

Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/6/2015

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

** Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.

12:55 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. I don't have any announcements at the top, so we can go straight to your questions.

Q Great, thanks, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: You're going to kick it off, Josh?

Q Sure. General Campbell told the Senate this morning that the U.S. military strike mistakenly hit this medical clinic in Kunduz. Now that we have that level of specificity about the fact that this was a mistake on behalf of the United States, does the President plan to apologize to Doctors Without Borders or to the families of the victims of that incident?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, you are correct. I had an opportunity to be briefed on General Campbell's testimony today, and General Campbell did indicate that the strike in the hospital was a mistake. And there still is more that needs to be learned, however, about how exactly this happened.

The President has called for the kind of investigations that will yield a full accounting of what transpired. There is already underway an investigation that's being conducted by the *Justice [Defense] Department. There are also investigations that are ongoing that are being led by NATO and a separate third investigation that is a joint investigation that's being carried out both by the United States and Afghan officials.

As I acknowledged yesterday, General Campbell has been in touch with President Ghani and offered condolences to the Afghan people, and there have been senior administration officials that have been in touch with officials at Doctors Without Borders.

What occurred in Kunduz over the weekend is a profound tragedy. And as I mentioned yesterday, volunteers at Doctors Without Borders are physicians who use their training to try to meet the medical needs of people in forgotten parts of the world. And these physicians, at great risk to their own personal security, enter into these situations to try to meet the needs of those who, in many cases, are in a terrible situation. And so to learn of the death of these individuals is tragic.

And I say all of that to make clear to you and to people around the world that this is something that the United States takes quite seriously. In fact, the Department of Defense goes to greater lengths than any other military organization in the world to prevent civilian casualties. And that is what leads General Campbell to conclude that this was a mistake.

It does warrant mentioning that that stands in pretty stark contrast to the strategy that is implemented by extremists in Afghanistan. Extremists regularly claim credit for operations that target civilian populations. That is part and parcel of their strategy inside of Afghanistan. And that stands in pretty stark contrast to the U.S. strategy.

And that's why the President also has the expectation that steps will be taken to try to prevent this kind of thing from happening again. And I also understand from General Campbell's testimony today that he has already tasked his team to conduct a review and to carry out retraining where necessary to try to prevent these kinds of things from happening.

But before I say a whole lot more about this -- although I will acknowledge I've said quite a bit now -- but before I say a whole lot more about this, we would want the investigations to be completed, to have a full accounting of what transpired, and some discussion about what next steps will be necessary.

Q And General Campbell also said in open session this morning that he thinks the President should revise his plan for troop withdrawal. He thinks that leaving just those 1,000 people in the embassy would restrict the ability of the U.S. to train Afghan forces and also carry out counterterror operations. I know that you said yesterday that you're not going to put a timeline on the President's decision on this, but with the top commander there saying this pretty publicly, can you give us at least a sense of which way the President would be leaning on this issue?

MR. EARNEST: I would resist the urge to speculate on that at this point, Josh. The President did announce back in March that the United States would leave about 10,000 troops in Afghanistan through the end of this year, and they'd be engaged in essentially two missions. The first is a counterterrorism mission that is explicitly tied to protecting the United States and our interests around the world. The second mission is separate but not completely unrelated, which is offering some training, advice, and assistance to Afghan security forces.

And what Afghan security forces are trying to do is trying to secure their country so that they can stabilize the government there and provide more opportunity to the Afghan people. That's in the interest of the United States because we've seen that terrorists have previously tried to capitalize on chaos in that country to organize and plan and even implement terror attacks against the United States. So it's in our interest to support the Afghan security forces as they are pursuing that mission. And that support is in the form of training, advice, and assistance.

What the future presence looks like and what our future strategy will be in Afghanistan is something that will be determined by a variety of things. The first is conditions on the ground -- what kind of progress has been made toward securing that country, what threats remain, what sort of assistance can the United States provide to the Afghan people, to the Afghan government and to the Afghan security forces as they try to provide for that security.

And the President's decision will be driven by those conditions on the ground and what our longer-term strategy is there. The President will certainly take into account the recommendations that are provided by General Campbell. General Campbell obviously is seeing firsthand the challenges that are faced there. But the President also will take input from his diplomatic team; he'll take input from the intelligence community; he'll take input from the civilian leadership at the Pentagon, as they all offer their advice to craft a strategy for moving forward inside of Afghanistan. We'll also take into account the views and preferences of our NATO allies who have also played an important role in carrying out the missions that I've described. So there a variety of factors to take into account here.

That is not in any way to diminish the input of General Campbell. In fact, his input is quite important. But it's not the only input the President will receive as he makes this decision.

Q The President is having lunch today with an old friend of his. (Laughter.) Any sense of what might be on his mind, what might be going on?

MR. EARNEST: Just a weekly get-together. The President and the Vice President do have the opportunity to have lunch just about every week, depending on the busy schedules of those two men. But we've made a habit of not reading out the details of their conversations. Typically they cover more than one topic over the course of their lunch, and I would anticipate that they'll cover more than one topic in today's lunch, as well.

Q And the top court in Europe today ruled that data that's being held on servers here in the U.S. is essentially unsafe because the NSA is spying on it. And I know that -- I know what your views are about NSA programs and also about the person who disclosed them, so I'm not really asking about that. But I'm just curious about if there's some concern from an economic standpoint that this data pact that U.S. companies have been relying on to do business in Europe has now been invalidated.

MR. EARNEST: There is concern about the economic consequences of this particular ruling, Josh. We're aware of that ruling. And while we're reviewing that ruling, we're disappointed that the court has struck down an agreement that since 2000 has proved to be critical in protecting both privacy and fostering economic growth in the United States and the European Union.

The United States, principally through the Department of Commerce will work with the European Union to provide certainty to companies both in Europe and the United States to release an updated safe harbor framework. There have been discussions ongoing about an updated framework for some time, and we're ready -- even as we review the decision, we're going to work with the European Commission to release that updated framework.

Jeff.

Q Thanks, Josh. What is the White House assessment of the Russian argument that its incursion into NATO member Turkey's airspace was an accident?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that NATO has indicated that there was more than one incursion, and I know the Secretary General of NATO expressed some concerns about that activity. We share those significant concerns. And the United States has been consulting with our NATO allies about them. But Turkey is not just a NATO ally of the United States. Turkey is also a member of the anti-ISIL coalition that has been working closely with the United States and 63 or 64 other countries to implement our strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And it took a number of months of diplomacy to get Turkey fully engaged in this effort, and the length of those negotiations I think is an indication to you, Jeff, and to the world of how important Turkey's role is in this matter. And it is -- we certainly appreciate the important role that Turkey has stepped up to play in terms of making a military contribution to this effort, but also to provide for the security of their own country.

Turkey, as we've pointed out on a number of occasions, has a border with Syria that stretches that some 500 miles. So they are justifiably concerned about the security situation inside of Syria and the threat that ISIL and other extremists inside of Syria could pose to Turkey.

So all that is to say that we have expressed our concerns in the past with Russian activity that runs contrary to this international counter-ISIL effort that the United States is leading. And certainly the kind of activity that was described by the NATO Secretary General is not consistent with the kind of constructive contribution that we'd like to Russia make to the broader international counter-ISIL effort.

Q The President said last week he was directing his staff to scrub existing authorities on gun control to see if there are further executive actions that can get done. Who is leading that process? And did you take Hillary Clinton's comments about her desire to implement more executive action if she becomes President as a hit for not having done more?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, the President's Domestic Policy Council obviously plays an important role in examining policy considerations like this. The Vice President, given his expertise on these matters, also has played an important role. And members of his staff have played an important role in designing some of the gun safety rules that we've put forward, these executive actions that were an effort to reduce gun violence in this country. So there are a variety of figures here at the White House that are involved.

The President made a reference to scrutinizing the laws, and I think that would be an indication to you that there are lawyers involved here at the White House in this matter, as well. So there are a variety of people who are leading this effort. But it is an effort that in the past has yielded some important progress. But we've been quiet forthright in acknowledging that the progress that we've made in terms of implementing executive actions is not as important as the progress that could be made if Congress were to take some of the common-sense steps that they could take.

As it relates to the announcements from Secretary Clinton in the context of her presidential campaign, those kinds of policy proposals are the kinds of ideas that we welcome in the context of this debate. The President made clear that progress in this regard will require a robust political debate in this country. And we certainly welcome the contributions of who, according to just about every poll, is the leading Democratic candidate for President. We would welcome the contribution of somebody with a voice that prominent in the debate trying to advance this effort. So that is the -- we welcome that kind of contribution to the debate.

Q Lastly, Josh, the Volkswagen chief executive told workers today that they should prepare for job cuts. Are you concerned -- because of the emissions scandal. Are you concerned that that will hurt the German economy, which is pretty important for the world economy, and/or the United States economy, given the plants from VW that are here?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen any broader analysis of the economic impact of this scandal. There are obviously significant concerns that have been raised by the conduct of the leadership at Volkswagen, particularly when it comes to complying with important regulations here in the United States. And I understand that there have been questions that have been raised now in other countries about this matter.

So our principal concern here is making sure that countries -- or companies that are interacting with the EPA as they try to implement the Clean Air Act are doing so honestly, and that they're doing so in full compliance with regulations and expectations of honesty and forthrightness. And questions have been raised about that. But I have not seen any broader analysis done about the possible economic impact of Volkswagen's malfeasance.

Justin.

Q I wanted to go back to your answer to Josh on the safe harbor agreement. The sticking point in those negotiations seems to be access by American intelligence to European data. And so I'm wondering if this ruling puts any greater pressure, gives

Europe any greater leverage to limit U.S. access to that data, and what impact it's really been having on U.S. intelligence capabilities.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Justin, I'm routinely reluctant to discuss in much detail U.S. intelligence matters from here. But there is a legal matter that I would direct you to, which is that the U.S. legal framework for intelligence collection includes robust protection for privacy under multiple layers of oversight and a remarkable degree of transparency.

Many of those are reforms that have been put in place in just the last few years, consistent with the President's stated commitment to greater transparency. And the concern that we have about this ruling is -- we have a variety of concerns about this specific ruling. One of them is that we believe that this decision was based on incorrect assumptions about data privacy protections in the United States. And the ruling fails to properly credit the benefits to privacy and growth that have been afforded by this framework over the last 15 years.

So our concerns -- we've got a variety of concerns with the ruling, but we certainly have been working with our European counterparts in recent months to release an updated safe harbor framework. And we're going to continue working on that effort.

Q Looking back on one of Jeff's questions. One of Hillary Clinton's sort of gun control proposals was revoking a law that gives protection to both gun manufacturers and dealers if their guns are used in a crime. This is kind of special exemption in the past, I think a couple decades ago and maybe 10 years ago. And I'm wondering if the President also supports that as a sort of legislative proposal.

MR. EARNEST: I have not looked in detail at the proposal that she has put forward so let me reserve judgment on that. But we can have somebody follow up with you.

Q And my last one is on TPP. I've been watching your guys sort of campaign online for TPP.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks for watching. (Laughter.)

Q Yes. Well, I noticed yesterday that a number of White House officials retweeted Kevin Johnson, the Mayor of Sacramento, who, just a couple of weeks ago Deadspin reported a woman who received a six-figure settlement from Johnson reportedly because -- allegedly because she was abused by him when she was 15 years old. He's also been accused of sexual assault by a number of students at the school that he used to be a principal at. So I'm wondering if this is really the type of figurehead that you guys want to put in front of your TPP campaign. And if he's been somebody that the President has kind of worked with a lot on a local level, if he's going to continue to be part of your guys' efforts.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I've seen some of the reports related to the matters that you cited. And I think there are a variety of investigations that are underway there. So I at this point wouldn't weigh in on those specific matters.

I think the President -- knowing that I'm not going to weigh in on the specific matters related to the Mayor, I think the President's views on sexual assault and his commitment to stopping sexual assault, whether it's on campus or in the military or anywhere else, I think is quite well known. Since he's had the opportunity to speak out on this issue on a number of occasions. So I don't think there's any doubting his commitment to fighting sexual assault.

And the argument that we want to make about TPP and the economic benefits associated with opening up overseas markets for American goods is an argument that many people are making. There are a wide variety of Democrats and Republicans in a variety of positions across the country, including a number of mayors who are making this argument. And we have been engaged in an effort to lift up those arguments because we believe that -- obviously the President believes with a lot of conviction that reaching an agreement like this to open up access to overseas markets for American goods, cutting 18,000 import taxes in 11 of the most economically dynamic countries in the world is a clear benefit to the United States and our economy.

So we're going to drive that message quite aggressively and use it as we try to persuade Democrats and Republicans to take the important but necessary step of ratifying this agreement.

Ron.

Q Can you give us an indication of what we can expect from the President's trip to Oregon?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President is planning to travel to Oregon on Friday morning. As you know, Ron, the President had a previously scheduled trip to the West Coast, so it does not require a significant change in his travel plans for him to travel to Oregon and spend some time with the families of those who were either injured or killed in the tragic shooting that occurred there last week. I would not anticipate much of a public appearance from the President. The stated purpose of his trip is to spend some time with the families that have been affected by this outrageous act of violence.

Q Is there any question whether there would be a public event of some sort?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, I do not anticipate that there will be a public event.

Q And whether -- given the work of the Domestic Policy Council and others on trying to come up with other executive actions, when do you think we might anticipate something new -- some new proposal on that front, given I would think that the President wants to keep the momentum going on this issue now given what's happened out there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a timeframe for if or when any additional executive actions might be taken. Obviously, the President's team is hard at work on them and has been for some time considering what other options may be available to the President to try to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. There are some common-sense things that

Congress could do to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and others who shouldn't have them in a way that doesn't undermine the constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans.

Q So we shouldn't expect anything imminently?

MR. EARNEST: I just don't have any guidance for you on the timing.

Q And lastly, on the MSF incident in Afghanistan, you said that there's still -- still more needs to be learned before an apology. And I'm not trying to apologize or not accept responsibility, but MSF is a very -- it's hard to think of a more credible organization, given the kind of work that they do. This was an established facility. The coordinates for it were exchanged with coalition forces. They say that the planes were circling for a half hour or so. There was one specific building out of several that was targeted, an intensive care center, an emergency room. The point is there seems to be a lot of detail that's already available to the administration. And, yes, I understand the need for investigations, but does the United States accept responsibility for this, if you won't apologize for this at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, I think what I'd do is I'd refer you back to what General Campbell has said. And he said very clearly that the strike on the hospital was a mistake. He noted, as I have in the past, that the Department of Defense goes to greater lengths than any other military organization in the world to prevent civilian casualties.

And there's no denying that what has transpired here is a profound tragedy for many of the reasons that you have cited. But before I go further than that, I do want these investigators to collect all the available information to try to learn exactly what happened and provide the full accounting that the President has asked for.

Q You said that there were some administration contact with MSF --

MR. EARNEST: That's correct -- that there have been senior administration officials who have been in touch with leaders at Doctors Without Borders, MSF.

Q As part of the investigation or to express -- can you describe or characterize those -- that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have details of those conversations to share at this point.

Q Again, I asked because it just -- based on what they are saying and the credibility of this organization, this is a -- in many ways, just a very profound event.

MR. EARNEST: It is.

Q And I think the criticism or the concern is that the administration is not responding in a way that they would like.

MR. EARNEST: Yes. Well, I certainly understand the sense that a lot of people have to understand exactly what happened and for there to be reforms or changes in the rules of engagement, or other procedures that are in place in the military to make it less likely that events like this happen again.

There certainly is a desire on the part of the President to have a clear understanding of what exactly transpired. But we also run the risk of not getting the kind of full accounting that the President would like if we rush the investigation. And this is an investigation that's only been underway here for three days or so now.

So there is a sense of urgency about this. And there is no denying the significance and scale of the tragedy that transpired at the MSF hospital in Kunduz. As I mentioned yesterday, these are physicians who are not collecting a large salary. In most cases -- I think maybe even all cases -- these are individuals who are volunteering their time who have left the safety and security of their homes to go and try to provide for the medical needs of people that they would otherwise never meet. In fact, they're going to a place like Kunduz because this is a part of the world that people have either forgotten or they're, understandably, scared to travel to. But these doctors use the training that they have. They display tremendous courage to go there in the first place. And the fact that they were killed even as they were providing that medical treatment is a terrible tragedy. And there is no diminishing the sense of loss that is being felt by that organization and by the families of those who were lost.

But what is necessary is a full accounting of what exactly transpired. And that's what the Department of Defense is working on. I would -- I think I would reiterate that the expectation is that this is the kind of investigation that would move quickly, but at the same time, an accurate accounting of what transpired so that accountability can be enforced if necessary. And certainly changes to the rules of engagement or other standard operating procedures can be implemented to make it less likely that something like this would ever happen again.

Jon.

Q Coming back to the trip to Oregon. The President at least twice explicitly said that it was his intent to politicize what happened out there. So in what ways does he intend to politicize this trip if he's not going to do a public appearance?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think in this instance, Jon, on Friday morning the trip would not be about politics, but that trip would be about merely consoling the families of those who were so profoundly affected by that tragedy.

But I think the President, in his public statements both on Thursday in the immediate aftermath of the event, and on Friday, made quite clear that what essentially the NRA and other advocates for gun manufacturers have done is effectively politicized this issue to prevent congressional action. And the President's view is that if we're going to win a -- that it's going to be important for the American people who share his view that there are

some common-sense things we can do to reduce gun violence -- that they're going to have to mobilize politically to counter that political effort on the part of the NRA and other organizations like them.

Q And you said just a few minutes ago that it would be helpful on the gun issue to have Hillary Clinton out there making the case for measures to combat gun violence. I assume it would also be helpful to have Hillary Clinton out there making the case for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Given her work as Secretary of State in the development of that agreement, and her strong support for the development of that agreement as Secretary of State, would you expect that she would be out there supportive of this agreement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would expect that she would make up her own mind about whether or not --

Q She would? Because we haven't heard from her yet.

MR. EARNEST: Well, she'll have ample time to make a decision about whether or not she supports the agreement. The full text of the agreement has not been released yet, so I certainly would be sympathetic to her desire to want to review the agreement in detail before offering up a position on it. That's the expectation I would have for every member of Congress. And given the President's commitment to transparency, that's something that we are hoping we can do relatively soon. But it's a long document, and there are a variety of issues to finalize before that text is made public. But the President has committed to making that text public prior to his signature and prior, of course, of Congress having to take it up.

Q But would you expect that she would support this agreement given her past support for the development of this agreement?

MR. EARNEST: I would expect that she will take a look at the details of the agreement and arrive at her own conclusions.

Q Would the President be disappointed if she wasn't in support of this agreement?

MR. EARNEST: Certainly the administration would welcome her support, as well as the support of any other presidential candidates that wanted to come out in favor of the deal and urge Congress to support it. But ultimately, this will be a decision for her to make.

I guess the one other thing that I do want to mention is that we have heard other presidential candidates sort of indicate what they claim to be is an openness to working with the administration to try to prevent other acts of gun violence. Many of them talk about the need for better mental health treatment and better mental health care for those individuals who need it. One way that -- one particular program that has been particularly effective in expanding access to mental health care across the country is the Affordable Care Act. So voting more than 50 times to repeal a piece of legislation that has done more to expand mental health care across the country is certainly not in keeping with their commitment to want to actually address this significant problem.

One of the biggest providers of mental health care, particularly in disadvantaged communities, is Medicaid. And we've seen a number of Republicans, including Republican governors and Republican state legislators, resist the effort to expand Medicaid, which would actually expand substantially mental health care coverage to millions of Americans.

So for those who say that they want to work with the administration, at least one area when it comes to limiting acts of gun violence, we would welcome their contribution and their support for implementing the Affordable Care Act and expanding Medicaid.

Q So you would welcome the support of Republican presidential candidates -- you would welcome their support of Obamacare?

MR. EARNEST: But if they say that they want to work with the administration on mental health care, and if that's the real way that we're going to stop these acts of -- these heinous acts of gun violence, then I've got some good ideas about how they can do that.

Q I wouldn't hold your breath.

MR. EARNEST: I won't.

Q One last quick one. Edward Snowden, in an interview with BBC, said he's willing to come back to the United States to serve jail time. I'm wondering, where are we on that? Do you take that offer seriously? Are there ongoing efforts to bring him back still?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have made clear what our position is, which is that he is an American citizen who has been charged with serious crimes and we believe that he should be returned to the United States so that he can be afforded all the due process rights that are afforded to every other citizen, but at the same time, he should face those charges.

I don't have an update in terms of our efforts to try to bring about his return to the United States. But for any possible discussions or even negotiations between the U.S. government and Mr. Snowden's lawyers, I'd refer you to the Department of Justice.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I'm going to ask you about a report in the Journal that is suggesting that the Russians are actually targeting U.S.-backed rebels in Syria. Does the administration believe that is the case? And if so, how does this country avoid getting roped into sort of a proxy war with Russia, if that's the case?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, the President made a firm commitment in his news conference on Friday that the situation in Syria is not going to turn into a proxy war between the United States and Russia. The fact is we see Russia doubling down on their support for Bashar al-Assad that only draws them further and further into a civil war inside of Syria. And it risks a variety of things. It risks Russia's further isolation from the international community. It certainly risks the successful completion of a political transition. In fact, we believe it would delay the successful completion of a political

transition. And that's significant because the Russians themselves acknowledge that a politics transition is what's required inside of Syria to address many of the concerns that they've raised.

The other concern for the Russians is obviously involving themselves even more deeply in a sectarian conflict inside of Syria. And we've seen reports that the Iranians are prepared to get more involved in support of the Russian efforts. And that is a dangerous proposition for the Russians, both as they consider the possible reaction of the millions of Sunni Muslims who live inside of Syria and will be alienated by Russia's support for a regime that has carried out wanton acts of violence against the population, but it also poses some risk to Russia given the substantial Muslim population within Russian borders.

Q What about the first part of the question -- does the White House believe that the Russians are intentionally targeting U.S.-backed rebels?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, what we see is the Russians fail to distinguish between the variety of opposition groups inside of Syria. And while they claim to be carrying out a military campaign against ISIL, we see that they are most frequently carrying out military operations in areas where there are few, if any, ISIL forces. And it certainly calls into question both the wisdom and likelihood of success of their strategy.

It also raises legitimate questions about whether Russia is carrying out military actions that are contrary to the goals of our broader international campaign -- coalition campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. One element of that strategy is offering some support to moderate opposition groups inside of Syria, and we have raised concerns in the past and continue to have them today that Russia is failing to distinguish between moderate Syrian opposition groups inside of Syria and extremist groups operating inside of Syria, including ISIL.

Q Two parts of one question about TPP. Is it fair to say that this administration believes that this is a way to sort of keep China in check, at least strategically, economically speaking? And what do you say to tobacco growers who have expressed a great deal of concern about TPP?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me take your first question first. The President has made a quite overt case that if the United States were to scale back our engagement in the Asia Pacific, we risk a scenario where China comes in, lowers standards and writes the rules of the road economically inside of Southeast Asia to put the United States, U.S. businesses and U.S. workers, principally, at a significant disadvantage. And the President has chosen the opposite tack, which is to go and engage throughout the Asia Pacific and to raise standards and write the rules of the road of the economy that levels the playing field for American businesses and American workers. That will have a positive impact on our economy. It will create jobs.

The President is at the Department of Agriculture today -- I believe he just returned -- and he spent some time talking there about how important an agreement like this is for American farmers and ranchers that it opens up a variety of overseas markets for American agricultural products. That certainly is a boon to our economy, as well.

But there's no denying that this does put pressure on China to raise environmental standards, to raise labor standards, and to incorporate the kind of intellectual property protections that are included in the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. And this does put a lot of pressure on China that typically likes to see their own influence inside of Asia, and by raising economic standards in the Asia Pacific, the economic interests of the United States are well represented. But it certainly is a way for the United States to make clear to China that we welcome a rising and growing China, but that there are some expectations that the international community places on countries like China that are seeking to be a genuine international presence.

Q And tobacco growers?

MR. EARNEST: And on tobacco growers, the agreement that is included in the TPP gives the health authorities in individual countries the rights and responsibilities to essentially establish their own public health policies. And when you're entering into trade agreements like this, you're always thinking about how these policies will be applied in your own country. And certainly the President would be an aggressive advocate of making sure that public health authorities inside the United States have all the authority that they need to protect the health and well-being of the American people. And that's why those rules are written the way they are.

Q Last one. I just want to follow up very quickly on the question about Snowden. I didn't get a chance to ask you while I was up in New York -- did Snowden's name come up during the protracted meeting between the Presidents?

MR. EARNEST: It did not.

Pam.

Q Speaking of China, Josh, now that the visit of the Chinese President has come and gone, are you any closer to announcing who's behind the OPM hack? And if not, why not? Because it seemed like you tied the Sony hack to North Korea pretty quickly.

MR. EARNEST: And that decision to publicly name North Korea as the actor behind the Sony attack was a decision that was made by investigators. And the calculation that they made is that by naming the North Koreans it would not inhibit their ability to carry out that full investigation.

The investigators who are looking into the significant breach at the Office of Personnel Management have not arrived at the same conclusion that naming the actor, or at least revealing more information about what we know about the possible actor, would benefit the ongoing investigation.

So what we have said as we've acknowledged the severity of the breach, we have continued to carry out the kind of investigation that will help us learn exactly what transpired and try to gather some more information about what we can do to prevent those kinds of breaches from occurring in the future.

Q Anything more on the fallout in terms of the information that got out and how it might affect employees --

MR. EARNEST: At this point, I don't have additional information to share in terms of what we know about how or even whether that information that was exfiltrated has been used. But the Office of Personnel Management has made a commitment to all those individuals who were affected by the breach to try to offer them some protection. And they're in the process of contacting those individuals and letting them know what sort of tools they can use to protect themselves in cyberspace.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks, Josh. I'm sorry, I'm just looking at the pool report, but I'm wondering if you have -- if you can tell us what the President's message to business leaders and agriculture was, whether there's -- on agriculture, to go to first -- whether there's a particular concern, like dairy or something, that he's trying to address.

MR. EARNEST: Cheryl, the reason the President went to the Department of Agriculture is that the U.S. agriculture industry is one of the big winners in this agreement. The fact is this will open up a variety of overseas markets for American agricultural products that will create jobs and expand economic growth right here in the United States. And that is only one area that we've chosen to highlight of the benefits to the U.S. economy from this agreement going into force.

I would just point out that there are a variety of corporate interests who were represented at the meeting, including a senior official at the United States Chamber of Commerce. You'll recall that's an organization that doesn't often agree with the President and his policy priorities. But when it comes to the TPP agreement that's been reached, even an organization like the Chamber of Commerce, with whom the President has significant political disagreements, even they agree that this kind of agreement would be in the best interests of American businesses, American workers, and the broader American economy.

So this was an opportunity for the President to sit down with business leaders to talk about the benefits of the proposal, to make clear what some of the details are when it comes to expanding access for American goods in overseas markets and how this agreement would cut import taxes -- about 18,000 different import taxes all around the world, including in some of the most economically dynamic countries in the world.

So there are a lot of benefits to discuss and that was part of the President's meeting today.

Q Is there one particular or a couple particular concerns that have come about since yesterday that are emerging as sort of top concerns?

MR. EARNEST: Well, no. I mean, I know that there's been a pretty -- I know there has been some frustration expressed by some about the tobacco rules that are written into this thing, or at least the rules that could have an impact on tobacco. But as I mentioned yesterday, I believe, the President wasn't going to go into negotiations with 11 other countries with a goal of just seeking an agreement that would pass Congress. The President went in with the goal of actually trying to do the right thing for the country and for our economy. And that meant cutting these taxes and opening up access to these markets, reducing non-tariff barriers to U.S. services, and making sure that goods that are stamped "Made in America" have the opportunity to compete in economies around the world. And that was the goal.

And the President wasn't going to put forward a bad agreement just because he thought it was more likely to get passed. The President was going to go and negotiate the best possible agreement and then make the case to Congress that this is exactly the right thing for the country. That's how we're moving forward.

April.

Q Josh, three subjects. Starting off with Afghanistan, could you give us the initial conversation that DOD gave the White House as to the mistake in Afghanistan, especially as it said that the AC-130s fly very low and can literally fly so low that they can see what they're flying over and see into what they're flying over?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, at this point, I don't have the kinds of details that you're asking for in terms of where that particular aircraft may have been flying or at what altitude it may have been flying. Presumably this will be part of the ongoing investigations into this matter.

The President, as you would expect, has received a briefing from the Department of Defense on this, but there's a lot that still can be learned about what transpired and how it transpired. And that's important because the President is very interested in putting in whatever changes are necessary to make it less likely that something like this would happen again.

Q So when you were -- when this White House was advised what happened, the White House was apprised of the fact that it is a low-flying plane, correct?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not able to give you much detail about the contents of the briefing that the President received.

Q Okay. On the next subject, what are the lessons learned a year after Ebola hit the western African countries and the United States? What's the lessons learned?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think there were a lot of lessons that were learned from that matter. I think the first is that -- the President has had the opportunity to talk about this a little bit -- that the remarkable capacity of the United States armed forces is something

that regularly impresses given the way that their involvement in this response galvanized the international community and made a material difference in choking off this outbreak in West Africa.

The second thing that we learned is that investments in medical infrastructure are critically important and that the kinds of investments that we've seen in other countries in Africa that were initially put in place to fight other diseases actually did make a material difference in preventing the spread of this disease across the continent, and it highlights how other countries in Africa could benefit from a similar investment in their health care infrastructure.

And the President and his team are serious about following through on some of the work that's already been done to build up that infrastructure. And I think it was a real tangible example for the American people to understand how the interests of the United States are advanced when we make investments in the health care infrastructure of countries around the world.

I'm sure there are more lessons to be learned than that, but that's just two.

Q One lesson I want to ask if you learned is or that you felt that you did the right thing on not shutting down some of the borders in other countries that could have really defaulted economically if you shut down the borders a year ago to those coming from that country to the United States.

MR. EARNEST: Well, that was one controversial decision, or at least a decision that was questioned publicly. And the reason for not shutting down transportation, for example, between the United States and the outer world and those countries where the outbreak occurred was the concern that those individuals seeking to leave those countries would find a way to get out of them, and if there was a clear incentive for them to not be truthful about their travel history or to seek ways to evade the detection systems that had been put up by the international community, that that would have been a bad policy decision. And I think the wisdom of that decision, while controversial at the time, I think has been borne out by the results.

Q And lastly, since you won't give us too much about this friendship meeting today that happens weekly when they can, can you give us just a little bit of color that we don't normally know about that meeting, when they meet and some of the things that -- how it's done, does the Vice President walk in, shake hands -- (laughter.) Can you give us more of the color? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Cloth napkins, candlelight, maybe. (Laughter.)

Q Champagne.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, exactly. Maybe.

Q Is it more formal? Is it more casual? Are the sleeves rolled up? What? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I think what -- I'll try. (Laughter.) Okay? What I would say is that the -- I think it's typically pretty casual. Obviously the two of them have been having lunch about once a week for almost seven years now, so they can dispense with the formalities. It typically will take place in the President's private dining room, right off the Oval Office. I believe that there's one occasion where you all have been given the opportunity to photograph that lunch. But the lunch does not always take place there. I know that they've, on occasion, even had lunch outside on nicer days. Today seems like it might fit that description, but I don't know whether or not they'll eat outside today. I don't know whether they'll dine al fresco. (Laughter.) But we'll see.

I think the other thing, as I alluded to answering Josh's question, is that they obviously have a personal friendship and they know one another quite well and quite personally, and so there is an opportunity for them to talk about their families and some of the other personal aspects of their lives. But they also do some important business there, too, and there are -- whether it's discussing politics, or upcoming policy decisions that the President has, the President has long relied on the wisdom and insight that the Vice President has to share. And that does not just take the form of the Vice President sending memos or attending meetings, but it also includes private and, in some cases, even rather informal consultation.

Q Is there a time limit on it, like 45 minutes, an hour, or what?

MR. EARNEST: I think it's typically scheduled for about 45 minutes, but I think sometimes it runs longer.

Q Thank you so much.

MR. EARNEST: I tried. (Laughter.)

Jim.

Q I guess on that subject, I have a follow-up. Does the President --

MR. EARNEST: I fired all my ammo now.

Q Yes, exactly. I won't get into who breaks the bread.

Q You should. (Laughter.)

Q Does the President have an opinion on how long this decision-making process should take the Vice President?

MR. EARNEST: His opinion is that the Vice President should take all the time that he feels is necessary to make what the President firsthand knows is an intensely personal decision.

Q And getting back to a more serious subject, in Oregon, the mother of the Oregon college shooter apparently posted some comments online about her own private weapon collection, and in addition to that, it was well known that she had made comments about

her son having issues, having perhaps some mental deficiencies. And I'm just curious, does the White House, does the administration, does the President have an opinion about the wisdom -- and I think this was also the case with Adam Lanza -- there was what was described as an arsenal in the home -- about the idea of people who have children who may have special needs and, at the same time, a gun collection in the house?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, the President's view is that there are some common-sense things that can be done to keep guns away from those who shouldn't have them. And there are obviously responsible things that millions -- there are obviously things that millions of responsible gun owners across the country do to keep their homes and their families safe. And there are basic responsibilities that relate to locking up your guns when you're not using them, and making sure that they are safely stored. And I know there are a bunch of proposals that have been put forward in the form of legislation related to trigger locks and other technological improvements that could be made that could contribute to gun safety.

I know there are a variety of views on this, and this is obviously something that the President believes is worthy of additional study. But as it relates to this particular family, I didn't see the individual positing so I wouldn't comment on it other than to say that there is an expectation that gun owners do have a responsibility to store their firearms safely. But it's hard for me to relate those kinds of policies and those kinds of recommendations to this particular case because I'm just not aware of all the details.

Q Okay. And getting back to the hospital in Afghanistan, I'm just curious why you're stopping short of issuing an official apology in that circumstance. A hospital was bombed. There's no disputing that. The general today said it was a mistake. There's no disputing that. So why is there not an apology?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, the fact of the matter is there is an ongoing investigation and there is more that must be learned about this particular incident so that the President can get the full accounting that he would like to see. If there are individuals that need to be held accountable, the President's expectation is that they will be. And if there are things that the Department of Defense can do to change their procedures, change the rules of engagement to make these kinds of incidents less likely to happen, then the President expects that those will be implemented and implemented promptly.

But those are all legitimate questions. And the President is at least as eager as everyone else to get answers to those questions. As the Commander-in-Chief, he certainly feels a responsibility to get the facts, to get this full accounting, and to make sure that whatever changes are necessary are properly implemented. But at this point I would defer additional comment until we see more results of that investigation.

Q And on Russia and Syria, you have -- the U.S. believes that the Russians are bombing U.S.-backed Syrian rebels. The folks at NATO believe that Russia has now crossed into Turkey's airspace twice. At what point does the President say to Vladimir Putin, cut it out?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President has made quite clear that Russia should not be interfering with the 65-member international coalition that is seeking to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. We've made that quite clear. And there has been at least one preliminary conversation between the United States and Russian military officials to try to de-conflict those military activities.

Q It doesn't seem like they're getting the message, though. Just about anybody -- if you give a fair reading and just determine that Russia just is going and doing willy-nilly whatever they feel like doing in Syria. And at what point does the President have a problem with that, I guess is my question.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think we've raised significant concerns about the likelihood of Russia achieving their stated goals. For example, many of their military airstrikes have been carried out in areas where there are fewer or any -- if any ISIL forces, and they're carrying out those military activities despite the fact that they say that they're focused on ISIL.

They say that they would like to -- or the Russians acknowledge that the situation will only be resolved when there's a political transition inside of Syria, and yet, their actions are geared specifically at propping up a leader that has lost legitimacy to lead that country for a variety of reasons. He's lost both the moral authority to lead that country, but he's also lost the practical support of 80 percent of the population because he's targeted many of their communities with indiscriminate violence.

So there are a number of reasons to call into question both Russia's tactics and their strategy. And I do think that those actions --

Q -- you can do it about it.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think those actions are likely to result in Russia becoming more isolated and Russia not accomplishing their stated goals, and antagonizing if not outright angering a significant Muslim population inside of Syria and a significant Muslim population inside of Russia.

So as I mentioned in a previous exchange on this, the significant negative consequences that Russia is facing right now as a result of their actions far outweighs any sort of diplomatic demarche that Russia could receive from the rest of the international community.

Q But it seems that's as far as you can go, is pointing out the negative consequences. That's as much as the U.S. can do at this point.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what the U.S. can do is we can continue to stay focused on our strategy, which is to lead a 65-member coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. We are implementing that strategy. And in recent weeks we've made some progress in terms of taking some ISIL leaders off the battlefield. And we're going to continue to implement that strategy in a way that we think serves our interests.

But there's also no denying that what Russia is doing is further immersing themselves in a sectarian conflict that could, as the President described on Friday, ultimately lead to them being sucked into a quagmire in Syria.

Mike.

Q New topic, Josh. The Washington Post today took note of the imminent release of about 6,000 federal prisoners that comes as a result of sentencing guideline changes over the past year. I assume given the President's interest in criminal justice reform that he's heartened by -- that this process is about to begin I guess at the end of the month. But is there any concern inside the White House by the President and others to try to make sure that the release of these prisoners as it begins doesn't get sort of caught up in the sort of election year politics that's about to come next year?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mike, I didn't have an opportunity to read the story that you're referring to. But I can say that when it comes to criminal justice reform more broadly, that we've identified this area as one of the very few areas inside of Washington, D.C. where there seems to be some genuine bipartisan agreement. That's one of the reasons that the administration has been so committed to working to try to advance this particular initiative.

The President does believe there is a lot more that we could do to make our criminal justice system more fair and essentially more effective at keeping our communities safe. We know that our law enforcement officials do heroic work in so many places to keep our communities safe. But there is more that can be done from a policy perspective to make them more effective and to make the results more consistent with our stated goals, which is trying to protect communities across the country, but also making sure that justice is admitted fairly -- administered fairly. That's a priority.

And there are some economic reasons for us to consider those kinds of reforms. And so certainly the President considers this a priority, and we're pleased to see that many Republicans consider this to be a priority too. At this point, I don't think there's a significant level of concern that any rhetoric on the campaign trail could sabotage the important bipartisan work that's currently ongoing on Capitol Hill. And I hope I'm right about that.

George.

Q Thanks, Josh. Two questions on TPP. You said to Justin the President would campaign aggressively for it. Can you elaborate on some of the ways he'll be doing that? And secondly, does he feel an obligation to deliver a significant number of Democrats so the entire burden isn't on the Republicans?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say a couple things about that, George.

The first is that obviously the President went and did a public event at the Department of Agriculture, at least an event where the press corps was allowed to see the President conduct the meeting and to deliver some remarks to the press pool there to advocate for

the agreement. And I would anticipate that you'll continue to see the President making public appearances advocating for this agreement. There obviously are a lot of reasons for Democrats and Republicans to support it, and the President will take advantage of many opportunities to make that argument.

As it relates to our efforts to build support for this in Congress, I think we saw in the protracted fight over the summer about -- over trade promotion authority that this is an agreement that is likely to be ratified only if enough Democrats and Republicans support it. We're going to need members from both parties. It's not going to be possible to ratify this trade agreement strictly along party lines. And I think that's why the arguments that you'll see from the administration will be arguments that appeal to both Democrats and Republicans.

I think what that argument -- or that debate over the summer also revealed is that more Republicans in Congress are receptive to the arguments about the benefits of a trade agreement like this than Democrats. There are a variety of reasons for that. But the President took a rather practical approach to building bipartisan support for trade promotion authority, and he'll take a similarly practical approach in building bipartisan support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well.

Go ahead, Mara.

Q So you're not -- you don't have any goal in mind for the numbers of Democrats?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm sure that our legislative team --

Q Not that you're going to share with us.

MR. EARNEST: That's correct. (Laughter.)

Q Yes, okay.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks for letting me off the hook that easily.

Q Just one quick thing. There's no DOJ investigation, it's just a DOD investigation, is that correct?

Q You said DOJ earlier.

Q Of the hospital.

MR. EARNEST: In Afghanistan?

Q Yes.

MR. EARNEST: I apologize. I misspoke. So there are three investigations. It's DOD, NATO, and then a joint U.S.-Afghanistan. I apologize for misspeaking.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Margaret.

Q On Afghanistan, Josh, I'm wondering if you can characterize for us if these tragic events, this mistake in Afghanistan at a Doctors Without Borders facility, if that is affecting the President's thinking at all -- factoring the President's thinking at all about a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and the long-term risks associated with being there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President's decision about our forward-looking presence in Afghanistan is one that will be influenced by factors on the ground. And so that certainly would include the relative strength or weakness of the Afghan security forces and the risks that U.S. military personnel are facing in Afghanistan now while they carry out both their train-advise-and-assist mission and their counterterrorism mission inside of Afghanistan. So the President will certainly factor all of those things into the equation.

At the same time, the President has urged his team regularly to resist the temptation to make snap decisions based on one or two incidents; that what the President wants is a much more strategic look. And what the President ultimately is making is a more strategic decision about the long-term trajectory of our interests in Afghanistan and in the region. And that's what will drive the decision.

So I guess to try to answer your question as directly as possible, of course incidents on the ground -- including high-profile incidents -- and what they say about the relative strength or weakness of the Afghan security forces will have an impact on the President's decision. But it is not the only thing that is driving the President's decision. In fact, the most important calculation in the President's decision is determining what's in the best long-term interest of the United States in that region of the world.

Q Has the President had a chance to review what General Campbell put forward, what he referenced today in terms of changing needs on ground and changing U.S. military presence to match that?

MR. EARNEST: I acknowledge that General Campbell did discuss at some length the recommendations that he had made to the President. I suspect he did that because he was facing direct questioning under oath from members of Congress, and so he's in a little different position than I am. I'm not going to discuss the advice that the President receives from his commanders on the ground.

Q We can put you under oath. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: That won't be necessary. But at this point, I'm going to protect the President's ability to communicate confidentially not just with his military commanders on the ground, but by others who will be a part of this decision, including leaders in the intelligence community, leaders in the diplomatic community, our NATO allies, and, of course, the President's national security team here in Washington.

Q On Syria and Russia, question for you. Yesterday, Secretary of State Kerry said -- comments made over the weekend by Bashar al Assad about a political transition in Syria not taking place until the terrorists, as he defined them, are defeated. Kerry said that's "directly contrary to an agreement that President Putin made with President Obama." Those are his words, "an agreement." What is the White House's understanding of what that agreement was? And has Putin violated it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think this is what the -- this was the readout of the meeting between the two presidents that U.S. officials shared with all of you, which is --

Q It sounded like they spoke past each other at the time. This makes it sound like they actually came to a common understanding on something.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me try to explain to you what transpired. Both President Putin and President Obama agreed on the need for a political transition inside of Syria. There was unanimity of opinion on both sides of that table that there's no military solution that could be imposed on Syria; that at the root of all of its problems was a significant political problem inside of Syria. And that is something that the two leaders agreed on.

Now, where they parted ways was on the most effective way to resolve that political problem. President Putin has obviously cast his lot with Bashar al Assad. We believe that's a losing bet. And, unfortunately, the Russians have made a decision to carry out the kind of military action that makes clear that they're prepared to double down on that bet.

The United States has long made the case -- and I think it's a pretty persuasive case when you consider the facts on the ground -- that Bashar al Assad has lost legitimacy to lead that country. And I say that not just because he's offended our moral sensibilities by carrying out acts of violence against innocent Syrian civilians, but also because there's no reason to expect the innocent Syrian civilians who have been on the receiving end of those violent attacks are going to tolerate him continuing to lead the country. That's just an unreasonable proposition, and it certainly calls into question the success of any political transition if Bashar al Assad is going to remain in power.

Q But some of what you're saying makes it sounds like there is a luxury of time in waiting to see how this plays out on the ground. But at the same time, while the White House says that the preferred approach has to be diplomacy -- whether it's military-to-military talks or if it's a political transition -- that is, diplomacy is the foot forward. All of that has stalled. There are no talks on the calendar, military-to-military or diplomatically at this point. One could look at that and say the Russians just appear to be playing for time, tilting the chessboard towards their guy. Does the White House walk away thinking that right now? Or is the jury still out on whether Putin is following through on this agreement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, on the military-to-military talks, I would not rule out that there are follow-ups relatively soon to those initial conversations that took place last week.

But I think there is one premise of your question that I would disagree with -- I don't think President Putin is playing chess, he's playing checkers. And I say that because he's making a series of tactical decisions that are leading to a starkly negative strategic conclusion, which is that by making the tactical decision to ramp up their support for the Assad regime, Russia is being sucked into a sectarian civil war, essentially a quagmire that poses a whole set of risks to Russia's interests not just in the region but back at home.

And whether that is being further isolated in the international community, pushing off a political solution that even the Russians themselves acknowledge is necessary, and certainly making Russia the target of Sunni Muslims in Syria and in Russia that are quite angry that the Russians have backed up the murderous regime of Bashar al Assad.

Q Not ready to close the door on diplomacy at this point in talking to the Russians?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I -- maybe I misunderstood your question. Because there was a commitment out of the meeting between the two presidents that there would continue to be these military-to-military talks. There's only been one that's taken place in the last eight days, but I certainly wouldn't rule out additional military-to-military consultations purely at a tactical, practical level. And both leaders agreed that Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary of State John Kerry would continue to consult on this matter, particularly as it relates to trying to find a political transition inside of Syria.

So, yes, those kinds of consultations I'm confident will continue. I thought the point that you were making -- and the point I think that I was ready to agree with -- is that the broader diplomatic discussions about how to bring about the political transition inside of Syria haven't made much progress. And it's not immediately obvious exactly how that political transition will take place.

The short-term picture at least for those kinds of talks is rather bleak. I would acknowledge that. But the reason for that, or at least one major contributing factor to that, is that the Russians are propping up the Assad regime and using their military force to do it. That is making a political transition much harder to discuss, let alone achieve.

And again, the reason I point that out is because it's the Russians themselves who have said that that's a priority.

So that's why I think it's hard for anybody to make the case here that President Putin is in any way marching confidently in the direction of his strategic objectives. If anything, he's marching his army in the wrong direction.

And that -- all of this is what's happening in Syria. If you sort of take a step back and look at the challenges that are confronting Russia more broadly, their international isolation has led to significant weakness in their economy. The international experts project that they're likely to lose 3 or 4 percent in terms of contracting the size of their economy this year, and that stands in stark contrast to other energy exporters that are projected to grow this year.

We saw that there was a preliminary agreement between the Russians and the Chinese to build a pipeline that would have been lucrative for the Russians. The Chinese have backed away from that project. And there are a variety of other ways to measure this.

Capital investment in Russia has fled. We've even seen prominent, or at least well-educated members of the Russian population fleeing Russia and emigrating to other countries because they are concerned about the longer-term trajectory of that country.

And so I think that's why I would call into question the suggestion that somehow President Putin is advancing the interests of his country by entering into this civil war inside of Syria.

Chris.

Q Josh, over the weekend, both Hillary Clinton and Vice President Biden expressed support for the Equality Act, which would allow -- which would amend all areas of federal civil rights law to include LGBT people. When the bill was introduced, you said the President shares the goal of the bill but it was still under review here at the White House. Are you prepared to say today that President Obama will endorse legislation?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not prepared to say that yet. This is a piece of legislation that the White House does continue to review. There are significant consequences for this bill going into effect. It has an impact on housing law and a variety of other policies in the federal government, so it's something that is still being carefully reviewed by the administration.

But I will say, Chris, that the President believes that we must ensure all Americans are treated equally under federal law. And the President believes that passage of comprehensive legislation that protects LGBT Americans from discrimination would mark an important step toward that outcome.

So we would applaud the efforts of members of Congress to try to advance that goal. But when it comes to this specific piece of legislation, it's something that's still under review by the administration.

Q Was the President out of -- was the Vice President out of line with the administration when he said Congress must pass the Equality Act during the Human Rights Campaign dinner?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the Vice President was certainly expressing a set of values and views that are consistent with the policies of the administration. But as it relates to the administration's review of this particular piece of legislation, that's still ongoing.

Q Why is -- review is still ongoing? Is it -- what reasons are not to endorse legislation right now?

MR. EARNEST: And it's just simply that this particular piece of legislation, the way that it's written, would have a significant impact across a broad set of policies. And so the administration wants to take a careful look to make sure that we understand the broad

impact that this particular piece of legislation would have.

But this is a review that's ongoing and we'll keep you posted.

Olivier, I'll give you the last one.

Q I'm going to take two just because --

MR. EARNEST: You can have the last two then. (Laughter.) That's fine.

Q I've heard you say you're going to hold off on things like an apology for the hospital attack until the investigation is over. There are three ongoing. Do you mean that you're going to wait until the United States, NATO and the Afghans have finished all three investigations? Or is the United States, is the DOD investigation sufficient?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say that at least until more progress has been made in the DOD investigation will be necessary before we take that -- before I have a lot more to say about this. But I wouldn't necessarily say that we won't say anything more until all three investigations are concluded. But I have a feeling you guys will keep asking, and it's an entirely legitimate line of questioning.

Q That's a good instinct. And then, wildly unrelated, 36 House members have signed a letter to the Nobel Peace Prize committee urging them to consider Pope Francis as a candidate this year. Was wondering, the President, as a past Laureate, whether he supports this campaign?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that you had the opportunity on Friday to hear the President say some very warm things about Pope Francis and the impact that he had on this country when he visited here for the first time. I don't know that the President is doling out endorsements in the Nobel Peace Prize competition. In some ways I think that might even violate the spirit of the Nobel Peace Prize.

So as a Nobel Laureate, he certainly is committed to upholding that spirit. But I'm confident that if the Nobel committee were to choose Pope Francis, that the President would believe that he would be a worthy recipient.

Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:12 P.M. EDT