

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 9/12/2013

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your patience today. The Cabinet meeting ran a little long, and then, obviously, as I think some of you saw, Secretary Kerry and his counterpart spoke in Geneva. I wanted to allow you the opportunity to see that before I came out.

Before I take your questions I wanted to make two statements. First, on Wednesday -- this coming Wednesday, at 10:45 a.m., the President will address business leaders at the quarterly meeting of the Business Roundtable. The event will take place in D.C. at the Business Roundtable office.

Secondly, if I may, I'd like to point you to a new report that was released today by the Department of Health and Human Services, showing that 6.8 million consumers saved an estimated \$1.2 billion on health insurance premiums in 2012 because of the part of the Affordable Care Act called rate review that brings sunlight and scrutiny to insurance premiums. Now, in every state, insurance companies are required to submit for review and justify any proposed health insurance premium increase of 10 percent or more. In other words, the days when insurers could post double-digit insurance premium increases without transparency and accountability are over.

Now, this is one of many ways that American families are saving under the health law. For example, the 80/20 rule, which requires insurance companies to spend at least 80 percent of premiums on health care or provide rebates to their customers, saved 77.8 million consumers \$3.4 billion up front on premiums last year. This is separate from and in addition to the savings I mentioned at the top. Also, insurers that did not meet the 80/20 rule provided 8.5 million Americans with \$500 million in rebates, averaging \$100 per household.

So today's news is the latest example of how the Affordable Care Act, along with state efforts, continues to bring scrutiny to health insurance rate increases and is saving consumers real money as a result.

Now I will take your questions. Jim.

Q Thanks, Jay. I wanted to ask you about two issues, one on Syria and the other one on the budget. On Syria, I wonder what the President's reaction was to President Putin's op-ed piece in The New York Times today. The Speaker called it insulting. I wonder what the President thought of it.

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me say this. Both in his op-ed and in the statements and actions that we've seen from President Putin and his foreign minister, it is clear that President Putin has invested his credibility in transferring Assad's chemical weapons to international control and ultimately destroying them. This is significant. Russia is Assad's patron and protector, and the world will note whether Russia can follow through on the commitments that it's made.

As for the editorial, we're not surprised by President Putin's words. But the fact is that Russia offers a stark contrast that demonstrates why America is exceptional. Unlike Russia, the United States stands up for democratic values and human rights in our own country and around the world. And we believe that our global security is advanced when children cannot be gassed to death by a dictator.

It is also worth noting that Russia is isolated and alone in blaming the opposition for the chemical weapons attack on August 21st. There is no credible reporting -- and we have seen no credible reporting -- that the opposition has used chemical weapons in Syria. And we have been joined by now 34 countries in declaring that the Assad regime is responsible for the use of chemical weapons on that night. Even Iran, which is fighting on Assad's behalf in Syria, has publicly blamed the Assad regime for the August 21 attack.

In addition to the intelligence pertaining to the regime's preparations for the attack and our post-attack observations, it is common sense that the opposition does not have the capabilities to have carried out such a large-scale coordinated rocket and artillery attack from a regime-held neighborhood, targeting opposition neighborhoods.

And I think it's worth also pointing out that there's a great irony in the placement of an op-ed like this because it reflects the truly exceptional tradition in this country of freedom of expression, and that is not a tradition shared in Russia, by Russia. And it is fact freedom of expression has been on the decrease over the past dozen or so years in Russia.

Having said that, the point I made at the top is the most important point. Russia, as we saw just now in Geneva, has put its prestige and credibility on the line in backing this proposal to have Syria, the Assad regime, give up the chemical weapons that until two days ago it claimed it did not have, turn them over to international supervision with the purpose of eventually destroying them. And we are going to work with the Russians to see if this diplomatic avenue to resolving this problem can bear fruit. And that is absolutely worthwhile and the right thing to do.

Q As you mentioned, Secretary Kerry just spoke. These talks that he's conducting in Geneva are occurring on the same day that there are reports of increased U.S. military assistance to the opposition forces. Do those two tracks kind of cancel each other out? Is

there a chance that that additional military support actually undermines the diplomatic track that Secretary Kerry is pursuing?

MR. CARNEY: Well, without confirming specific reports, we have said for quite some time -- the President on down has said that we have been stepping up our assistance to the Syrian military opposition; no question. And in June, the administration announced that following credible evidence that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against the Syrian people -- this is prior to the massive attack on August 21st -- the President had authorized the expansion of our assistance to the Supreme Military Council in Syria -- that's the opposition's military arm.

The expansion of assistance has been aimed at strengthening the cohesion of the opposition and the effectiveness of the SMC on the ground, as well as assisting their efforts to defend themselves against a regime that has shown no boundaries in its willingness to kill civilians.

So I think it's an important distinction to make, as we have all along, in the wake of the August 21 attacks and in our response to them, that the issue of Assad's chemical weapons is distinctly problematic and is separate from -- although it is part of the civil war, it is separate from our policy response to the civil war in Syria. And that response is built around humanitarian support for the Syrian people; assistance to the opposition, including assistance to the Supreme Military Council; as well as an effort with a broad range of allies and partners, including Russia, to bring about a resolution of that civil war through a political settlement -- because that is the only way to end that war.

So these are distinct tracks. The problem that confronts us by the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons needs to be addressed, and we are addressing that. The President has spoken clearly about his views on it. We are exploring this diplomatic avenue, this opportunity that exists potentially to resolve this by removing from Assad's possession chemical weapons. But we will continue our policy of supporting the opposition in an effort to bring about a political settlement in the Syrian conflict.

Q On the budget, and I won't belabor the point because you addressed it a little bit yesterday, but the House leadership is still trying to find a way to get a continuing resolution that funds the government beyond October 1st through the House. They wanted to do it yesterday and pulled it. And the Obamacare question aside, I'm wondering does the White House support continuing spending levels at 2013 sequester levels? I think the number is something at the rate of \$986 billion over the year. Is that a number that the White House is satisfied with and would tell Democrats to accept if that's what the continuing resolution --

MR. CARNEY: Well, let me step back a little bit and explain our position on this. First of all -- and this pertains to legislation that we haven't seen, but is clearly under discussion -- we will not accept anything that delays or defunds Obamacare. Congress needs to pass a budget and not attach politically motivated riders to their funding bills -- part of a persistent effort to refight old battles to overcome the fact that this is a law that was passed by Congress, signed by the President and upheld by the Supreme Court; a law that

has already provided enormous benefits and savings to millions and millions of Americans, and that will, when fully implemented, allow for millions of Americans who could not afford insurance in the past to be insured, for millions of Americans who have preexisting conditions to have the security of health insurance that they did not have in the past. These are significant benefits that are provided by this law passed by Congress, signed by the President, upheld by the Supreme Court.

Secondly, we will not accept anything that further cuts the investments we need to grow our economy, create jobs and strengthen the middle class. We will not, absolutely, accept the Republican budget approach that further slashes these investments in our economy and the American families need.

The Republican leadership has said that -- at the very least, setting aside all the policy significance of these decisions, the Republican leadership itself has said that it would be politically damaging to them to allow the government to shut down. And we agree; they should not do it. And they should not do it for a host of reasons. So Congress needs to act on this. When it comes to how that plays itself out, we want Congress to responsibly fund government. We have drawn the lines that we've drawn, and we will see what they produce.

Q But are current spending levels something that you would accept?

MR. CARNEY: Again, when you're talking about short-term extensions, we would consider a clean CR that prevents a shutdown and allows time for Congress to find a long-term solution to its budget challenges when it comes to avoiding a shutdown, but there are bigger issues that need to be resolved here, as we all know.

Q Today President Assad said that his government will wait for a month after it joins the Chemical Weapons Convention before handing over information or data about its chemical weapons stockpiles. Is this an acceptable timeline?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would point you to what Secretary Kerry said about this. He outranks me. And we believe that this needs to be done very quickly. And words don't count when it comes to the Assad regime; actions count.

The Assad regime in the past has committed itself to a U.N. investigation into the use of chemical weapons, and for months and months and months refused to allow inspectors in. Even in the wake of the appalling August 21st attacks, having said that they would allow inspectors in, they waited five days before they let those inspectors in and then shot up their convoy on the way in.

So, again, action is what matters here. And delays are not something that we can accept.

Q Secondly, today General Idriss said his opposition forces have not received any military support/weapons support from the United States. And I know there have been reports that you don't want to confirm to the contrary. But can you help clear this up?

MR. CARNEY: So you want me to confirm the counter-contrary?

Q But has the United States sent the support? Is it on its way?

MR. CARNEY: Here's what I can tell you. As I mentioned in answer to a previous question, in June the administration announced that following credible evidence that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against the Syrian people the President had authorized the expansion of our assistance to the Syrian Military Council. The expansion of assistance has been aimed at strengthening the cohesion of the opposition and the effectiveness of the SMC on the ground, and their efforts to defend themselves against a repressive regime that has shown no boundaries in its willingness to kill civilians.

We cannot detail every single type of support that we are providing to the opposition or discuss timelines for delivery. But it is important to note that both the political and the military opposition are, and will be, receiving this assistance.

Q Does it concern you that he is out here saying we haven't got any?

MR. CARNEY: It's important to note that both the political and the military opposition are, and will be, receiving this assistance.

Jim.

Q You were just saying that you want this done quickly. Why not set a timeline so you can hold their feet to the fire?

MR. CARNEY: We are in the process of meeting with the Russians in Geneva -- not just Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov, but also substantial teams with a great deal of technical expertise -- to work on this issue. And I will leave it to them to discuss and explain all of the technical and logistical aspects that would be involved in securing Assad's -- identifying and securing Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles.

The objective there is to have a serious discussion about the mechanics of identifying, verifying, securing and ultimately destroying Assad's chemical weapons. And concurrently with that process in Geneva, there is a process underway in New York at the United Nations Security Council where we are working very closely with our allies, very close allies, the United Kingdom and France, on this effort and a United Nations Security Council resolution that would be part of it. Obviously, we're also working with the Russians and the Chinese on that effort.

So these teams in New York and Geneva will be better able to talk about how this will work if it is agreed to and what times and durations would be a part of an agreement. But we're not at an agreement yet. And, as I said yesterday, we're approaching this with open eyes. We understand that -- and it's important for everybody to remember where we are now. Three weeks ago, U.N. inspectors were stymied in Syria; Syria would not admit that it possessed chemical weapons; and we had two years of complete lack of cooperation with Russia on the United Nations Security Council when it came to dealing with Syria. Even on resolutions and initiatives that contained no element of force, simply holding Assad accountable for what he was doing to his own people -- those efforts, those resolutions were blocked by the Russians and the Chinese.

Three weeks later -- three weeks later -- and there's no question that there have been some curves in the road as we've arrived to where we are now. But three weeks later, United Nations inspectors not only have inspected the sites that were bombed with chemical weapons on August 21st, but they will be releasing a report about that inspection. Syria, which as recently as three days ago was denying it had chemical weapons, has admitted that it has chemical weapons, has said that it will transfer them to international control and that it is prepared to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention. And Russia is putting its credibility on the line behind a proposal to place Syria's chemical weapons under international control.

That's a lot of distance traveled in a very short period of time, and it's significant to note that even as we concede upfront that this diplomatic road may or may not prove successful. But it is absolutely worth exploring.

Q And getting back to President Putin's op-ed in The New York Times, he says in that op-ed that "we have every reason to believe that opposition forces used chemical weapons." How do you negotiate with somebody who doesn't even agree with you on the facts?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think there's an inherent contradiction in the fact that Russia has acknowledged, and I assume prodded Syria into acknowledging, that Assad has these chemical weapon stockpiles; has put forward a proposal that we are glad to see that Syria -- the Assad regime give up its chemical weapons stockpile, that they be played under international control and ultimately destroyed, on the one hand -- and this is all in the wake of the August 21st attacks -- and on the other is making a claim unsupported by any shred of evidence that the opposition could be responsible for those attacks. There's not a lot of logic that connects those two assertions. And as I mentioned earlier --

Q So that's an issue that Putin would say that?

MR. CARNEY: Well, it's not necessarily an issue in securing and disposing of Assad's chemical weapons stockpile. It's an issue of a claim in its relationship to the truth and to the facts, but that's one for others to resolve. And I think it goes to sort of the general differences that we've had on this matter. But it's certainly not an obstacle in our view to pursuing this diplomatic avenue.

It's safe to say that if there were evidence to support that assertion, The New York Times would have provided a little more space to include it in that article. But there is no evidence. And that's because there also is no logic to the assertion that the opposition that did not have the capability to do this, did not have the weapons to do it, could not have in any imaginable scenario gone to regime-controlled areas of Damascus to fire rockets into opposition-controlled areas or contested areas. It defies logic and probability.

But having said that, the most important part of this is the fact that Russia has put its credibility on the line in pursuing this with us and others. And it's an important objective and we are very pleased to see it, and we are working -- as you saw, Secretary Kerry with

his counterpart -- very closely and collaboratively with the Russians to try to see if we can get this done.

Q And very quickly, just to follow up on that -- you and the President and others have said this week, "trust but verify." The phrase "trust but verify" has been thrown around Washington a lot this week. Does President Obama trust President Putin?

MR. CARNEY: I think the point of that is that actions speak louder than words, and that we will --

Q So he doesn't trust him?

MR. CARNEY: Look, I think that the -- the fact is if we can resolve this without resorting to military force, if we can relieve a dictator of his stockpiles of chemical weapons so that he can never use them against innocent civilians again, then credit will be due to the Russians and to everyone else who participates in that process to make it happen. We'll see if it happens.

Jon.

Q Jay, just first a quick clarification. You said that the Iranians have blamed the Syrian government --

MR. CARNEY: The former President of Iran acknowledged that the Syrian government was responsible for that attack.

Q Okay, so then the current -- the government of Iran has not made that -- okay.

So, first of all, your reaction to the fact that the very rebels that the United States is supporting have issued a statement saying that they categorically reject the Russian initiative. These are our allies --

MR. CARNEY: No, I understand that, but it goes to the point that we have been making that there is an ongoing sectarian civil war in Syria. We have been appalled by, as many of our allies and partners have been, by the wholesale and brutal assault that Assad has waged against his own people. But the President has made clear that even as we step up assistance to the Syrian people and we step up direct assistance to the opposition's Military Council, that we are not putting boots on the ground and we are not engaging militarily in an effort to take sides, to try to resolve someone else's civil war.

But when it comes to chemical weapons, which pose a threat to the region and the world, including the United States, and the violation of a century-old prohibition against their use, we absolutely believe that we have to take action.

Q But I'm asking you to directly respond to the rebel groups that the United States is supporting saying that the United States is essentially selling them out by going forward with this Russian proposal. What is your response to that?

MR. CARNEY: My response to that is that we continue to support the opposition, and we are supporting the opposition in tangible ways through substantial and stepped-up assistance. But when it comes to how we resolve the disposition of these very dangerous weapons and how we ensure that a dictator does not use them again against innocent civilians, including children, we will pursue a diplomatic course to see if it can bear fruit, to see if it can produce the result that we desire. In the meantime, as the President has said, we remain ready and our military remains ready to engage in a military strike if necessary.

Q How can you expect the Russians to be operating in good faith on this when even this morning in The New York Times Vladimir Putin is saying it was the rebels that used the chemical weapons?

MR. CARNEY: I just answered this, Jon.

Q Well, not really. I didn't hear a direct answer to this.

MR. CARNEY: I said that what Russia has committed itself to and put its credibility and prestige on the line in doing so is the proposition that it supports and will help bring about the removal from Assad's control of a substantial stockpile of chemical weapons, the transference of that stockpile to international control for the ultimate destruction of that stockpile. That is a significant piece of business and it would represent a significant accomplishment by the international community and by Russia. So we will pursue that.

We obviously disagree with the wholly unsupported assertion that the opposition could have or did commit this atrocity. And we have a substantial body of facts to prove our point, and we have more than 30 countries that have already agreed to that proposition. And we have obviously -- I think there's not a member of Congress who disagrees with us on the basic facts, which is that the chemical weapons attack occurred and Assad was responsible.

Q But can you explain how, if you have an agreement with Assad to turn over his weapons and that starts to happen with the Russians -- under Russian supervision, do you still support rebel groups that are fighting to overthrow the government that you are working with to turn over their chemical weapons? How does that work?

MR. CARNEY: We will continue to support the opposition because --

Q Even as you're working with the government to turn over their weapons, you're going to support their --

MR. CARNEY: We are working to secure chemical weapons that need to be secured to prevent a dictator from using them again against his own people, and he has shown himself more than willing to do that.

Q And just one last. Is it still U.S. policy that Assad must go?

MR. CARNEY: It is still our policy and our view that Syria's future cannot have Assad in the picture. It's inconceivable, given what he has done to his own people. But this is something that we have said all along needs to be decided in a political settlement. It is not something that will be decided militarily.

Q If you promise to come back, I defer to my colleagues behind me.

MR. CARNEY: Major Garrett gets some credit there. Mara.

Q I just have a quick question. Diplomats always choose their words carefully, and today Kerry said, "should diplomacy fail, force might be necessary." Everything that the President has said up until now made it seem like if diplomacy fails, force will be necessary, and that's what he's trying to get Congress to authorize him to do.

MR. CARNEY: Well, look, you saw a sustained debate here in the United States about the use of force. You saw the President speak about it on numerous occasions. I think the formulation Secretary Kerry uses is allowing that -- as we've seen in the last few weeks, there are always developments that we can't anticipate. What he is saying -- and let me be clear -- is that we retain the option of using a military strike in response to Assad's attack with chemical weapons on his own people -- the murder of more than 1,400 Syrians, including more than 400 children -- because of the profound ramifications of not holding Assad accountable for the use of chemical weapons.

In the meantime, we are pursuing this potential diplomatic path to resolving this problem by seeing if we can prevent Assad from using chemical weapons again by relieving him of his chemical weapons without the use of force.

Q Are you saying it's a hypothetical that if diplomacy fails, you don't know whether force is going to be necessary or not?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again --

Q Because he didn't say it hypothetically.

MR. CARNEY: He said "might." And I think that that allows for a variety of things that could happen in the next days and weeks with regard to this matter. I think we have seen even this week that this situation is fairly fluid. What is clear from what Secretary Kerry said and what I am saying here in the White House and what the President said the other day to the American people is that he believes absent a diplomatic success here that a military option is important to maintain, and that it is the mere pressure, it is the credible threat of military force that has resulted in these rather remarkable changes in position that we've seen this week. And we need to maintain the pressure.

I think I said April. Yes.

Q Jay, in reading this op-ed to the American people what were the messages that you got out of this op-ed from Putin? And also, could you tell us about the message that that hand was in when --

MR. CARNEY: Sorry?

Q The hand, the picture of the hand in the article -- the op-ed rather from Putin.

MR. CARNEY: I saw it online. I'm not sure --

Q I'm talking about the definition of the hand. In looking up the hand on that article it meant terrorism, and also it was a signal about World War I.

MR. CARNEY: I'm sorry, I confess, April, I'm not sure what you're referring to, because I just read the text. And our response is what I said, which is the single most important thing about it is the continued assertion by the President of Russia as well as his foreign minister that Russia believes and will support and pursue this effort to secure Assad's chemical weapons, place them under international supervision with the ultimate goal of seeing them destroyed. And that is a very important, significant development.

Now, we have to work with the Russians, as well as the United Nations Security Council, to see if we can turn that proposition into reality.

Q Russia is not alone. China was there saying they do not want to see this to a military strike from the U.S. on Syria. With that, what are the conversations that are taking place now with the United States and China -- as the Russian situation is public, especially as the relationship with China is still complicated as well?

MR. CARNEY: I would say that you're absolutely right that when we have tried to bring this matter before the United Nations Security Council in the past, not just Russia but China have blocked those efforts that have been supported by a broad coalition of nations. But it is also the case that when it comes to Syria, Russia is certainly Syria's premiere patron and protector. And so we will engage with both nations. But I think that Russia is a major player when it comes to Syria, specifically.

Q But can you give us any information on --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any specifics on conversations in New York with the Chinese. I'm sure Ambassador Power or her office might have more on that.

Major, you want me to come back to you?

Q In our conversation yesterday, Jay, you said it was too early for the United States to say whether or not it would require the threat of military force to be an enforcing mechanism at the United Nations. It's still to be determined. Secretary of State Kerry, in Geneva, standing next to the Russian foreign minister, added the word "might" to the idea of military action as an enforcing mechanism. Isn't it now fair to conclude that the threat of military action is becoming less a part of this conversation as the diplomacy moves forward?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we are certainly focusing on the diplomacy right now. The President made that clear in his address to the nation, that he asked Congress to pause in its deliberations, to postpone a vote on authorization. But that option -- there are two aspects here. There's the potential congressional vote on authorization and actions by the United States; then there's the potential United Nations Security Council resolution and the contents of that. These are related but distinct enterprises.

The basic position, as the President described in this address to the nation, of the United States is that the military remains in a position to execute a plan around holding Assad accountable for his appalling use of chemical weapons against civilians. And that remains true today. Meanwhile, we are obviously focused, as you've seen with Secretary Kerry's activities and the activities in New York at the United Nations, on pursuing this diplomatic option. I think that is the right thing to do. It is certainly the responsible thing to explore this avenue and to see if it is possible to resolve this peacefully or diplomatically.

Q Now, you mentioned that you retain the ability to carry out a military strike, but as the Pentagon has noted, maintaining all of the destroyers in the Eastern Med is costly at times, and there are operational decisions that are going to have to be made in a couple, three weeks about rotations for vessels that are due back. One of them is already two weeks overdue. Are those factors part of the calculus as to how long this administration will wait to determine whether or not this diplomacy is --

MR. CARNEY: I haven't heard that discussed. I think that the frame is more about testing whether or not there is seriousness here, and whether or not we can devise a plan agreed to by the relevant parties here that can bring about the transfer of those chemical weapon stockpiles to international control. And I think that a lot depends on that process, and that would include some of what you're discussing.

Q Can you help us understand the definitions of "seriousness" -- the benchmarks this administration has in mind when it is determining whether or not this process is serious and moving forward?

MR. CARNEY: I think we've seen thus far a degree of seriousness about this that we have not seen before, and that is welcomed. And having said that, actions, concrete actions speak much more loudly than --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not going to negotiate the way forward from here. That would be counterproductive.

Q You'll know it when you see it, in other words?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think those negotiating will know it when they see it. And I will simply say from here that this, understandably, will take some time, and there should not be an expectation, as I said yesterday, that we're going to know everything we need to know right away.

But you saw Secretary Kerry and his counterpart in Geneva discuss what they were looking forward to trying to achieve in their meetings. And we will look for results from those meetings as we move forward and assess the level of seriousness and the commitment here to get this done.

Q Last question. Your goal is to remove all chemical weapons from Syria, correct?

MR. CARNEY: The goal here, as stated, is to relieve -- is to remove from Assad's possession chemical weapons that he has maintained. It has been our assessment -- we've gone through this in the past -- that throughout this conflict, because of the disposition of Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles have been a concern of ours, it has been our assessment that his regime has maintained control of those stockpiles throughout the conflict. And I think that's probably where you're going.

Q We've talked to people who are experts in this who spend a good deal of time analyzing not just the chemical weapons question internationally, but in Syria, and they describe our intelligence about all the possible locations as imperfect; that we may not know where everything is and we may not be able to catalogue --

MR. CARNEY: Again, without not commenting on intelligence matters, I certainly accept that this is a relatively complicated piece of business, A; B, it is still our assessment that Assad's stockpiles have been in Assad's control throughout this conflict. So I can only point you to that.

Obviously, the Assad regime, if it's going to be cooperative in this effort, knows better than anyone where those stockpiles are and, in the process of identifying and verifying the chemical weapons, needs to be cooperative.

Q So we, in the end, need to trust this regime?

MR. CARNEY: Well, no, we're going to verify -- if this process moves forward, we're not going to only trust, we're going to verify. Verification is a key element of that process.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you, Jay. How would you convince the opposition that rejected this proposal that you still intend to hold Assad accountable for gassing more than 1,000 people?

MR. CARNEY: Our objective -- you're again conflating two objectives here. Our objective when it comes to chemical weapons use, whether through military action limited in time and duration and scope -- time and duration being the same thing -- limited in duration and scope, or through a diplomatic success here would be to prevent -- to deter Assad from using those weapons again, or, if the diplomatic initiative succeeds, preventing him from using them again by taking them all away. So that is separate. And that's what we mean and have meant by holding him accountable for the use of those weapons.

Second, when it comes to supporting the opposition, we have and will continue to provide assistance to the opposition, both humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people and direct assistance to the opposition, including to the Supreme Military Council.

Q But I quote here General Idriss; he literally accused the United States for --

MR. CARNEY: I just got this question, and all I can say -- you know the parameters of what I can say here and I will say it again. It's important to note that both the political and the military opposition are and will be receiving this assistance.

Q He accused the United States for giving a pass to a criminal just for surrendering the weapon of the crime.

MR. CARNEY: Again, I've explained our policy on numerous occasions; so has the President. We are not sending American troops into Syria to fight somebody else's civil war. We are supporting the opposition. When it comes to the use and abuse of chemical weapons, the indiscriminate use of chemical weapons against civilians, it is incumbent upon the United States and other members of the international community and all the signatories of the Chemical Weapons Convention to hold accountable the regime that used them. And that's obviously something we've been engaged in.

Q Last question. Would you also agree that the United States' prestige and credibility is also on the line, not only the Russians', by accepting this proposal?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would agree that the United States, in part because it is an exceptional nation, is called upon to lead in circumstances like this, often when it's unpopular, often when it's uncomfortable. And that is what this President and this country has been doing. And part of that is accepting that when circumstances change, as they did this week, and diplomatic avenues that had been closed reopen, that we explore them, because resolving this peacefully would be a better alternative, even as we approach this with a fair amount of skepticism and with wide-open eyes.

But there's no question that dealing with these issues is important and it's not always easy and it's not always popular either at home or abroad.

Q To clarify on the whole rebel question, you said earlier about helping the Syrian opposition that one of the things we're doing is helping with cohesion on the ground. So whose boots are on the ground helping them if we're helping them on the ground?

MR. CARNEY: Ed, we don't have boots on the ground.

Q We don't. So are we working with Jordanians or others?

MR. CARNEY: For the fourth time in this press conference I'm going to say that what I can say about the assistance we provide is that I cannot detail every single type of support, but that we are providing assistance to the opposition, and that it's important to note that both the political and the military opposition are and will be receiving this assistance.

And that assistance has been stepped up, at the President's direction, in the wake of the initial findings of high confidence by the United States that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against its own people.

Q On the issue of trust with Putin, he is scheduled to meet I think on Friday with the new Iranian President. And there are reports that Putin is offering to sell five ground-to-air missile systems to the Iranians and also is offering to build a second reactor at their nuclear plant. Does this raise any alarm at the White House?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't seen those reports. Obviously, we continue to be focused on and engaged in the effort to have Iran forsake its nuclear weapons program and we hope that there's an opportunity for progress in that effort. But it remains the case that Iran has flouted its obligations under a variety of U.N. Security Council resolutions, and we are going to work with our partners to help ensure that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapon.

Q Last one. Can you react to Republican Senator Bob Corker? Even though he is a Republican, he has worked with the President on a grand bargain, sat down for dinner with him, as I recall; has said positive things earlier in the Syria debate, and then, yesterday told CNN that he is disappointed in how the President has approached Syria, and at one point said he doesn't think the President is comfortable as Commander-in-Chief. How do you respond?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to respond specifically to any individual who might have been offering an observation. I would simply say a couple of things. One, when it comes to our approach to this problem in Syria, the President has been very clear about the need to respond and why it's important that Assad be held accountable.

It is somewhat ironic when some members of Congress are critical -- after having asked for the President to ask Congress for authorization to then be critical of that effort, which as I think everyone here reported, has involved an enormous amount of outreach, an enormous amount of information provided, both classified and unclassified, to members, as well as a very public effort to inform and educate the American people.

And then, I would simply say that when it comes to being Commander-in-Chief, I think that the American people, at least in my assessment, appreciate a Commander-in-Chief who takes in new information and doesn't celebrate decisiveness for the sake of decisiveness. And in this case, the President's objectives are clear. And he believes that the American people would certainly support the proposition that if there's a diplomatic opportunity here to remove from Assad's control these chemical weapons stockpiles that we ought to pursue it. And that's what he is doing.

Margaret.

Q On domestic politics, does the President or does the White House see the House decision to pull a vote on the funding as sort of raising the specter of a possible government shutdown? Are you concerned that the likelihood of that is growing in the light of the latest?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would simply say that the leaders in Congress of the Republican Party have made clear that they understand that allowing a shutdown would create an unnecessary headwind to the economy and I think cause political problems for them. And I assume that the combination of those two incentives would compel them to come up with a solution, so that we can fund the government responsibly, and not engage in these games that inflict unnecessary wounds on our economy right when it's growing and creating jobs and we're continuing to move out of the worst recession since the Great Depression.

Q Is it primarily Boehner who the White House is negotiating with on budget and debt ceiling, or are there some other --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a list of engagements. We're speaking obviously with a number of leaders and members in Congress on this matter. We're obviously working with our Democratic allies on this matter in both the House and the Senate. But again, Congress has a few basic responsibilities, and one of them is to fund the government; another is to pay the bills that it's incurred. And we simply ask that Congress own those responsibilities.

Q What are your thoughts on --

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to put a --

Q Can I do a quick foreign policy one?

MR. CARNEY: Yes.

Q Have you spoken with the President actually about the Putin piece? And here's what I want to ask. It just seemed that he hit on so many hot-button things that in theory would get under the President's skin -- not a lot of democracy, but a whole lot of al Qaeda; you're either with us or against us, comparing him to President Bush; there's no exceptionalism. You've said exceptionalism from the podium like eight times now.

MR. CARNEY: I think I said it once.

Q No, like six. Well, I lost count after five. So does the President think that President Putin was trying to get under his skin?

MR. CARNEY: The reaction that I gave you is a reaction of the White House from the President on down. The most important thing about this is that Russia has committed itself and, in doing that, has put its prestige on the line, including the individual prestige of its President, behind this proposition that we can resolve this by having the Syrian regime, the Assad regime give up its chemical weapons stockpile to international control. And that is important.

And we hope that Russia and, through Russia, Syria keeps the commitments that they're making this week. And we will work very closely with Russia in trying to bring this about. And if it is achieved, it would be a significant accomplishment for the international

community broadly and for Russia. So we hope that these commitments are kept.

Yes, Kirsten.

Q Jay, but this is not the main point.

Q Jay, thanks. I want to go back --

MR. CARNEY: You don't think it's the main point?

Q No, I don't.

MR. CARNEY: Shocked.

Q I want to go back to the interview that Assad gave today. He said that any agreement would require the United States to stop arming the rebel forces. I know you won't get specific about the type of assistance that the U.S. is giving to rebel forces, but would the United States consider at all scaling back that assistance --

MR. CARNEY: We are and will continue, as I've said a number of times here, to support - to provide assistance to the political and military opposition.

Q Would you consider scaling it back as a part of it?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not going to negotiate this. But our position is that we are providing assistance to the opposition, both the military and the political opposition.

Q So that won't change?

MR. CARNEY: And again, conditions and demands placed by someone who a few weeks ago blithely used chemical weapons against innocent children so that we could all watch them die in videos are a little hard to take.

Q And Richard Engle, who is reporting from the region, has reported that thousands of al Qaeda members are joining with rebel forces while these diplomatic talks are going on. Does that square with your understanding? And how much does that complicate your efforts to assist --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have specific numbers to attach to the assertion that we've made for some time that there are elements of the opposition that are extremists and are not friendly to the United States. And that's why we have throughout this process worked to identify the moderate elements of the opposition and to support the moderate elements of the opposition. But I think Secretary Kerry and others have spoken about this directly.

Q And I guess going back to that, several months ago you said you felt confident that you were able to identify who those moderate elements are. Are you still confident about that given that there seems to be an uptick in the number of al Qaeda forces who have joined --

MR. CARNEY: I believe that's the case. We are very deliberate in the process of identifying moderate elements of the opposition for precisely this reason.

Carol.

Q Can you give us a sense of what the President's message is going to be on Wednesday when he speaks to the Business Roundtable?

MR. CARNEY: I am sure he will discuss at that meeting the efforts that we all need to engage in to help the economy continue to grow and help it grow in a way that makes the middle class more secure -- because we have always been at our strongest economically when the middle class is growing -- when the middle class is secure and expanding. So I'm sure that economy and economic policies will be the focus of that discussion.

Q Anything on --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have anything specific for you at this time.

Q Jay, on one point?

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Andrei.

Q Thank you. The main point I think in Putin's piece is nobody is above the law. I personally admire it -- that he is being consistent that nobody is above the law.

My question to you is very simple. Does this principle apply internationally: Nobody is above the international law as it stands? Does this apply to the United States?

MR. CARNEY: Andrei, Russia blocked at the United Nations Security Council multiple resolutions to hold Assad accountable that did not even have force attached to them. True or false?

Q They did it deliberately. They did it deliberately.

MR. CARNEY: Yes, they did.

Q Because it was the law.

MR. CARNEY: It's the law to block holding people accountable? I think that that's a fine position to take, and I understand that that's the position the Russian government has taken, but it is not the position that we think is the right position when it comes to the agreement by 98 percent of the world's population that chemical weapons ought not to be used and should be prohibited and should be banned. And to support a regime that uses them against its own people is a terrible thing.

Q Is the United States above the law? Jay, yes or no?

MR. CARNEY: That's not even a serious question, Andrei.

Christi.

Q Jay, the congressional picnic, can you say why that was canceled?

Q It is a serious question.

Q And does that say anything about the state of relations between the White House and the --

MR. CARNEY: It does not. The picnic was -- decisions had to be made about holding it when we thought that there was going to be an enormous amount of activity on Syria. What we are doing is offering a change in the way that the holiday parties are constructed so that members of Congress can bring their families to those parties.

Q Could you address the question of the state of relations between the White House and the Hill going into your fall discussions and preparations?

MR. CARNEY: We obviously have divided government. We have sometimes contentious, sometimes very effective relations with Congress. We work with Congress to get the business of the American people done. And whether it's shutting down the government or engaging in ideological battles like threatening to default over defunding Obamacare, these are not constructive approaches to getting the business of the American people done.

But we keep at it. And we believe the American people want their elected representatives to focus on helping the economy, helping the middle class, and certainly avoiding self-inflicted wounds.

Q So where do you think you are now on that spectrum between constructive and contentious and -- what did you say -- effective?

MR. CARNEY: I think that as has been true ever since I got to Washington under the Clinton administration and the Bush administration, this is a contested business. And parties hold different positions; individual lawmakers hold different positions. Congress and the occupant of the Oval Office sometimes are at odds. And that's our system and you work within the system.

Q Jay, can you say did the White House get a heads-up on this Putin op-ed from the Times before it was published? And you haven't -- it hasn't quite been clear whether the President himself has read it.

MR. CARNEY: I think I've given the White House response. The President reads widely, including The New York Times. Our response is what I've said about it.

Q What about the President's response?

MR. CARNEY: He's the head of the White House.

Q And did he get any -- did he or the White House get a heads-up?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not aware of any heads-up, but I'm not -- I didn't talk to everyone about it.

Mark.

Q In that op-ed, at the very end, President Putin said that over time there's been growing trust in his relationship with the President. A month ago the White House canceled a visit to Moscow on the rationale that there wasn't much worth talking about with the President on a whole range of issues, not just Syria. Would President Obama share that characterization?

MR. CARNEY: I think what President Obama would say is that his conversations, even when we have not been able to see eye-to-eye with President Putin, have always been direct and constructive and with each President making his views clear. And that was the case in St. Petersburg. And as we've noted, one of the topics of the conversation that the two Presidents had in St. Petersburg was the possibility of pursuing a diplomatic initiative to take away from Assad his chemical weapons.

Now, it's certainly the case that this is a conversation that had been engaged in periodically both at the presidential level and the foreign minister level over the last many months without action. And it was a new and welcome development to see a public initiative to see if this could be achieved, and that is a good thing.

And look, our approach -- and this is why I think I and others have tried to answer questions about the state of the reset this way -- is that the whole point of the reset was to explore opportunities to advance each country's interest in our conversations with the Russians, even as we acknowledged that we would not agree on everything. And even during the early period of the so-called reset, there were areas of serious disagreement, including on missile defense, but we were able to accomplish a number of things that were in the interest of the United States and our national security and in the interest of Russia, and I think that's why Russia pursued the reset.

Now, it's also, as the President said, the case that we had run into a wall in our efforts to reach agreement with the Russians on other areas like Syria, like some other things, some economic things, but even in that circumstance, the fact is on some of these other issues where we have found agreement with the Russians we've continued to work with them. And it's important to acknowledge that.

The relationship is not all hot or all cold; it's one where we agree on some issues and make progress, and disagree on some others. And hopefully where we have seen enormous disagreement on Syria, we have now found potentially an avenue of agreement, where success, if it comes -- and we're certainly a long way from that at this point -- if it comes, that would represent a real breakthrough.

Q Do you think canceling the Moscow stop got his attention?

MR. CARNEY: You'd have to ask the Russians.

Last one.

Q I've got one question but it has two parts.

MR. CARNEY: That's fair. Thanks for the forewarning.

Q The first part being on Syria -- who is in the driver's seat now, diplomatically -- Russia or the United States?

MR. CARNEY: We're working directly with Russia. John Kerry is with his Russian counterpart. We're working in New York with all members of the United Nations Security Council, including the other four permanent members, one of which is Russia. And because Assad and the Syrian regime has been a patron of Russia, protected by Russia, obviously Russia plays a huge role in bringing about this change in Syria's handling of its chemical weapons, and even its admittance that it has chemical weapons. And that means -- that is very significant.

Moving this forward requires the joint effort of the United States and Russia, and the consensus effort of nations on the United Nations Security Council. So this is -- it's not one nation; it's many. But there's no question that the United States and Russia are key players.

Q And then just allow me to play devil's advocate here. Has the United States, by accepting Putin's gambit here, put him in the arguably ironic position of claiming to be the peacemaker in this, which if his op-ed is any indication, would be what he apparently believes?

MR. CARNEY: Here is what I would say -- and we're a long way from there and I do not, through this briefing or any other, want to convey anything but a sober assessment of the potential for success, because we are understandably skeptical -- but if we were to see a situation unfold where Assad were to give up his chemical weapons, all of them, to international supervision, that would be an enormous accomplishment and it would represent a wholesale change from where Syria and Russia were as recently as three weeks ago. And I think that would be due significantly to the decisions made by the Russian leadership, but also the decisions made by the United States, by the President to take the approach that he has taken in response to the horrifying use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime on its own people.

Thank you all very much.

END

2:55 P.M. EDT