

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 5/30/12



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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for being here. I'll let everyone get settled. Today, ahead of the 2012 hurricane season, which begins on Friday, June 1st, the President was briefed by Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security John Brennan, as well as Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano, FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate and others on actions already taken by the administration, working with states and communities in hurricane-prone states to ensure we are prepared for the season.

At the briefing, the President also heard from the Department of Energy, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and NOAA, as well as the State of Florida's Emergency Management Team and a private sector utility representative from Florida Power and Light.

The briefing highlighted lessons learned from disasters ranging from Hurricane Andrew, which made landfall in the southeast United States 20 years ago this summer and remains the second costliest hurricane in U.S. history, as well as more recent events, including responses to the Joplin tornado and Hurricane Irene last year.

There was also a discussion of steps taken to incorporate lessons learned from major power outages caused by severe weather. The President asked his team to keep him updated on any unmet needs as the season progresses, and thanked them all for their efforts.

I was able to attend the meeting. It was fascinating. But I brought along with me today a person far more capable of answering your questions as the hurricane season begins. With me is FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate. And what I'd like to do is if -- as we do traditionally, if you have questions for him, address them to him at the top, and then when you are done and finished with those questions, we'll let him leave and I'll be here for other issues.

And with that, I give you Mr. Fugate.

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Well, good afternoon, everybody. Just real quickly, some of the things the President was asking about -- lessons learned -- particularly, we saw earlier this -- a couple weeks ago, as he attended the graduation at Joplin and lessons from Hurricane Andrew or Katrina is, if you don't get debris picked up quickly, if you're not able to restore public infrastructure, particularly get schools open, it's very difficult for communities to come back.

And so, again, applying those lessons, realizing that Joplin was a city, but hurricanes can be much larger; the need to get in quickly, to support and stabilize the governor and local officials. But really, key things that we've learned and reinforce with Joplin -- you got to get the debris out so people can rebuild. You've got to get schools open so that children can get back to their routines. And you need to look at this from the standpoint of what the entire team brings together, not just what government does.

Private sector is a key component. Without jobs, without services it's very difficult for communities to reestablish and be able to recover. So again, we continue to work on those efforts and we continue to encourage people to get ready for hurricanes.

Q Can you tell us what you've learned about the intensity of this hurricane season? And then, also, what has been learned in terms of all the different agencies communicating -- the flow of information between all the agencies?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Well, the seasonal outlook -- I believe the National Weather Service and NOAA put out theirs calling for an average season. Of course, hurricane season starts June 1st and we still have a tropical depression -- the second named storm of the season.

Unless you're in the reinsurance business, the seasonal forecast has very little meaning for any actions that you're going to take -- because what the seasonal forecast doesn't tell us is where we'll have a landfall hurricane; 2010 was one of the most active hurricane seasons - - no major landfall hurricanes have hit the United States. Irene, last year, impacted -- was one of the few landfall hurricanes in the last couple of years.

So the real message about that is, if you're getting a seasonal forecast, it must be time for hurricane season -- get ready. But for individuals and most businesses, the seasonal forecast shouldn't change anything, because there's never a forecast that says there will be no hurricanes, and there is no forecast yet that says where they're going to hit or not hit.

So if you live along the Gulf Coast, the Atlantic and as far inland as the folks in Vermont found out last year, you need to be prepared for this hurricane season.

Q Mr. Director, two major gatherings this summer in the peak of hurricane season, Tampa, the Republican convention; Charlotte for the Democrats -- what special contingencies and plans are you looking at for those two gatherings?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Well, as far as us, we're looking at this as we would any of the events that would lead to a state response. However, the states themselves have done a lot of work and planning. These are national security events, so there's a lot of planning that goes into them beyond just hurricane, so it's the all-hazard approach.

And I would reference to the state of Florida specifically doing their statewide hurricane exercise focused on a hurricane occurring during the RNC. So we support this as a national security event. We support the all-hazards approach. The governors and their teams have been doing more specific planning.

Q When hundreds of thousands of people perhaps are gathered in one place, are there any special precautions? Or is this more or less unprecedented?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Are you familiar with Miami, Tampa and tourism? They always have large numbers of people. (Laughter.) So again, not to be flip, but the fact that you have the conventions there, there are decisions the conventions have to deal with.

But as far as having additional people visiting during hurricane season, it's part of all planning to allow for if you got special events, if you got large gatherings, if you have conventions, to build these into your local and state evacuation plans. So it's a numerical increase, but it is something that you plan for -- irregardless of what the function is, you plan for what happens if you have larger numbers of people, how does that affect your evacuation lead times.

Now, that does not get into any of the details the actual conventions have as far as their decision-making, and I'll defer to them. But for the evacuation purposes, you merely add the population increases just like you would for any other event that would occur during your evacuation timeframes.

Q Two questions. Is there some type of national interface on housing for those who are displaced from major storm systems that hit communities?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Yes. Probably one of the lessons we've learned from Andrew and then most recently Katrina, that in a large-scale catastrophic disaster we have lots of housing loss. Many people are going to have to leave the area in the immediate short term to get better long-term housing. So we've been working much better at coming up with and working with both our partners at HUD, but also with the private sector on available rental properties and other facilities that may be available outside of the area of impact, and then make these available to disaster survivors as potential options if they wish to relocate out of that as part of the FEMA temporary housing program.

Q And as far as a timeline, since we're not so far away from 2010, you said that was one of the worst seasons -- storm seasons that you've seen.

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Well, no, it was just a lot of activity, not a lot of landfalls.

Q Well, since it was a lot of activity, what would you say to Americans this season, especially now that you're saying that we've had two storm systems already and June 1st hasn't even come yet? What would you say to the average American right now as we're seeing activity that's begun before the hurricane season has begun?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Have a plan. What I hate to have people do is go through hurricane season worrying all year about hurricanes. What I want them to do is find out about their risk, take the appropriate steps to get ready, and then if a hurricane threatens, know what to do. And for some folks, that means they'll have to evacuate away from the most dangerous areas; for other people, they need to be prepared for the impacts of the hurricane. One of the big ones, besides flooding, is power outages.

But I think we always worry about the storms. I don't want them to worry. I want them to be prepared. I want them to have a plan, and know what to do if the storm threatens. And that's our message every year going into hurricane season.

Q And I know this sounds very elementary, but when you say be prepared, some people don't think about, I guess, the electricity component and phones versus the cell phones with electricity; power versus the landline -- the old landlines that used to dial up. Could you talk to us about that?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Sure. And we have actually learned this. Remember when we had the earthquake here last year and everybody got on their cell phones at the same time and nobody could get through? Right?

So we went with the FCC and we put together something -- and you can go to Ready.gov, and it's called Tech Ready -- and what it did, it incorporated all the lessons we learned about how we need to make sure that when there's a big crisis, don't try to call people on your phones; text message -- it's a lot faster and gets through. Use social media to update people so you can let a lot of people know than trying to call everybody.

And also, be prepared when power outages occur how you're going to keep your electronic devices charged. We've seen this, where oftentimes, the wireless community can get up and be operational, but if you evacuate and you forget your chargers and your phone dies, or if you're without power not knowing how to charge things. So we went and put together a lot of information just focused on your mobile devices, wireless communications, things you need to do. The fact that many people no longer have a landline, they only have wireless communication, and they need to make sure that they take the steps to make sure they're ready for that, but also realize that you're going to have a lot of congestion and difficulties getting through so you want to have backup plans.

And if you just did one thing this hurricane season, make sure you've got a good family communication plan and what your backups are going to be, so when you get on that cell phone and you get that busy signal you're not stuck, you know what the next step is.

Q Early warning measures -- after Irene last year, it came out that some of the budgetary plans that might -- that were considered, might eliminate funding for early warning measures, like what was saving lives in Kansas a month and a half ago, and hurricanes last year. Are there any budgetary plans in place, or is there any concern by FEMA at this point that we might eliminate early warning measures?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Specifically, what early warning measure? Because we've got a whole lot of new stuff that's rolling out this year as we speak.

Q Well, I guess my question is more about budgetary plans that are being considered by Congress and proposed by the White House. What are you looking at in terms of funding for the existing early warning measures that you have and these new ones that you're excited about?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Well, I'm not excited about it. It's happened, and I'm real excited that it happened. We have been working on the Emergency Alert System, trying to move past just broadcast media. And although we still heavily leverage broadcast radio and television and the NOAA weather alert radios, this year, in partnership with the wireless industry, through the rule-making authority of the FCC, we're rolling out the cellular access program where we're now able to broadcast to cell phones that are being upgraded to the system.

So that has been a huge evolution that as your cell phones are upgraded and as people get new cell phones, they'll be able to get warnings in a push system that will come out as part of the Emergency Alert System, what we call the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System. And so, for the first time, we've actually now -- are rolling out -- have implemented the technology nationwide to begin pushing alerts to cell phones.

Q My question was about funding, though.

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: That's just it. What specifically? Because we are funded to do these programs and to continue rolling out and improving these systems. So there may be local systems that aren't being funded. I don't know about that. I know that from our standpoint the funding that we are putting into the Integrated Public Warning Alert System and those programs are funded, and we're moving forward with deploying those systems.

Q Mr. Director, it seems there's a lot more tornado activity in a lot more places. Do you see increased activity -- looking historically -- to hurricanes today? And do you attribute any of that to global warming?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Well, I'm not a meteorologist. I'm not a climate scientist, and hurricanes are cyclic. I do know history. And if you look at history and you look at hurricane activity, there are periods of increased and decreased activity that occurs over decades. Throughout the '60s, '70s, early '80s, up until about '95, the Atlantic was actually in a period of below average activity, even though you had significant storms like Andrew, Frederic, and David.

Beginning about 1995, we saw an uptick in activity that has been sustained, and about the only variation is whether or not we've had El Niños or La Niñas, depending upon that for a factor. But if you look back for the amount information we have going back to about 1850s, you'll see a cycle, and it's over decades of increased activity and decreased activity. And so that cycle has been there.

As far anything driving that, I'd really defer to climate scientists. But the reality is the history says we've had this period of activity, we've had a period of quiet. We've had a period of activity, we've had a period of quiet. And so what we've seen is not what we -- we've seen this in history before.

MR. CARNEY: All right, well, thank you.

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Thanks, everybody.

MR. CARNEY: Thank you, sir.

Q Should we get landlines again? (Laughter.)

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: Huh?

Q Should we get landlines? Should they start making landlines again?

ADMINISTRATOR FUGATE: No, make sure you have a charger for your cell phones. And preferably, make sure you got something that you can charge it with a battery -- little battery chargers -- just in case you don't have power. And add to your evacuation kits your cell phone chargers. We're seeing -- and this is again, time and time again, oftentimes, wireless communication is coming up as fast as the wireline communications. So again, yes, it's good to have a phone system. But since most people -- and a lot of people now are going totally to a wireless; they don't have a landline at all in their homes -- make sure you have emergency power and the ability to charge it when the power is out.

MR. CARNEY: Thank you. With that, I will go to questions on other matters. Jim.

Q Thanks, Jay. On Syria, and in lobbying the Russians, how receptive is Moscow to the President's argument that it hurts Russia's reputation in the world community that they're perceived as friendly to the Assad regime? And can -- could potentially the Russians play a similar role in Syria as the U.S. played in Yemen to negotiate Assad's exit?

MR. CARNEY: We are certainly speaking with the Russians, as well as other members of the United Nations Security Council about Syria. We were very clear about our disappointment of the veto exercised by both Russia and China on the resolution regarding Syria, calling on Assad to cease and desist from his brutal campaign against his own people. And as I've said many times and others have, we are in regular consultations with Russians -- with the Russians and others about what we are seeing happening in Syria, and the need to put further pressure on the Assad regime, the need to isolate the Assad regime further, and to bring about the political transition that Syrians so desperately deserve and desire.

I won't speak for any other government. I would simply say that it is our belief, and it's the belief that we express in these conversations, that supporting the Assad regime is placing oneself or one's nation on the wrong side of history. Assad will be remembered

forever for what he did this past weekend and what he has done for the past 15 months. He squandered an opportunity to preside over a political transition that would improve the position of Syria in the international community, and most importantly, improve the lives of his citizens. And that will not change.

So it is certainly our belief that as events progress in Syria and as we continue to consult with members of the Security Council and other nations, including, of course, nations who are part of the "Friends of Syria," that we will make the argument that more action needs to be taken to pressure and isolate the Assad regime, to hold it responsible for what it has done. And I think, as you've probably seen, there has been further action taken today in terms of sanctions against another bank.

This is a process that involves a number of steps towards an end -- steps like the ones that were taken yesterday in coordination with other nations that resulted in the expulsion of Syrian diplomats from a number of countries; steps that have, for many months now, increased the isolation and pressure of and on the Assad regime.

Q How much of an obstacle does the administration view the Russians -- and to some degree, the Chinese, too -- but the Russians in particular on achieving anything with the Annan plan?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the Annan plan is broadly supported by the United States and other members of the Security Council. The issue here is Assad's refusal to comply with the Annan plan despite the fact that he promised he would.

The question I think you're asking is, what -- if the Annan plan ultimately does not succeed, if Assad does not abide by it, does not cease firing and withdraw his forces, what then are the next steps, and what kinds of consultations will we have and are we having with other countries regarding possible next steps? And clearly, those consultations are with many countries, including Russia.

But I can't preview for you what -- or speculate for you what might be included in next steps. We are continuing to work with a number of nations on this issue and continuing to shine a spotlight on the appalling, depraved behavior of the Assad regime.

Q On one other subject. The Polish Prime Minister says he's not completely satisfied with the White House explanation of the President's reference to Polish death camps. Does the President have any plans to call Prime Minister Tusk and offer an explanation?

MR. CARNEY: The President misspoke. He was referring to Nazi death camps in German-occupied Poland. And as we've made clear, we regret the misstatement and that simple misstatement should not at all detract from the clear intention to honor Mr. Karski, and beyond that, all those brave Polish citizens who stood on the side of human dignity in the face of tyranny.

On several occasions, including his visit last year to the Warsaw Ghetto memorial, his remarks at the Holocaust Museum just last month, and his video message at the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, President Obama has paid tribute to the terrible loss of innocent Poles in Nazi death camps during the Holocaust.

Again, we regret the misstatement, but that's what it was. It was a misstatement, and I think it's important to see this in the context of awarding this medal in honor of the remarkable bravery of Mr. Karski and other brave Polish citizens who stood on the side, as I said, of human dignity in the face of the 20th century's most terrible tyranny.

Yes.

Q Jay, thanks. Two questions. Starting with Syria, has the President's new Atrocities Prevention Board met to consider a response to the Syrian crisis, particularly since the Houla massacre?

MR. CARNEY: I'm sorry, has the --

Q The President's new Atrocities Prevention Board, which he actually announced at the Holocaust visit, has it met?

MR. CARNEY: I'll have to take the question. I don't know the answer to that.

Q Okay, all right. Then the second thing I'd like to try on is the eurozone, which seems to gathering speed -- the crisis, which seems to be gathering speed. Could you talk about how the President is monitoring the situation there -- if he has spoken with any European leaders in the last few days to discuss the steps that are being taken to restore confidence?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any specific conversations involving the President to read out to you. But as we've said in the past and it continues to be true, he is in frequent contact with his European counterparts. He, as you know, recently hosted European leaders and others at the G8 at Camp David as well as, of course, at the NATO Summit in Chicago. The eurozone crisis was very much a topic of conversation, especially at the G8, and those conversations continue, both at the highest levels as well as at the level of the Secretary of Treasury and other officials -- Lael Brainard from Treasury and others.

So as I think the President has made clear, we view this as a matter of concern. That is why we have spent so much time consulting with and advising our European friends on it. We bring to those consultations a certain amount of wisdom through experience that we hope our European allies and friends find helpful as they chart their course. We've made clear that the Europeans have it within their own capacity to solve this, resolve this crisis. They have taken some important steps. They have embraced some important reforms. But much more needs to be done.

Yes.

Q Governor Romney today said that the administration has been "sitting on the back burner" and leading from behind while the situation in Syria becomes unacceptable. Your reaction?

MR. CARNEY: I would simply make clear that the President and the United States have led on Syria as he and we have led throughout the upheaval known as the Arab Spring. I think perhaps not this critic but others of the same ilk use that phrase to criticize the President with regards to Libya. I think history will demonstrate that the course of action the President took in that specific instance was the right one. And I think that every one of these situations that have arisen within the Arab Spring demands a different response because of the different circumstances that surround them. We've been through this on a number of occasions when I'm asked and we discuss the comparisons and the distinctions between Libya and Syria.

I would simply say that the President has made clear where he stands on Syria, on Assad's behavior. He has made clear the efforts that we're making to isolate and pressure Assad, to bring about the political transition -- the culmination of the political transition that is already underway in Syria. And we've made clear that while we are taking steps every day and every week in pursuit of this eventuality, that we are constantly evaluating what next steps need to be taken.

And as others have said and the President has said and I have said, we don't rule options out. But right now we believe that, for example, on the issue of providing lethal aid, that that's not the course of action that's the right one to take for this country. We are providing non-lethal assistance and humanitarian assistance and coordinating other nations -- with other nations in providing support for the opposition as it forms itself.

Q On another subject -- the President still refers to the mess he inherited from time to time. How does he feel about meeting President George W. Bush here tomorrow at the portrait unveiling? Is that going to be awkward?

MR. CARNEY: Oh, not at all. I think the President -- I know the President looks forward to it. There is a --

Q What about that mess?

MR. CARNEY: Well, look, there are differences without question between his approach and the approach and the policies of his predecessor. That was certainly the case when I believe President George W. Bush had President Clinton to the White House for his portrait unveiling. And I think it is well established that those two now-former Presidents have a good relationship, as did President Bill Clinton with President George H. W. Bush. I think there is a community here with very few members that transcends political and policy differences. I think you could even write a book about it.

Q Even in the middle of a campaign season?

MR. CARNEY: I think a couple of my former colleagues have written a book about it, and I'll give them a plug for The Presidents Club. But I think that -- I think the spirit represented by that book is what will be here in the White House tomorrow as I believe

President George W. Bush as well as his father, President George H. W. Bush will be here for the unveiling. And President Obama looks forward to that occasion.

Q You don't think they'll be talking politics?

MR. CARNEY: I don't think so. I think what has been the case and will be the case is that there is so much shared experience between, so far, the men and, one day, the men and women who hold this office that there is much to talk about that is -- that they hold in common. So there is not a lot of need to talk about where they differ.

Yes, Dan.

Q Thank you. While you won't give specifics about what options might be taken to continue to put pressure on Syria, can you give us any sort of broader indication as to what lies between expelling ambassadors, putting pressure on banks and, on the other end, military action?

MR. CARNEY: I can't, because I don't want to speculate or rule in or rule out what actions might be taken should the Annan plan fail, should Assad continue to refuse to abide by his commitments, should Assad continue to murder his own people.

There are, as I said earlier, options that we do not pursue now, but that we do not rule out simply because it would be unwise to do so. I think others in the administration and in the national security leadership have spoken to that. And it is -- it would be unwise to speculate about where this would go because we are pursuing a policy now that -- with a host of other nations that is aimed at driving the Assad regime so deep into isolation and distress that it would bring about the peaceful political transition that is clearly the most desired ultimate result of this situation.

Q I guess what I'm trying to get at is, do you have multiple options before you would look at military action?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think there are a number of things that we have done that go beyond some of the things that you mentioned, and there are obviously other actions that could be taken, both by us and by the international community or by individual nations, in concert with us or independently, that will address this problem. But I don't want to list them because decisions have to be made, and these are -- this is a step-by-step process.

Q And one other issue. I don't know if you were watching CNN yesterday with Donald Trump.

MR. CARNEY: Always. (Laughter.)

Q Donald Trump was going at the birther issue, and I wonder if there is any reaction to the fact that this continues to be an issue in this campaign.

MR. CARNEY: I think it's up to, as I mentioned yesterday, those who seek the office to decide how they will run their campaigns and what views they associate themselves with. As the President made clear in this briefing room when this became a ridiculous distraction last year, the American people are concerned about real issues that confront this nation, that concern principally with the fact that we are still not down the road to the final destination of full recovery from the worst recession since the Great Depression.

Those are the things -- jobs and the economy, the security of the nation, security of the American people -- that I think voters overwhelmingly care about. I think one man's attempt to draw attention to himself by engaging in this kind of ridiculousness doesn't really change what most Americans care about.

Q So it's still a ridiculous distraction?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think so. Do you not?

Q I don't know. I'm asking you.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think it is.

Yes, Mike.

Q Two questions. First, Europe again in crisis. Overnight, a Spanish bank in trouble. Markets here -- I know you don't comment on the markets -- but they're --

MR. CARNEY: You're speaking like -- in a piece almost.

Q I beg your pardon?

MR. CARNEY: Europe -- Europe again in crisis. (Laughter.)

Q Yes, it's the live shots. (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: I remember that from my, of course, marital affiliation -- that they remove all the verbs and just deliver it without -- yes. (Laughter.)

Q Where was I? Oh, yes. (Laughter.) In all seriousness, there is a sickness in Europe, an economic sickness that threatens a contagion here in the United States. The President on down, top officials have said Europe needs to work this out among themselves. My question is simply, why is that? If it threatens the economy of this country, why can't the U.S. government be more forceful in either encouraging the Europeans on a certain path or helping them financially?

MR. CARNEY: Well, two things. One, we are being, I think, quite forthright in our consultations with our European friends in suggesting to them the directions that we think might be best; the decisions that we recognize are hard to take, especially in a system like the eurozone, but that would help resolve this crisis. But it is obviously a sovereign issue for the individual nations of Europe and a broadly sovereign issue for the European Union, the eurozone, and it is for them to resolve that.

It is also the case that we are the greatest, most powerful nation on Earth, but we are not all powerful. And that is why we must focus our efforts, first and foremost, on the things that we can directly control and completely control, which are the actions that we can take to help our economy grow here at home, to help our economy create jobs here at home, in part to insulate ourselves from the impacts of events that we cannot wholly control, whether they are economic crises in a part of the world -- parts of the world, or natural disasters in other parts of the world, or even here at home -- to bring it back to the beginning of this briefing.

And that's why the President continues to push Congress, as he did when he signed the reauthorization of the Export-Import Bank today, to take action together in a bipartisan way to help the economy grow. Despite all the understandable doubt about whether there is the capacity within Congress to do that, we continue to establish that there is that capacity. And that was true today with the bill the President signed, it has been true with a number of other bills that the President signed that represent bipartisan efforts in Congress.

And he hopes that -- excuse me -- on the other items on the "To-Do" list -- on his "To-Do" list -- he hopes that on the other items of his "To-Do" list, as well as the surface transportation bill, as well as the need to take action to ensure that 7 million students in America don't see the rates on their loans double, that Congress will do the right thing and act in the interest of the American people and the American economy.

Q Getting back to Bill's question --

MR. CARNEY: Excuse me for my digression.

Q Getting back to Bill's question on the visit tomorrow from 41 and 43, the Presidents Bush -- so this is all -- is there any private time built in to this? This is all bonhomie? There's not going to be any hashing out of the issues?

MR. CARNEY: I don't know what the specific schedule is. I think the opportunities to speak with formers are not limited to occasions like this. But I know that President Obama is looking forward to it. I know he has always enjoyed his conversations with all former Presidents that he has had the opportunity to meet and talk with, and that will be the case tomorrow.

Cheryl, and then Mark.

Q The Speaker next week wants to put a tax bill on the floor that would repeal the medical devices tax in the Affordable Care Act. Does the President support or oppose that?

MR. CARNEY: Cheryl, I confess I haven't looked into that. I would venture that my suspicion is that there may be a difference of opinion, but I will have to get back to you.

I think I said yes to somebody, but now I -- Mark. Yes.

Q Have you got any more to tell us about the tone of the phone call between President Obama and Mitt Romney today?

MR. CARNEY: Well, look, it was very collegial and friendly. It was not, of course, particularly long; I think the campaign put out a statement about it. The President discussed how he -- or mentioned how he looks forward to what he believes is a very important debate that will be engaged during this campaign. And I think that -- distractions notwithstanding -- in the end, that is what this election will be about. It will be about each candidate's vision for America's future -- its economic future, principally, but also its national security future. And you know where the President stands.

I think one of the notable things about this cycle, to my mind, as a former journalist, is that, again, speaking of the past, I personally am surprised by a process that has led to a debate where the President has his vision and some agree with it and some don't, and the other side has a vision that is not unique or distinct or its own new vision -- it is the very same vision, the very same substantive policy proposals -- except exaggerated -- that led to a situation where we were in the worst economic crisis of our lifetimes. And that will be the debate. I expected a little more, honestly, but that is what we have.

And if I could take the privilege here, there's been some discussion stirred up by my citation of a MarketWatch article last week. And no matter how you slice the numbers -- at least if you're being at all honest about it -- there is a simple fact, as Jared Bernstein wrote today, in assessing this once again -- if you apply the TARP bill to the President's

spending in 2009, even if you make all those adjustments, it is simply a fact that President Obama has presided over slower average growth in federal spending than almost all of his predecessors -- depending on how you slice it -- equal to only, or as low as only President Clinton.

Now what -- and I know the RNC likes to put this stuff out in contesting it, and they cited the size of the budget deficit 2009, '10 and '11, what they -- and the fact that they were among the largest in history. Well, of course, they were. Because what they never tell you is that President Obama was handed on January 20, 2009, the single-largest budget deficit in history. And what they never tell you is that unlike what will happen when President Obama leaves office in four and a half years, the deficit that was handed to him in January of 2009 began as a surplus eight years earlier. That is not something you ever hear the RNC talk about.

And so when it comes to responsible stewardship of our budget and our fiscal issues, I think we have a strong case.

Ann.

Q Thank you. Where was the President when he made the call? And during the campaign, will President Obama make sure that Governor Romney gets some kind of briefings or kept updated on some international crises sometimes? I think that was done in that past for --

MR. CARNEY: I'm sure that we will abide by convention and tradition, but I don't have anything specific for you on that.

Q I don't know if there is a tradition, but does he think it important

MR. CARNEY: Well, you mentioned that it was done in the past.

Q -- if they're going to be debating --

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure. I think it is simply -- it is always the case that on national security matters in particular that there is something of a gap between what an incumbent President has access to and needs to have access to versus a candidate. But I just don't know how that process works, and I'll have to take the question.

And I think he was here -- he was here in the White House, in the West Wing.

Q Did he make the call from the Oval Office?

MR. CARNEY: I believe he did. Is that correct? We'll double-check. I was in a meeting. But yes, I think so, because he came out -- I think it was -- was it before or after the hurricane briefing? We'll check. But it was here in the West Wing and most likely in the Oval.

Yes, Donovan.

Q I just want to follow up real quick. I'm not sure that we got an answer to the question, is the President --

MR. CARNEY: That's impossible.

Q Did the President call the Polish Prime Minister, or does he have plans to?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any calls to read out to you or preview for you. I think we made clear -- I made clear or the statement makes clear that this was a simple misstatement and we regret it. I think it is -- if you look at the context here, it is absolutely obvious that the purpose here was to honor with this incredibly significant medal the remarkable bravery of Mr. Karski and those Polish citizens who fought against the terrible tyranny of the Nazis, and that it was Nazi death camps that the President was referring to. So again, I don't have any other details for you on that.

Q I only ask simply because of the Polish Prime Minister's --

MR. CARNEY: No, I understand.

Q -- statement this morning. So I was wondering if there was --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have anything new for you on it except what I just --

Q Is there any communication on a lower level with the Polish Prime Minister?

MR. CARNEY: Well, not -- I just don't have anything for you on that. We obviously consult regularly with all of our allies, including Poland.

Yes, Jake.

Q The House is, I think this afternoon, preparing to take up a bill that would ban gender selection as a factor in abortions in this country. And I was wondering -- I haven't seen it in a statement of administration policy, and I was wondering if the White House had a position on that.

MR. CARNEY: I will have to take that as well. Been focused on other things. But I will get back to you.

Bill. I'm sorry -- Lesley, then Bill. Yes.

Q Yes, Jay, last week the State Department issued a visa and Mariela Castro, Raul Castro's daughter, visited. It created quite a stir. There was one in 2002. Were you taken aback by that? And do you know if the President had any talks with any of the Democratic critics of that decision?

MR. CARNEY: I don't know. I don't know that he did. But I think -- I don't have any additional comments beyond what others have said on that matter. I think the State Department took those questions because it's a visa issue.

Q And her endorsement of the President?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't -- I wasn't even aware of that.

Bill.

Q Jay, thanks. Next Tuesday is the recall election in Wisconsin -- Tom Barrett, the Democratic candidate, against Governor Scott Walker. Has the President endorsed Tom Barrett? Does he plan to?

MR. CARNEY: You might ask the campaign. I'm not -- I'll have to take the question. Not that I'm aware of, but I'll take the question.

Q Do you know that the -- or the DNC Chair, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, said that she felt that a loss by Tom Barrett would not have any national impact if the Democrat lost there. Do you know if the President shares that view?

MR. CARNEY: I think that there are issues obviously unique to that state and issues unique to the spending that's happened in that particular matter that would suggest that she's right, but I haven't discussed it with the President.

Q Jay, prior to the call this morning, when was the last time the President spoke directly with Mitt Romney?

MR. CARNEY: I believe it was when he was a senator.

Q He never was a senator. Oh, you mean the --

MR. CARNEY: I know what you're focused on -- (laughter) -- singularly, but actually, the President was a senator.

Yes, in the back.

Q Jay, did the President say anything about Romney's phone call?

MR. CARNEY: Just that they had a very good conversation. He congratulated him on winning the nomination. He, I think, mentioned that he knows what -- how difficult a process that is, having gone through it in 2008, also a fairly prolonged primary season, and said he looked forward to the debate in the fall.

Q I'm sorry. What exactly did Romney say on the call?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't speak for former Governor Romney, so I can just tell you what the President said. Thank you.

Yes.

Q Thanks, Jay. Just adding to the -- what you were talking about with regards to the spending, it's not just been the RNC that's called that out. The Washington Post fact check has called that out.

MR. CARNEY: Right. There have been some disagreements between the PolitiFact and all the different fact checkers, and I think what I was pointing to was an assessment made by Jared Bernstein, an economist who used to work with me in the Vice President's Office, that I think is -- look, he allowed where there were some issues that you could disagree on, on the numbers. But even if you did that, the fact is, is that average growth in federal spending was greater under President George W. Bush, greater under President George H. W. Bush, greater under President Ronald Reagan. That's just a fact.

I mean, it is hard to accept, I know, that the conventional wisdom about profligacy and irresponsible budget management turns out to be wrong, but it is. And that's why I think it is clarifying to see these assessments made. It is clarifying to remember an exercise that I have undertaken to look at the size of the federal government under different Presidents, look at the size of the increase in public workforce under different Presidents, and how they compare over the years. I think all of these are very edifying instead of just retreating to the tired old, conventional -- pieces of conventional wisdom that actually don't bear out in the modern era.

Q And one other thing. The President did quite well in the Texas primary but in previous primaries -- Arkansas, Kentucky, West Virginia -- is there anything you have to say? Even in Texas, actually.

MR. CARNEY: Sure. I think those states will be challenging for the President in the general election.

Q But in a Democratic primary, shouldn't he have gotten --

MR. CARNEY: You can address those questions to the campaign. Yes, sir, all the way back.

Q Thank you, sir. The Romney campaign started its black outreach not too long ago -- folks in high unemployment in the area. Many have argued that the Obama administration has not done quite enough for African Americans. What is he doing to make sure that those people come back to the polls once again?

MR. CARNEY: Well, those are two different questions, and I'll refer you to the campaign for questions about voter turnout.

I think the President's record on the economy and economic recovery, and how the initiatives he put into place -- took a situation where we had catastrophic economic decline to a situation where we've had steady economic growth; where we had a situation where we were experiencing catastrophic job loss at the rate of 800,000 jobs per month

to a situation where we now have experienced 26 straight months of job growth -- is one that will be very much a focus of this campaign, and it is one that is, I think, affected communities that were hardest hit by job loss as well as other communities.

I think that our efforts on surface transportation and other areas -- there are a number of measures -- going back to the Recovery Act and others -- that had, because of the nature of the assistance and the nature of where job loss was most keenly felt, had a disproportionate effect on certain communities, including the African American community. But as for the political side of the question, I think the campaign ought to take that.

Yes, sir.

Q Yes. Can you talk a little bit about the "To-Do" list, and whether --

MR. CARNEY: I'm sorry?

Q On the "To-Do" list.

MR. CARNEY: Yes.

Q The House -- Eric Cantor released this sort of, last week on Friday, their schedule for the summer; nothing from the "To-Do" list is on their schedule. Harry Reid has mentioned bringing up the small business tax cut, but none of the other items are headed for the Senate schedule at this point. I'm wondering what you have to say as far as whether you're going to get any votes in the House, where you see this going in the next couple weeks.

MR. CARNEY: Well, look, I think, as I said in response to an earlier question, the President will continue to push Congress, both the Senate and the House, to take action on these kinds of measures that have traditionally enjoyed bipartisan support, whether they make a specific agenda for the next few weeks or not, and act on them -- because they can pass, they can be signed into law, and they can help the economy grow and create jobs.

I think that whether you're a Republican leader in the House or a Democratic leader in the Senate, you are for cutting red tape so responsible homeowners can refinance; you're for investing in a new hire tax credit for small businesses; you're for creating jobs by investing in affordable clean energy, for the most part; and you're for putting returning veterans to work using skills developed in the military; and I assume you're for rewarding American jobs and eliminating tax incentives to ship jobs overseas.

So these are things that I think have all the hallmarks of the potential for bipartisan cooperation. We expect that Congress will act on them. We certainly will continue to press Congress to act on them.

Q Thanks, Jay.

MR. CARNEY: Thank you, Jim. Take care, everybody.

END

3:20 P.M. EDT