

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jay Carney en route Atlanta, GA, 6/26/12

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Aboard Air Force One
En Route Atlanta, Georgia

10:18 A.M. EDT

MR. CARNEY: Good morning, everyone. Welcome aboard Air Force One as we make our way from the Bay State, Beantown, to Atlanta, Georgia, the Peach State and Hotlanta. I have no announcements to make at the top, so I will entertain your questions.

The Associated Press, please.

Q Jay, NATO called the downing of the Turkish jet unacceptable. They said they condemned it in the strongest terms. What's the administration's view on this? And is there a concern there could be retaliatory action?

MR. CARNEY: A concern?

Q Is there a concern that there could be retaliatory action here?

MR. CARNEY: From Syria? Well, I would simply say that the NAC met a Turkish request and determined Syria shooting down a Turkish fighter jet, as you said, on June 22nd to be an unacceptable act, condemning it in the strongest terms. The United States and NATO stand in solidarity with Turkey. We will work with Turkey and other partners to hold the Assad regime accountable and to continue to push forward for Syria's needed political transition.

I would note that recent high-level military defections to Jordan and Turkey are another testament to the regime's loss of control over the situation in Syria. It is clear, however, that Assad is desperate to hang on to power at all cost, as evidenced by his continued use of air power and Shabiha gangs.

I would just refer you to NATO and the North Atlantic Council in terms of their statement, but obviously we stand with Turkey and we stand by our allies in NATO and at the NAC.

Q Just following up on that, the Turkish Prime Minister had some pretty strong language, and I wondered if the President was concerned if that sort of quite pointed rhetoric increases the risks of escalation and tensions along the border between Turkey and Syria.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think the comments were more measured than you described, and as the North Atlantic Council made clear, this was an unacceptable act. The United States remains in close contact in Turkey, with Turkish officials, as they continue to investigate the incident and determine Turkey's response, including in the United Nations Security Council. We will work with Turkey and other partners to hold the Assad regime accountable and as part of our efforts to promote a democratic transition in Syria. We commend Turkey for its measured response thus far.

Q Jay, what conclusions does the administration draw from the fact that the fighting seems to be getting closer and closer to Damascus? Is that also a symptom of what you said was a growing lack of control by Assad?

MR. CARNEY: I think that's a fair assessment. Clearly, Bashar al-Assad has been slowly - - too slowly -- losing his grip over his country. The process because of his refusal to step aside has been horrific and has exacted a terrible toll on the Syrian people. Thousands and thousands of Syria have paid for Assad's hubris with their lives. That's why we believe it is so essential for the international community to come together and do everything it can to help bring about the political transition that the Syrian people desire and deserve.

Q Jay, do you have any reason to believe that the Russians are any closer to supporting the sort of political transition that you're looking for?

MR. CARNEY: Well, look, I think the -- we've had very productive conversations with the Russians, and we continue to have those discussions. There's no question that we have differed on the issue of Syria, but we and the Russians agree entirely that there needs to be a peaceful transition in Syria and end to the violence in Syria.

Our view is -- the United States' view is that that transition cannot include Bashar al-Assad because of the heinous acts that he's perpetrated on his own people. He has relinquished any credibility he may have once had, and must step aside so that the Syrian people can build the future that they deserve.

Q Can I ask you a couple of domestic questions? The first is on the budget showdown, fiscal showdown that's coming. Congressional leaders from both parties are now acknowledging that they are considering postponing the automatic federal spending cuts until March of 2013 rather than January, and if they went that course it would likely include an extension. It also would include an extension of the Bush tax cuts. I want to know, what does the administration think at this point? And then I've got a Hispanic question also.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not going to negotiate the end of the year budget developments from here. I would simply say that you know the President's position. The way to avoid problems that some folks fear at the end of the year or next year is to come together and pass on a bipartisan basis a deficit and debt reduction plan that is balanced, that gives everyone a fair shot, requires that everyone does their fair share and makes sure that everyone plays by the same set of rules.

That kind of balanced approach is one embodied in the President's several proposals. It is embodied in every bipartisan proposal that's been put on the table. It is embodied in every assessment made by independent economists when they look at what needs to be done here. The holdouts here thus far have been Republicans in Congress who, by and large, have refused, as the President has noted, to ask the wealthiest Americans to pay a single nickel extra in order to deal with our medium and long-term budget challenges.

A balanced approach is required because -- not just because it would be entirely unfair to ask seniors and students and others to bear the burden of getting our deficit and debt under control on their own, but because we need to have a balanced approach in order to ensure that we're making the proper investments in education, innovation, research and development, clean energy that are the foundations of economic growth in the 21st century. To slash funding for education, to slash funding for innovation and research and development, to slash funding for clean energy would be to cut off our nose to spite our face, economically. It's foolish policy.

As for the Bush tax cuts, as you know, the President does not support extending the high-end tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans. He does support and would sign tomorrow a bill that would extend permanently tax cuts for the overwhelming majority of the American people.

And the Republicans need to decide if they will hold those tax cuts hostage, if they will choose to raise taxes on middle-class Americans, raise taxes on 98 percent of Americans, simply because they insist that the wealthiest Americans who have benefited most substantially from the Bush-era tax cuts do not pay their share.

Q On the Hispanic voter question, yesterday, the President issued a statement on the Supreme Court's ruling, left it at that. We attended several campaign events -- he didn't directly raise the issue. Today is different. He's going to Florida, very important Hispanic population, two fundraising events with hosts or guest stars who are Latino in origin. Is this an issue that he will address more directly today with these voters?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have a preview of the President's remarks today. The President's position on the need for comprehensive immigration reform is clear. The President's position on the Arizona law is clear. It is why the case was brought eventually before the Supreme Court.

As you know, the Supreme Court ruled to strike down three of the four provisions of the law. The President was pleased by the development. He is concerned, the administration is concerned about the manner in which Section 2 will be implemented. And I would

refer you to the Department of Justice for more questions about that.

And I would say that what we heard yesterday -- the President's position on these issues -- on Arizona, on comprehensive immigration reform, on the DREAM Act -- are clear.

Other's positions are not so clear, except beyond what I deduce

-- what I saw to be the only conclusion one can reach based on the response of Republicans, including Governor Romney yesterday, is that he and they still believe that the Arizona law is a model for the country. The President strongly disagrees with that.

Q Can we go to Europe? (Laughter.) Turn this plane around. So the President phoned -- spoke with Italian Prime Minister Monti yesterday. Clearly a great deal of anxiety in the financial markets ahead of the summit at the end of this week. Can you describe further what they talked about, what the President said to the Prime Minister? And has he made any other calls to European leaders?

MR. CARNEY: I have no other calls to read out to you at this time. If I do in the future, I'll certainly bring them to your attention. On the call with Prime Minister Monti, this is part of the President's continuous engagement with his counterparts in Europe on this issue.

You heard him speak at the G20 and the G8 about our position on the European crisis, the eurozone crisis, the role that we played, that he has played, that Secretary Geithner has played in terms of offering our advice and counsel based on the experience that we, the United States, have; our strong conviction that Europe needs to take action to address the need for growth and job creation as it pursues necessary reforms. So these are the topics that the President and the Prime Minister discussed, as well as specific issues that are being negotiated and discussed by European leaders in the run-up to the EU summit Thursday and Friday.

Q -- if Merkel remains sort of -- isn't yielding, I mean, does not even come more on board for the President?

MR. CARNEY: As the President has said, Germany has played a very important role in this and continues to play a very important role in this. We believe the Europeans have the capacity to resolve this crisis. There was consensus emerging from the G8, reaffirmed at the G20, that growth and job creation is very important. There was consensus on the need to take steps for fiscal consolidation and other measures to stabilize the situation in the eurozone. And our role has been to help support that process, to offer the advice that comes from the experience we had in the United States where we obviously had a financial crisis that was severe and could have been even more severe had we not taken the steps we took.

Q There is news today that Cyprus is requesting a bailout as well. Is there any concern that the IMF commitments that were made at the G20 -- or the commitments to the IMF bailout are insufficient or might be insufficient if more smaller countries continue to request bailouts?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would refer you to the Treasury Department for an answer regarding Cyprus, and remind you that our position on the IMF is that we're not making any additional commitments -- the United States is not. But obviously the IMF plays an important role in this process. But the Treasury Department may have a fuller response with regards to Cyprus.

Q I have a question about Thursday as well. The outlook is pretty certain that the health care decision is going to come out on Thursday. Do you have any plans -- will the President make a statement either way if a decision comes down in the morning? Will we hear from the President that day?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any announcements to make about potential presidential statements or appearances. We're, as I've said in the past, confident that the Affordable Care Act is constitutional, in keeping with decades of precedent under the Commerce Clause. We continue to implement the law accordingly, and we are ready for the Supreme Court's decision, whatever it may be. Once that decision is rendered, we'll make decisions about what to say about it.

Q Going back to Europe, briefly. Expectations for the summit seem to be diminishing by the day. Is the administration still confident that the signals that were seen in Mexico about what the Europeans were going to do are still going to be followed up in Brussels?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would quickly say that we continue to believe that Europe -- eurozone leaders have taken a number of very important steps, and need to take more steps towards stabilizing the situation and resolving the crisis. The G8 meeting was a milestone along the road; so was the G20. And so will be, I expect, the EU meeting.

We never expected that these very complicated issues would be resolved at any one gathering of any single group of leaders. This is a process. It has moved along considerably in the last several months, and I'm sure will continue to evolve as it moves forward this week.

Q Jay, another thing that's going to happen on Thursday is supposedly the contempt vote in the House on AG Holder. Is there any attempt by the White House to try to avoid that vote or is there any --

MR. CARNEY: As I said yesterday, the Department of Justice is engaged in an effort to try to resolve this. And if the Republicans decide not to have this be a purely political issue, we think that this could very easily be resolved. But it has not been resolved yet, and I think that points to the obvious political nature of this effort by House Republicans.

I can go over again the enormous number of documents that have provided, the hour after hour after hour of testimony provided by the Attorney General and other officials, the fact that the assertion of privilege begins after the letter sent on February 4th to Congress, demonstrating that the assertion has to do with the absolutely necessary internal deliberations within an administration over how to best respond to a congressional inquiry and media inquiries, and not to the Operation Fast and Furious itself.

The chairman of the committee himself said the other day, Sunday, that there's no evidence of White House involvement in any attempt to "cover up" the Fast and Furious operation, or any involvement at all in the Fast and Furious operation. Unfortunately, to quote a leading House Republican, this is about politics. And it's a distraction.

We're days away from seeing 7.4 million American students have their student loan rates double. Congress needs to deal with that. That's an urgent priority. We're days away from a situation where, absent action by Congress, tens of thousands -- hundreds of thousands of construction workers will find themselves without work and idle. That's an urgent priority. Partisan political gamesmanship is not an urgent priority. And that's, unfortunately, what we've seen in this oversight effort by the House Republicans.

Q One more. Today is primary day in New York State. Charlie Rangel has been campaigning and emphasizing his ties to the President. Is the President supporting Charlie Rangel?

MR. CARNEY: I don't think our position on that has changed. I would refer you to the campaign.

Can I just say while I still have you that there's been some really silly reporting about the President's remarks regarding Kevin Youkilis last night. It is highly commendable in my view as a Red Sox fan that this President has always refused to pander on sports. He is a White Sox fan. He owns his fandom of the White Sox, and proved that again last night.

And anyone who knows Boston and knows the Red Sox, and who was in that room, knows that the preponderance of people shouting in response to what the President said about Kevin Youkilis were saying "Youk," not "Booo" for god's sake.

I'll remind you, there was a time in 2007, when Alan Solomont had urged the President to wear a Boston Red Sox cap when he went out to Fenway and he refused to do it, and even mentioned it, because he is a White Sox fan.

I don't think the American people appreciate it when politicians suddenly pretend they're fans of another team just to try to curry favor. The President is very serious about his sports. He will not do that. He will not cross that line.

Q -- was just done too soon, that the Boston fans were just sad to see Youkilis go?

MR. CARNEY: I'm a fan --

Q I'm a Red Sox fan as well, Jay -- is all I'm saying.

MR. CARNEY: I am very sad to see Youkilis go. He has a fond place in my heart for all he contributed to two World Series teams.

Q There was some friendly booing in there.

MR. CARNEY: No, I'm not saying it wasn't. People in Boston, I think, were sad to see Kevin Youkilis go. But the President is not going to pretend he is not a White Sox fan. And if Kevin Youkilis helps the White Sox this year, I'm sure he will circle back to the subject.

Anything else? Youk is Y-O-U-K. (Laughter.)

Q Thank you.

MR. CARNEY: All right.

END

10:40 A.M. EDT