismissive of the American role in Syria -- involvement in Syria. He said that the U.S. wasn't serious about going after ISIS. He was watching the presidential elections, so on and so forth. What were your -- has the President seen this? I would think --

MR. EARNEST: I don't know. I doubt if the President has seen the interview. I'm sure he is aware of the news that was reported out based on the interview.

Q What is the White House, the President's reaction to what Mr. Assad has been saying generally?

MR. EARNEST: I guess I would just say that this is not the first interview that he's done with a Western news organization to talk about these issues. I did not hear him say anything that is going to give anybody confidence that he will constructively contribute to a solution inside of Syria that ends the chaos, that ends the bloodshed, and that addresses the extremist threat that is present there.

Q And just on other -- this whole issue of policing and so forth. The President, as you say, has invested a lot of time over the last week or so into this -- the town hall tonight, the trip to Dallas, the cutting short the European vacation, the unusual meeting of the length and breadth yesterday. What is -- if you could -- what is the President's state of mind about where -- why is he doing this now? Perhaps this is an obvious question, but why is he investing so much in this now? And is he frustrated, is he hopeful? It sounds like he's -- he's talked about the limits of his rhetoric. He's talked about how these problems are going to endure -- not going to be solved, not close to resolving the tension. It sounds like he's rather frustrated and it sounds like he felt like this was a particular moment where he really needed to invest a lot of himself in this.

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, Ron, I think people across the country have been troubled, frustrated, concerned, scared about the kind of violence that we've seen over the last week and a half or so. And the President felt it was important to cut short his trip to Europe

and come back and address it.

Now, the President proactively addressed it while he was in Europe as well, even before the terrible tragic shooting of five Dallas police officers last Thursday night. So this is something that the President has been focused on. This is an issue that, as a public servant, the President has devoted a lot of time and expertise to. As a state legislator, state senator in Illinois, one of the President's landmark legislative achievements was being able to work effectively with law enforcement organizations -- Democrats and Republicans -- and civil rights activists, to address some of the concerns that had been raised in his home state about racial profiling.

So this is something the President has been focused on intellectually and as a public servant for decades now. Some of that is based on his own experience and based on his own relationships with law enforcement officials and with leaders in the African American community.

Q But does he feel pressure because his time in office is running out and he really needs to do something now?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President is responding to I think a lot of emotions that are being expressed by Americans across the country. And that's what he's been responding to over the course of the last week. And many of those emotions that are being expressed across the country -- profound sadness about the killing of five Dallas police officers, profound concern about persistent racial disparities in our law enforcement -- those are concerns that the President shares.

Margaret.

Q Josh, on Syria. With Secretary Kerry meeting with Vladimir Putin -- I mean, the State Department and Secretary Kerry himself will say Syria has broken every single diplomatic agreement that the U.S. has helped broker, even those that Russia has tried to midwife and agreed to on its own behalf. So why does the administration put any faith in trying to negotiate with Putin, given that he has given absolutely no reason for -- no good-faith effort thus far?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me break that apart. Yes, it is true that Assad has time and time again broken commitments that either they had made or Russia had made on their behalf. I think that would explain why, just one example or one reason why Secretary Kerry is not in Damascus negotiating with President Assad right now. It's not worth the time -- setting aside the morally reprehensible actions that he's undertaken in the last several years. What's true of the Russians --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, so what we have seen from the Russians has been intermittent. Russia did act constructively in helping to stand up the Cessation of Hostilities. And for the first several weeks that that was in effect, that did mitigate significant security

concerns inside of Syria. It did open the door for extensive humanitarian relief to be provided to innocent Syrians who had been suffering for a long time.

The point is, we know that the Russian government has influence with the Assad regime in a way that can have a tangible impact on the ground. It's just a matter of President Putin deciding whether or not he cares enough about his own integrity to use it. And that's the question that they face. There's also a question related not just to their influence with the Assad regime but also to their own national security concerns. There's a significant extremist threat inside of Syria. We've talked about the risks associated with Russia walking into a quagmire. And that could have the potential of enhancing the risk back home.

So the incentives are pretty clear for the Russians. Our willingness to work with them effectively on shared interests is pretty clear. That's why you hear me say that the time has come for Russia to decide whether or not they're going to focus on the kinds of solutions that will address the situation in Syria and address the significant threat that the Russians face back home.

Q So just a few weeks of compliance under the Cessation of Hostilities is a reason to continue? I mean, we then saw the regime break the Cessation of Hostilities. So as you just said, just a few weeks of resolve that you're saying is enough to stand on their -- I mean, what is the consequence to Russia? Will the U.S. continue to provide diplomatic cover or political cover with -- continue to say we're going to keep trying to get him to do the right thing here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I think that the several weeks of the over-performance of the Cessation of Hostilities, if you will, demonstrate that Russia has the capacity to use that influence with the Assad regime. They just have to decide whether or not they want to use it. So that's the illustration that I'm trying to provide here.

I'm not suggesting that this means that they can be necessarily counted on to keep a commitment. I'm suggesting that that is an illustration that they have the capacity to keep that commitment.

Q And then, yesterday, an appointee that President Obama named -- Jeff Shell -- to the Broadcasting Board of Governors was briefly detained and then deported from Russia. This is just a string of recent incidents where American diplomats and personnel have been harassed -- high-profile incidents. Is this something that the President would like Secretary Kerry to raise in the meeting? And given the harassment of Americans, that doesn't set a good table for the U.S. to go in and negotiate with Russia right now if they feel that willing to assault American diplomats in the street.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can't speak to any individual case. And I'll let my colleagues at the State Department provide a readout of Secretary Kerry's discussions with leaders in Russia. I'll just say in general, as it relates to U.S. diplomats, that we regularly remind leaders in countries around the world where our diplomats are stationed that those

countries have a responsibility, they have made a commitment to ensure the safety and security of U.S. diplomats that are serving around the world. We expect every country, including Russia, to live up to that commitment.

Q Is the President aware that Jeff Shell was detained and deported yesterday?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I'm just not in a position to speak to any individual cases. The President is certainly aware of specific concerns about mistreatment of U.S. diplomats in Russia.

Q And then a Russian national from Gitmo who was sanctioned yesterday by the State Department for recruiting militants to fight in Syria, or links to a terror group that has I guess at least in the past had ties to ISIS -- the U.S. sanctioned him as a terrorist today -- or yesterday, I should say. Does the White House believe that this particular case, given that he's a former Guantanamo detainee, makes it more difficult for the already difficult task of closing down that prison?

MR. EARNEST: Well, no. And the reason is simply this: This individual that you're referring to, this Gitmo detainee, was released by the previous administration prior to the new regime that President Obama instituted on his second full day in office to more thoroughly screen detainees before their release and to more effectively work with the countries that agreed to take these individuals in prescribing specific security constraints that could be applied to them to mitigate the risk that they would pose to the United States.

So our process has been much more rigorous, and the number of former Gitmo detainees that have been released after this regime was imposed, who have then been confirmed to reengage in the fight, is much, much smaller because of the newly instituted process that the newly elected President Obama instituted.

Q Am I understanding that to mean that -- you're talking about the 500 or so detainees that the Bush administration released, and comparing them to the standards that you have now. So should this individual not have been released? Or are you just saying that the standards at the time were not adequate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't looked at this individual's case. I don't know that anybody has looked carefully enough to second-guess a decision about whether or not to release this person and what security precautions should have been in place. I just don't know that there have been a lot of Monday-morning quarterbacking that's gone on here. But it is clear that the process that has been put in place by President Obama is one that has enhanced our national security and enhanced our ability to make progress in closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay a goal that would ultimately take away a recruiting tool that is used by terrorists and save taxpayers some money.

Suzanne.

Q I want to follow up on something Ron had asked about the meeting yesterday with the President. It was really an extraordinary set of circumstances to bring more than 40 people in the same room with the President. And you talked about a lot of Americans who are in pain, who are angry, who are saddened, even loss of life, before you could get these individuals together. One of the things that they talked about that was breaking ground was the fact that they were there in a format where they could hear each other, they could speak openly, and they could listen.

I wonder if the President sees this model as something that he could use for literally members of Congress, who the American people are so frustrated with, in terms of getting them in a room, in a format in which they could express their views, express their differences, and listen -- if it was Nancy Pelosi, a Paul Ryan. Is that something that the President has done previously, or he's felt that he's attempted to do? What do you think of that in terms of moving the ball forward on his own agenda?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are certainly a number of occasions where the President has convened meetings with bipartisan groups of members of Congress. The most memorable of those would be the meeting that the President convened at Blair House with Democrats and Republicans to talk about health care reform. I also remember that early in his first term, President Obama attended a working conference of House Republicans, and the President didn't just give remarks, he actually engaged in a question-and-answer session with them.

So the President has certainly sought to engage members of Congress in a variety of ways. I think the real challenge with members of Congress is that it's a little harder to discern the true motive of members of Congress. And I say that with a particular focus on Republicans, of course. And let me just explain to you why.

After the midterm elections in 2014, Republicans claimed to have a big governing mandate -- understandably so. They had a historically large Republican majority in the House of Representatives. They had a Republican -- a substantial Republican majority in the United States Senate for the first time in -- just doing the math in my head -- eight years. And the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal saying, now we can get Congress moving again. But they haven't.

On a whole variety of metrics, they failed to do hardly anything. It might lead one to conclude that their interest is not in trying to get something done or to pass legislation or advance an agenda; they'd rather engage in a political fight.

And I think what the President noted about yesterday's meeting is that there is a genuine willingness on the part of all of the participants to not just give voice to whatever emotion they were feeling at the time, to not just try to win a contest of talking points, but to actually open up and to hear the perspective of someone else, to accomplish a goal that they share.

Republicans haven't even been able to do that among themselves. It's not as if Republicans are getting together, passing all kinds of legislation that they're sending up to the desk of the Democratic President, and he has to veto them. That's not at all the case. It's very unusual for the President to veto pieces of legislation because very few bills are getting to his desk. And the ones that the President has vetoed have almost all been bills seeking to specifically undo something that the President did.

That's not an affirmative agenda. That's not a vision for governing the country. That is a majority party that is focused on nothing or hardly anything other than obstructing the Democratic President.

They can do that if they want. I'm not suggesting that somehow that is -- I don't know, I don't really know what I'm saying about it. I guess what I'm saying is it's something I think that most Americans think is irresponsible, and it's something that they don't support and contributes significantly to the sense of dysfunction in Washington, D.C. And I think it explains why Congress is polling in the teens. And I think that's got to be particularly disappointing to Republican voters across the country who had been waiting for years to capitalize on the opportunity of finally having a majority in Congress where they could start passing bills.

But that's not at all what Republicans have done, even on bills that they themselves say that they support. So it's not even a matter of why can't Democrats and Republicans get along; why can't Democrats and Republicans try to find common ground to advance something. Republicans don't stand for anything -- Republicans who have their own affirmative agenda that they're repeatedly passing.

Q Has the President given up on working with Republicans?

MR. EARNEST: Well, considering that Republicans are leaving a day early for their seven-week recess -- maybe we'll talk to them when they get back. But they're very eager to rush off to that convention in Cleveland that everybody is so excited about.

Q I want to turn to the convention. DHS head, Jeh Johnson, said he is going to be heading to Cleveland tomorrow and on to Philadelphia to personally take a look at the sites. What is the administration's hope and expectations as they watch these two parties in the process of selecting their nominees, especially in light of the fact that we've seen racial strife, we've seen violence, we've seen protests around some of these large gatherings?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has a lot of confidence in the professionals of the United States Secret Service who will be responsible for providing security for this significant national event. I know that Secret Service officials have been on the ground in Cleveland and Philadelphia for more than a year now to coordinate with state and local officials and ensure that the proper precautions are in place to ensure the safety of not just the candidates but of the delegates to the convention and to the reporters who will be covering it.

As it relates to protests, there are protests at every political convention -- and there should be. People should have an opportunity to express their view, particularly if it's a view that is in disagreement with other people. The President's expectation is that people should exercise those rights to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly peacefully. And that's true of Democrats and Republicans.

Q Are the preparations ongoing in anticipation of problems of violence? I mean, is that something that they're expecting?

MR. EARNEST: I'm confident that law enforcement officials are prepared for a variety of contingencies. But I'd refer you to those local law enforcement agencies for contingency plans that they may have in place.

Julie.

Q Thanks. Just some more follow-up on the meeting yesterday. You've noted many times in this room that -- you put out the 21st Century Policing Task Force -- put out recommendations, but you can't tell forces around the country to implement them.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q I know there have been calls on the President to tie federal funding and federal grants that go to these local forces to the implementation of some of these recommendations and that that came up in the meeting. Is that the sort of thing that the President is open to, and is it something that he could do himself without Congress?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by saying that there is a challenge in terms of the way that the federal government interacts with the 18,000 different local law enforcement agencies across the country. Each of these local law enforcement agencies confronts a unique challenge. Each of these local law enforcement agencies has different capabilities to meet those challenges. It's why this problem is so -- it's one of the reasons that his problem is so resistant to a cookie-cutter solution.

So the President acknowledged in his remarks to all of you yesterday that one of the challenges for the federal government is to look at ways that the federal government can be a more effective partner with law enforcement organizations across the country. The President was pretty forthright about that.

As it relates to questions with regard to how we can encourage or even compel local law enforcement agencies to pursue these best practices, there's a reason that we allow citizens to organize themselves at the local level to provide policing. And there's a long tradition of that in our country, and that's not something that the President is seeking to overturn. The President is very respectful of local law enforcement. There's a reason that the President says that he's such a believer in community-oriented policing, because we know that crime-fighting efforts are going to be more effective if law enforcement organizations and the officers that wear the badge have a good working knowledge and a good working relationship with citizens in those communities.

So I'm not aware of any specific executive actions that are under consideration that would do something like that. But the President is certainly interested in considering, within those bounds, what we can do to encourage more political leaders and law enforcement officials to consider these best practices that have been used so effectively in other communities to address concerns in those communities.

There's an opportunity here; it's just a matter of leaders showing some leadership and deciding to make this a priority. There is an all-too-common of a tendency to have these problems bubble up, for there to be an intense focus on these issues for a couple of weeks while they're being debated in the media, and then they have a tendency to fall down the priority list. And this is one of those problems that is only going to be solved with sustained commitment and tenacity to a following-through.

Q Just on the broader question, at this meeting yesterday and in the wake of these recent incidents with race and policing, and also in the wake of Ferguson, the Black Lives Matter activists and a lot of civil rights activists have asked quite a bit of the President in terms of things he should do, places he should visit, legislation that he should pass, or executive orders that he should consider. Does he feel that those expectations that they have of what he can do in this situation are out of line with reality? Does he feel like that is in any way related to the fact that he is obviously the first African American President? Does he believe they're placing expectations on him that he can't really live up to?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's a hard question for me to answer for him. I think I'll acknowledge the obvious fact, which is I think every American, regardless of race, understands the unique perspective that President Obama has on these issues. He's talked about that before. President Obama has also acknowledged that all too often his words alone have been inadequate to facilitating the kind of understanding that he'd like to see. That's not going to prevent him from trying.

And the President has been quite forceful, time and time again, in making a case based on his own perspective about the outstanding work that the vast majority of law enforcement officers across this country do every single day. He's talked about how law enforcement officers have the right to come home at night at the end of their shift; that it is grossly unfair to cast aspersions and scorn on all police officers because of the illegal conduct of a few.

The President has made a similar point as it relates to protestors and people who are concerned about persistent racial disparities in our criminal justice system. The President has made clear that it is unfair to judge every protestor based on the intemperate remarks or actions of a few.

President Bush actually had a nice turn of phrase in his remarks in Dallas on Tuesday, where he talked about the need for us -- I'll probably butcher the line now, so go back and look at it for yourself -- but where he talked about how important it is for us to not judge other people by the worst examples of some people in their group, and to judge ourselves by the best intentions of our group. That distorted evaluation is part of what stands in the way of our ability to solve this problem.

And again, this sort of goes to the core of the speech that the President gave in Dallas, which is, empathy will be required to solve this problem. And the President read that Scripture from Ezekiel about turning our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, and being open to and being able to feel the perspective of a fellow human being, even if that fellow human being looks or thinks differently than we do.

And again, the historic nature of this presidency is part of the reason that the President's comments about all of these things are so powerful. And the President certainly does want to use that influence in the last six months that he has remaining in office to move the ball forward.

But as I was describing to April, the President knows this is not something that he's going to do alone. He'll do his fair share, and his fair share is bigger than everyone else's. But collectively, as a country, we have to make a decision about whether or not we're prepared to make this a priority. People of good faith have to decide if they're willing to make this a priority. And that will be hard. It will require courage. But it's something that we'll all have to decide to do.

Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. When does the President plan to sign the opioid legislation that the Senate passed last night?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jordan, as you may have seen in the statement that we issued shortly after that bill was passed by the Congress, the President will sign the bill. But the bill falls far short of what is required to address the opioid epidemic all across the country.

There are Americans right now who are addicted to heroin or opioids who are desperate for treatment, but can't get it because beds aren't available. That shouldn't happen in the greatest country in the world. That should not happen in a country that is founded on our values about looking out for one another.

And that's why it's such a shame that Republicans have passed a bill that will give them talking points on the campaign trail, but not give money to the doctors and nurses and patients that desperately need it.

Q Is there a -- so no exact timing yet on the bill signing?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know what day he'll sign it but we'll --

Q That was the question. And you said in the statement that you're going to continue to press Republican leaders in Congress to pass some sort of funding.

MR. EARNEST: We will.

Q Can you explain how you're going to do that? Is there some legislative vehicle that you're looking at to include that sort of funding?

MR. EARNEST: We'll consider all available opportunities. I mean, what's so dishonest about what Republicans are saying is they say, well, this is a bill that will provide a structure for the funding that we promise that we'll include in future budget bills. They haven't passed a budget bill. They haven't even passed a budget, let alone a spending bill.

So I guess the question I would ask is, what is the plan that Republicans have? In all their wisdom, the Founding Fathers gave the United States Congress the power of the purse. Nobody forced these Republicans to serve in Congress. They ran for the job. Presumably, at least some of them were familiar with the Constitution when they took office, and would understand the responsibilities that they have.

So it will be up to Republicans to put forward a specific proposal, and to pass it, for how they want to fund drug treatment programs in this country. I'll just remind you, President Obama put forward his own specific plan back in February in his budget for a billion dollars, fully paid for, that would expand and enhance drug treatment programs all across the country. And you'll recall, Jordan, that for the first time in 40 years, Republicans in Congress refused to even have a hearing to discuss that proposal. They refused. It's not just that they came out and trashed the proposal right when it was issued, they refused to even talk about it.

And I think that is a damning assessment of their failure to fulfill their basic responsibilities to the American people. And it's only one; there are many others. But it certainly is a good one.

Q Thanks, Josh. Does the White House agree with Justice Ginsburg that her comments were "out of line," and would just agree on the principle of the matter that justices have no place weighing in on the presidential campaign?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not going to comment on Justice Ginsburg's interviews or the written statement that the Supreme Court apparently issued earlier today. I'll let her comments stand for themselves.

Q Okay. And the White House Correspondents Association put out a column expressing concern about both campaigns' treatment of the press. Does the White House share the press corps' concern that Hillary Clinton hasn't held a press conference this entire calendar year?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, what you've often heard me say in the context of assessing relations between the White House and the White House press corps is that there is built-in tensions in those relationships; that if there weren't some concern on the part of reporters agitating for more access, then you'd be falling down on the job. That same dynamic applies to covering presidential campaigns.

So I'm hesitant to backseat drive for other campaigns that are implementing a communications strategy and navigating their own relationship with the reporters that cover them every day. But I think what I can say, as a general matter, is that it's a good thing that that tension exists, but it also needs to be followed up by a constructive

dialogue on the parts of both the reporters who are covering the campaign and the campaigns themselves to try to address those concerns. I can't speak to whether or not that's actually happening. I think all of you would probably know better than I.

Q But as a general matter, isn't it fair to say that the White House would agree that a presidential candidate should hold at least one press conference over the course of seven months? Isn't that a reasonable expectation, wouldn't you agree?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not going to weigh in on the specific tactical decisions that are made by either campaign at this point. The President has stood at this podium and certainly talked quite a bit about how important it is he believes for journalists to thoroughly evaluate the positions that are taken by the individual candidates. The process of running for President is hard, and one thing that makes that process hard is you're scrutinized by the media -- your statements, and your positions, and your past, and your plans are all carefully scrutinized. That makes the job of candidate for President of the United States really hard, but it's also critically important to the success of our democracy.

So, again, I'm not going to speak to the specific tactical decisions that either campaign is making, but I will just say as a general matter, the President believes that thorough, even aggressive coverage of the candidates and their positions and their statements and their record and their agenda is critically important to the success of our democracy and to the ability of voters to make a good decision when they step in the voting booth in November.

Q Okay. And following up on the President's meeting yesterday, clearly an issue the President cares deeply about, what can we expect the President's role to be going forward, even beyond this administration? Do you have any insight into what the President's post-presidency role on this topic might look like?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a lot to say about the President's plans after January 20th. I talked a little bit yesterday and you've heard the President talk before about his intention to be involved in the My Brother's Keeper initiative once he leaves office. This is an issue that is close to the President's heart, based on his experience growing up without a father. So that certainly is a part of the broader discussion that we're having about race and the criminal justice system and the persistent racial disparities in our criminal justice system. But beyond that, it's hard for me to give you much insight into what the President's plans are for once he leaves office.

Kevin.

Q Thanks. Just maybe he saw it, maybe he didn't -- did the President at least hear about Senator Tim Scott's comments yesterday about how he's been profiled before, pulled over as many as seven times in one year. And if he did hear about that, what did he think about it?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, I haven't had an -- I have not talked to him about that today. So I presume that he has seen those comments.

Q Would that surprise him, do you think?

MR. EARNEST: I'm confident that it would not. I think that the kind of experience that Senator Scott relayed from the Senate floor yesterday I think was notable not because of what he said but because of where he said it. It took a lot of courage from him to walk out on the floor of the United States Senate and talk so candidly about his own personal experience. But I think the kind of personal experience that he relayed is all too common across our country. So I guess that reflects my views. I don't know if it reflects the President's or not.

Q Understood. I'm sure you're aware that there are a number of protests that are scheduled for -- or planned, at least -- for tomorrow. There has also been some talk that the Pentagon is suggesting that DOD members stay away and avoid at any cost these circumstances. Is the White House concerned about these protests? And if so, what steps is the President encouraging not just the security staff around here at the White House but, more broadly speaking, encouraging law enforcement and others to consider as these events are planned?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, no, I would not describe the White House as concerned about these protests. I think what we have seen over the last couple of weeks is many Americans coming to the streets to peacefully express their concerns. They're exercising their freedom of speech, they're exercising their freedom of assembly, and that's a good thing. That reflects some engagement in the system. That's a good start.

Again, people responding to their conscience is important, but it's not going to be sufficient. We're also going to have to be able to not just protest, but also to engage in a dialogue, and to engage in the kind of conversations that open up our own perspective to the views of someone who may look and think differently than we do.

But look, the President has been complimentary of the vast majority of protestors that are making their views known in a way that's peaceful and reflects the proper exercise of their constitutional rights.

Q Quick follow on Olivier's question about the so-called 28 pages. I guess the question is that the Saudis have been saying since 2003, release them all unredacted; we want them out there because we're that confident that we have nothing to hide. The American people probably wonder two basic things. One, is there something there that is making the administration and others hold it back? And given that it will very likely be released -- at least reportedly -- perhaps as soon as tomorrow or Monday, is there anything that we should expect in terms of the White House reaction to what will be then made public?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, the Director of National Intelligence has been undertaking a process to declassify these documents because of the intense public interest in them. And they're working through that process. You can check with them for a status update. But ultimately, once they've completed that process, the American people will have a chance to see what's in them, and they can judge for themselves.

Q No concern on the White House's part.

MR. EARNEST: I can tell you that the White House has confidence in the ability of ODNI to administer this process and strike the appropriate balance between protecting our national security equities and being as transparent as possible with the American people. They may conclude that there are some elements of those documents that cannot be safely released, but let's see them do their work and then we can discuss it after that.

Other than that, I would not expect a specific or proactive announcement from the White House.

Q Last one. I want to play out the Assad-Russia circumstance. Given what we've seen previously in Iraq with Hussein and in Libya with Qaddafi, how does the White House, in working with Russia, prevent, in the case of a removal of Assad from a similar circumstance, not gripping that country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the focus of our diplomatic efforts to reach a political transition has been to work closely with a variety of opposition elements inside of Syria to answer this very question. It's not just a matter of President Assad leaving; it's just as important that whatever structure is put in place to replace him reflects the will and ambition of the Syrian people.

And working that out is no small matter, either. The opposition groups represent a variety of perspectives, and certainly have their own feelings that are shaped by some of the atrocities that have been committed by the Assad regime.

So this is hard work, and this is why it's not going to be solved overnight. But a system can only be erected to replace Bashar al Assad once he's committed to leave. And obviously that is not something that he's done at this point.

Mike.

Q What's the President's opinion of Mike Pence and what kind of Vice President he might make?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not sure to what extent President Obama has had an opportunity to interact with Governor Pence. I know that Governor Pence did do some important work with the administration to expand Medicaid in his state. That's something that President Obama has been encouraging Democratic and Republican governors across the country to do.

But look, I'll leave it to the individual candidates to determine who they believe would best complement their skills and could lead their party on the national ticket.

Q More specifically, what's his assessment of Governor Pence's handling of the religious freedom law, which he signed, and allowed businesses in Indiana to reject gays as customers? That's been an area of interest for the President.

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen this is something that we talked about when this situation first emerged a year or so ago. Obviously the President has had a pretty strong negative reaction to state laws that are focused on taking rights away from people. But other than that, I think Governor Pence is chosen, these are the kinds of questions that he'll have to answer under the national spotlight. And again, based on my answer to Jordan, that's a good thing. The records of the candidates and their running mates should be scrutinized by the media -- not just in terms of what they're promising to do, but also in terms of what they've done in the past.

John.

Q The President has called his selection of Joe Biden one of the best decisions he's ever made. I'm not going to get into names, and I don't think you would either, but as it relates to Hillary Clinton, what quality do you think -- based upon the President's relationship -- she should be looking for in terms of choosing her number two?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President would say that -- well, let me just couch it in terms of why the President chose Vice President Biden. I think generally I could put it in two categories. The first is, President Obama trusts his Vice President implicitly, that Vice President Biden has been exceedingly loyal to the President and to the country. And being able to trust that person who's helping you make these weighty decisions has been critical to President Obama's success.

The second thing is, Vice President Biden obviously brought to the ticket and to the White House a set of complementary skills and experiences that have served the American people and President Obama quite well. Vice President Biden has extensive relationships on Capitol Hill, for example. He served in the United States Senate for more than 30 years. So that extensive experience and those relationships were useful in advancing some elements of the administration's legislative agenda.

Vice President Biden served in the Senate foreign affairs committee and, based on his service in that committee, formed personal relationships with leaders across the globe. So his ability to use those relationships in negotiations have been helpful to advancing U.S. interests and advancing Obama administration policies in places as far-flung as Ukraine, Iraq, Central America, and even some places in Asia.

Q You've seen the names that have been mentioned in terms of the possibilities for Hillary Clinton's number-two spot on the ticket. Strong bench? How would you classify some of the names that you've seen over the course of the past few weeks?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, Secretary Clinton will have to make her own decision about which person fits the criteria that she had laid out for her running mate. Obviously the President has got warm feelings about any number of the individuals that have their names bandied about in the media. But I think the President is going to be respectful of the personal decision that Secretary Clinton has to make about who to add to the ticket.

Chris, I'll give you the last one.

Q Josh, the Republican platform -- the draft Republican platform released by the RNC's platform committee this week is seen as veering toward the far right. In addition to anti-LGBT language that calls for overturning a Supreme Court decision in favor of marriage equality, and rescinding President Obama's guidance in favor of transgender students in schools, it also identifies coal as a clean energy source. It calls pornography a public health crisis, and other things. Does the draft platform present a threat to the progress seen in the President's administration?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Chris, I don't think I have a specific reaction to the Republican platform. They obviously have their own process, and they'll consider whether to ratify the platform at the convention.

I think I'd just point you back to some of the comments that I had in response to Suzanne's question earlier about, there's a real question inside the Republican Party about what it is that they stand for. And it's not clear what they stand for because they've had Republicans in Congress for the last year and a half that haven't advanced their own agenda. They've been much more focused on just trying to throw sand in the gears of the President's agenda. And that's rather unfortunate when you consider that so many elements of the agenda that President Obama is advancing are things that Republicans at one time or another have said they supported.

So I used to keep here a list of all the things that Republicans say that they support that President said that he wants to make a priority too. These are things like funding for medical R&D that could advance our cancer initiative, funding for opioid addiction. At one point, Speaker Ryan indicated support for poverty programs that would expand the earned income tax credit in a way that would strengthen the economy and improve the standard of living for Americans across the country.

The last time the minimum wage was increased, it was signed into law by a Republican President. That should be something we should be able to find some common ground on. But Republicans haven't moved on any of that, and that's been disappointing. What's most disappointing, though, is that they haven't moved on anything.

So again, it's not just a matter of finding common ground, it's that Republicans don't themselves know what they stand for or don't have the courage or the support to advance it. And that, I think, is the most significant factor in the dysfunction that we see in Washington, D.C. It's not a matter of Democrats and Republicans not being able to get along. It's a matter of Republicans not being able to advance even the things that they claim to believe in. And to try to cover that up, they spend all their time trying to sabotage the things that President Obama strongly believes in, even if there are things that Republicans themselves have previously said they believe in.

So I guess that would certainly explain the public's view of Congress right now. And it will be something that I suspect will be a subject of some discussion at the Republican Convention in Cleveland next week.

Q But if you won't comment on the platform itself, aren't things that are in it, like opposition of same-sex marriage and now discrimination for transgender people seeking restroom use -- aren't those things that President Obama disagrees with?

MR. EARNEST: They are. And again, I think it is indicative of Republicans' inability or refusal to put forward their own proactive agenda. Instead -- again, based just on what you've said -- it sounds like even their party platform is focused on just trying to tear down a bunch of things that President Obama believes in. Again, I think the American people have higher expectations for their leaders who are entrusted with so much responsibility.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

1:50 P.M. EDT