

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 2/4/2013



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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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MR. CARNEY: I had something at the top here -- oh, I meant to bring back my scarf, Margaret. It was not -- I'm a Redskins fan. It was a scarf, actually, I got at the Vancouver Winter Olympics when I was traveling with the Vice President, a purchase of which I am fond.

Q It was too red.

MR. CARNEY: Yes, I wasn't really --

Q Was it 49er colors?

MR. CARNEY: No, I was -- I like both teams, but I'm a Redskins fan. My son is sort of also a Redskins fan and kind of decided to go wholeheartedly in support of the Ravens. So I was happy for Baltimore. Great town. And San Francisco has won a lot of Super Bowls.

Q Did the President -- did you talk about it with the President today?

MR. CARNEY: What's that?

Q The outcome? Did you talk about it with the President?

MR. CARNEY: He said -- actually, I'm echoing what he said -- he said, very happy for Baltimore. It was a very close, good game. It didn't look like it was going to be that close. Lots of novel aspects to it, including the 109 return -- 108-yard kickoff return and the power outage. But he said he enjoyed it, said it was a good game.

Q What did he think of the power outage? Did he comment on it?

MR. CARNEY: Based on the conversation I had with him, the initial response I think that we all had was I hope everyone is okay, it was not a security issue. And then once that became clear, it was just impatience to get the game going again.

Before I take your questions, let me just remind you that today the Senate is expected to take up a bill to reauthorize and strengthen the Violence Against Women Act. This bill was introduced by Senator Leahy and a bipartisan group of cosponsors.

If there is one issue Congress should be able to agree on it is protecting women from violence. When three women a day are killed as a result of domestic violence, and one in five have been raped in their lifetimes, we should be long past debate on the need for the Violence Against Women Act. We urge Congress to pass this critical bill without delay, and then to send it to the President's desk for his signature.

Now to your questions.

Q Jay, do you know when the President is going to send his budget, given that it looks like he's going to miss today's deadline?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have an update on the President's budget. I mean, I saw a tweet from the Speaker's office. The President has put forward consistently budgets that achieve what the American people overwhelmingly support, which is balanced deficit reduction, deficit reduction combined with investments in areas of our economy that would help the economy grow and create jobs. What he hasn't done is submit a highly partisan budget that has no support among the American public. That, unfortunately, is what House Republicans have consistently passed in the last couple of years.

So hopefully we'll be able to change that dynamic. Republicans will agree with the President that we need to continue to reduce the deficit in a balanced way. As you know, the President signed into law nearly \$2.5 trillion in deficit reduction, combining spending cuts with revenues and the interest saved from that reduction. And he's eager to do more.

Q Does he want to submit the budget before or after the State of the Union?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a date for you for when that will happen.

Q Is there a reason why he can't make the deadline?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have anything more for you on it. The President -- there's a couple of things to be aware of here that might encourage you to focus on substance over deadlines and things like that.

He has a proposal that the Speaker of the House -- a budget proposal that the Speaker of the House is welcome to take up today or tomorrow, as he might wish, which represents balanced deficit reduction; would achieve, combined with all the deficit reduction signed into law already, achieve the \$4 trillion magical target that would put us on a fiscally sustainable path for the rest of the decade. The President submitted, prior to that, a budget proposal that had within it both the principles of balance and very specific spending cuts and revenue increases that would achieve the balanced deficit reduction we need.

So the President hopes that he will be able to work together with Congress to achieve what's necessary here, which is removing the cloud of crisis, as he said yesterday, from the process of dealing with our finances in Washington; making responsible decisions based on compromise, based on balance, reflecting the will of the American people and the approach they want Washington to take, and ensuring that Washington doesn't inflict wounds on the economy at a time when the economy is poised to grow and create jobs, as it is this year.

Q Jay, on today's event -- not all Democrats are totally behind the President's initiatives. Would he be willing to jettison aspects of his proposal, such as the assault weapons ban, to gain broader support? As time passes support is likely to dissipate in any case.

MR. CARNEY: I think you're getting ahead of a process that's still in its relatively early stages. The President supports, as he long has, the reinstatement of the assault weapons ban. He also strongly supports limits on capacity of ammunition clips, supports and strongly urges Congress to pass a universal background check system. I think if you look at public opinion on that issue in particular -- and speaking of the Super Bowl, as we were earlier, there was an ad that related to this issue about past NRA support for universal background checks. And this is something we ought to be able to get done.

The President has made clear that he recognizes these are hard. All of these things are. If they weren't hard, they would have been done in the past. But we need to press forward. And he supports all aspects of the proposals that he outlined a couple weeks ago.

Q Can you also address the reports of a separate Oval Office being constructed elsewhere on the White House property? There was a discussion of an entire facility, the chance of moving there to do the President's work while there's a renovation taking place. Can you confirm that, talk at all about that?

MR. CARNEY: Renovations and building on the White House grounds is something that's handled by the GSA and I would refer you to them.

Q You know, they haven't actually answered any questions. That's why we have been asking you guys for a year.

MR. CARNEY: -- question about construction and renovation.

Q Are there any security reasons why you couldn't answer those questions? Or is it just a matter of not --

MR. CARNEY: I'm just not in a position to answer those questions. I don't have any information to impart about it. There's been an ongoing process that we've all seen of renovation and stuff on the grounds. But I'm just -- I would refer you to GSA.

Q On that front, would you preemptively make a commitment to ongoing open access between the press and the press office regardless of the construction?

MR. CARNEY: I think there's no question that we will maintain that commitment.

Q Yesterday, Robert Gibbs said that Chuck Hagel was unimpressive and appeared unprepared. Does the White House agree with that assessment, or how would you react to it? And also, has the President reached out to Hagel since the confirmation hearing to talk with him about how he performed?

Q I think the broader point that Robert made -- and it was correct -- is that focusing on this hearing, which was dominated by a rehashing of a debate between Republicans about the Iraq war, misses the overall import of this, which is that Senator Hagel is an enormously qualified, decorated war veteran and two-term Republican senator who will be an excellent Secretary of Defense.

And regardless of reviews of the hearing, both of how Senator Hagel did and how Republican critics comported themselves, the fact is since that hearing, the number of senators who have announced their firm support for Senator Hagel has increased. And that includes a Republican just yesterday I believe who announced his support.

So we remain confident that Senator Hagel will be confirmed, and confident that he will be an excellent Secretary of Defense.

Q But reacting to the comment itself, what is the White House's reaction to those two specific comments that he was unimpressive and unready --

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think you would have to look at everything that Robert said. And he made clear that -- I think he pointed to an example of Tim Geithner in the early days of his administration, and, as you know, Tim just left with reviews of his performance that were pretty uniformly positive and deserved. And the issue here is how will an individual do the job, and there's no question in the President's mind that Senator Hagel will do the job well.

And look, broadly speaking, the President feels, we feel Senator Hagel did fine and he answered the questions that were asked of him. The fact of the matter is, as you saw if you watched the hearings, there were exponentially more questions about a war that is over and that the President ended than there were about a war that is ongoing and involves, still, 66,000 American men and women in uniform in Afghanistan. And I think that reflects an interest in refighting old battles, relitigating debates that were had five years ago -- a debate that was actually the focus of the 2008 campaign and on which I think the American people were quite divisive -- decisive, rather, in their opinion.

Q And has the President reached out to Hagel since it? Have they spoken?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any phone calls of the President to -- or conversations of the President to relay. I know that members of the team are in regular conversation with Senator Hagel.

Q Just to follow on something that Mark asked on the assault weapons ban -- I get that the President obviously supports reinstating the ban, and I get that he has acknowledged that it's going to be difficult, but there is a certain point where you have to deal with reality. And Senator Reid and several other Democrats -- including Senator Feinstein, who is pushing for an assault weapons ban -- have said this -- either they can't support this at this point, they're not making their public opinion known, or they acknowledge it's very unlikely that it's going to pass. At what point do you make a decision to put Democrats out there and have to take up a tough vote, or look to do something else that maybe has a better chance of passing, like universal background checks?

MR. CARNEY: I appreciate the question. And, again, the President recognizes, and we all recognize, that all the components of this are difficult and face challenges, some perhaps even more than others. But the President's support is firm and clear. And we're certainly not going to preemptively alter the President's set of proposals before there is even -- there are even votes scheduled or this debate has been fully joined.

So I think it's just premature to start writing off the chances of any piece of this package. The fact is there is -- for every piece of it, there is, at least by most public opinion polls, majority support. And we need to have this conversation. The President made clear when he talked about this on several occasions that that conversation should be, and is taking

place, not just in the usual corners of the country but all around the country. And that's very important, because this is a problem that affects the entire country in different ways and that the entire country needs to express itself on.

Q Jay, have Reid and Obama talked about the prospects for Democratic votes on an assault weapons ban?

MR. CARNEY: Has who?

Q Have Reid and Obama talked about the prospects for Democratic votes?

MR. CARNEY: I don't know the context of their conversations about this issue.

Q Jay, to what extent is the President personally talking to any members of Congress about these gun proposals in the week since he announced them? And secondly, on terms of the timetable, how quickly does he want them to act, and how -- does he feel like they're acting too slowly right now to get this legislation through, to start considering it?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think he made his presentation with the Vice President two weeks ago -- is that correct? So I wouldn't accuse anyone of moving too slowly at this point. It was just two weeks ago.

The fact of the matter is we have two Senators on board Air Force One today and the President will be speaking with them, and he has had conversations with lawmakers and other stakeholders in this discussion, and will continue to have those conversations.

Q Who's aboard Air Force One?

MR. CARNEY: Senators Franken and Klobuchar.

Q Is anyone else aboard Air Force One who would also be worth noting besides the people we saw board the plane?

MR. CARNEY: I'll take a scan of the aircraft and let you know.

Q Any advocates -- any gun-rights advocates -- anything like that? Or vice versa?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't -- I saw the two Senators on my way back here. I'll check and see if there's anybody else.

Q Are they supporting the full legislative package?

MR. CARNEY: I certainly won't speak for them.

Q Can you preview what the President is doing tomorrow on immigration, the representatives who will be at the White House tomorrow?

MR. CARNEY: I can speak to that.

Q What the agenda is --

MR. CARNEY: Sure. I mean, well, just to give you a broader overview that I think demonstrates -- or answers the question that some of you have had about our capacity to keep pressing on both the immigration issue and the gun violence issue, as well as the issue of economy and jobs and deficit reduction, and I can tell you that with regards to immigration reform, the President and his team will continue to highlight the importance of comprehensive immigration reform this week, meeting with key stakeholders, CEOs and law enforcement officials to discuss the benefits from an economic and a security perspective while also underscoring the historic progress that has been made when it comes to securing our nation's borders.

Secretary Napolitano will also travel to inspect border security operations and meet with law enforcement officials in California and Texas.

On Tuesday, the President will hold meetings at the White House with labor leaders and progressive leaders as well as, separately, a number of CEOs from across industries to discuss his commitment to getting a bipartisan bill passed in 2013 and how immigration reform fits within his broader agenda for economic growth and competitiveness.

And just to provide a little more detail, on Monday and Tuesday, Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano will travel to San Diego and El Paso to tour border security operations on the Southwest border, meet with state and local stakeholders and discuss the department's ongoing efforts to secure the border while facilitating lawful travel and trade. This trip follows many similar trips the Secretary has made, as you know, including a recent trip to Arizona in December.

On Wednesday, following her trip, Secretary Napolitano, Assistant Attorney General Tony West and Director of Domestic Policy Council Cecilia Muñoz will meet with law enforcement officials from across the country to discuss the President's common-sense immigration reform proposal, and to underscore the unprecedented financial and human investment this administration has made in securing our borders and making borders communities safer.

So immigration reform will obviously be at the top of the agenda in his meeting with both progressive and labor leaders and CEOs tomorrow.

Q Can you say which CEOs are going to be --

MR. CARNEY: Sorry, I don't have a manifest.

Q On foreign policy, the Vice President obviously had a series of meetings in Munich over the weekend and I just wanted to follow up on those. Does the President feel that the Vice President's overture toward Iran and the response from Iran through the foreign minister have moved the ball at all, and why?

MR. CARNEY: I think I'd say a couple of things, which is that, as you know, the P5-plus-1 has proposed concrete dates and a venue ever since early December. After these initial proposals were not agreed to by Iran, the P5-plus-1's latest proposal is the week of February 25 in Kazakhstan. It is certainly good to hear that Foreign Minister Salehi finally confirmed this date and location. We hope the negotiating team from Iran will also confirm their participation.

It is time for Iran to come back to the negotiating table as soon as possible so that we can start dealing with substance again, and make concrete progress regarding the international community's concerns and the nature of the Iranian nuclear program.

Q On Syria, as well -- does the President have any concerns about the opposition leader's outreach that seems to go against what the U.S. is looking for? And has the President himself had any communication with the Syrian opposition leader? Or just Vice President Biden -- is Vice President Biden the highest official to have that conversation at this point?

MR. CARNEY: I'll have to check on the second question. Certainly, Vice President Biden, as you know; Secretary Clinton and others. But I would take issue with the first. During the meeting in Munich, the Vice President commended Syrian Opposition Coalition President al-Khatib recent statements expressing openness under certain circumstances to the possibility of negotiations to bring the Syrian people the leadership they deserve.

Now, the U.S. position is clear. It is also the position of the Syrian people. We support a political resolution to the crisis in Syria. And as the Syrian people have made clear, Bashar al-Assad has lost all legitimacy to enable a political solution and a democratic transition that meets the aspiration of the Syrian people.

So we will support the Syrian people as they determine which other members of the regime they can work with to facilitate a political transition that leads to a democratic, inclusive and unified Syria, that will protect the rule of law for all citizens and will hold those who have committed atrocities against the Syrian people to account.

The broader point here is support the need for and the efforts towards a political solution. We have been clear, I think the opposition has been clear, and the Syrian people have been clear that that transition cannot include Assad because he has rendered himself wholly illegitimate in the eyes of the people.

Q The opposition has already put some preconditions on the table that seem to -- that Assad's regime has said they don't want to deal with. So how realistic at this point do you think those talks are coming to fruition?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, the point here isn't about Assad's participation in Syria's future because there cannot be such participation. I think the idea that the Assad regime is united and cohesive is belied by what we've seen over weeks and months in terms of defections and other problems that they've had as the opposition has gained momentum and won territory in its efforts.

So the fact is there has to be a political solution that cannot include, ultimately, Assad. And we support the Syrian people's efforts as they determine which members of the regime they can work with to facilitate that transition to a more democratic future for the country.

Q Jay, there's a report this morning in The New York Times about cyber security and a legal review of the administration that showed broad powers for the President to have a preemptive strike, and I'm wondering if you have any comments on that.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm certainly not in a position to discuss details of classified discussions or documents. As you know, from early in the administration the President has worked to advance U.S. capabilities to defend against cyber threats, which, in May 2009, he described as, "one of the most serious economic and national security challenges we face as a nation."

Since then, the President has established principles and process for governing cyber operations by the U.S. government in a manner consistent with the U.S. Constitution as well as other applicable laws and policies of the United States and international law. And that policy employs a whole-of-government approach to cyber activities. But I certainly -- I can't comment on specifics about classified --

Q Broadly speaking, does the President of the United States have the power to strike preemptively if the U.S. finds evidence of plans for a major cyber attack?

MR. CARNEY: I would have to take that question because I'm not in a position to answer.

Q Thanks, Jay.

MR. CARNEY: That's it?

Q Actually I have one more -- on skeet shooting. Why did the White House --

MR. CARNEY: I was wondering. (Laughter.)

Q Why did the White House decide to release the skeet shooting photo two days before this trip, particularly when the press corps had requested any photos of skeet shooting days earlier? And will you now release a list of friends or family or guests with whom the President has skeet shot, since you do that with golf partners? Thank you.

MR. CARNEY: Let me say this. I thought the question was going to be, why did we wait five days. The fact is the President was asked a question -- did not volunteer, but was asked a question -- about whether or not he had ever shot a weapon. He answered with the truth, which is that he has enjoyed shooting competitively with friends at Camp David on multiple occasions. I think it's fair to say that we believed that would have been answer enough.

And when I said from the podium that as a rule we don't treat his private time at Camp David with friends and family as matters for public consumption, that's the truth, as you know. But there were persistent questions about this, so we decided to release a photo of the President shooting at Camp David. The timing of that I think is explained by what I just said.

Q Does he shoot skeet or trap when he shoots?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not an expert, and I don't think he would claim to be either. What I can tell you is that he has enjoyed competing with friends up there at Camp David. As you probably know, the President likes competition of all kinds.

Q Is he good?

MR. CARNEY: I think he has gotten better. But here's the thing to understand -- the President has made clear he grew up in Hawaii; he spent time in his life in California and Chicago and Cambridge. I mean, this is not -- he never pretended to, or suggested that he had grown up as a hunter, or engaging in sports activities with weapons. He simply said that he had -- and this is the truth -- that he had enjoyed shooting at Camp David. That's a fact.

Q Has he ever shot a weapon before being President?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure of the answer to that question. I know that he has shot weapons not just at Camp David.

Q Does he personally own any firearms?

MR. CARNEY: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q What does that mean? You know he has shot weapons elsewhere?

MR. CARNEY: I'm just saying this is not -- I don't know in terms of the timing, but I know that he has not --

Q He has -- so skeet shooting at Camp David is not his only experience?

MR. CARNEY: It's not the only time he has shot a weapon.

Q So when were the other times?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any details on that for you.

Q Could you find out?

MR. CARNEY: Again, the issue here is whether or not the President, in fact, as should have been apparent when he said it, had gone shooting at Camp David. So we released the photo to demonstrate that. But I don't have an accounting of all the times that he has shot a weapon for you.

Q Do you know whether he has fired a handgun at a shooting range or something like that, for sport?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any more for you it, guys.

Q Thank you.

END

12:25 P.M. EST