

Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/8/15

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. (Laughter.) Anybody have any news they'd like to discuss? (Laughter.)

Q -- haven't seen the remarks yet --

MR. EARNEST: Well, you can TiVo it. I'll be honest, I did have a topper, but in light of breaking news, we'll save it for Tuesday. So you can really eagerly anticipate that over your Columbus Day Weekend. So we can go straight to the questions.

Q Well, I guess I'll start with the obvious. Republicans are looking for a speaker. Do you have any --

MR. EARNEST: Again.

Q Again. Again. Is there anyone you think -- would the White House like to throw out a name, someone that the President could work with?

MR. EARNEST: Well, my guess is that an endorsement from me from here would -- well, not be viewed as an endorsement. So, look, Republicans have to make some decisions about how to lead their conference. And it certainly is easy to poke fun at the chaos, but the fact is the challenge that is facing the next Republican speaker of the House, regardless of who it is, is the same challenge that John Boehner faced, is the same challenge that Kevin McCarthy would have faced, and that is simply to unite a divided Republican caucus.

There is a minority group of conservative Republican politicians that places their own extreme ideology ahead of everything else. And certainly ahead of effective governance of the country, but also, as of today, ahead of the effective governance of the House Republican caucus. And somebody within among the House Republicans will have to step forward and demonstrate an ability to either tame the forces of that, again, small but vocal

group of extreme ideologues, or buck up the mainstream -- or at least more mainstream -- majority within the House Republican conference. That will also include a willingness to work in bipartisan fashion to do what's right for the country -- to not insist on receiving 100 percent of everything that they ask for.

That's not how our democracy works. It's certainly not how our democracy works when you have one party in charge of Congress and another party in charge of the White House.

So there's a path to solving these problems, and there is a path to including a conservative imprint on those solutions. But there will not be a path to addressing these significant challenges if Republicans choose to confront them in a way that satisfies the most extreme ideologues in their party.

Q So do you see a real practical impact to this on the debt ceiling, on the -- what do you think this is really heading towards?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, I think it's hard to say. But I do think that if the challenge wasn't previously clear, it is today. The next leader of the Republican Party in the House of Representatives and the majority of House Republicans will have to decide if they are more interested in insulating themselves from criticism that's vocalized by extreme ideologues in their party, or are they more interested in advancing the interests of the American people.

We saw this kind of division rear its ugly head in the context of the debate about funding the Department of Homeland Security. This debate continued most recently in the decision about whether or not to shut down the government. And unfortunately, it's not trending in the right direction. A majority of Republicans in the House of Representatives voted to shut down the government over ideology. A majority of them voted to shut down the government! That's an indication that Republicans are going to be struggling to address this problem.

I don't think that most of those members of Congress believes that shutting down the government is in the best interest of the country. But yet, that's what they voted to do. And as long as they continue to be worried about that criticism from the far right, they're going to struggle to demonstrate to the American people that they actually are suited to govern and to lead the country.

And when you have the majority in both the House and the Senate, you have a responsibility. And it doesn't mean that you have to sacrifice your principles, but it does mean that at some point you're going to have to seek common ground with the other side. That's what our democracy demands. That is what is functionally required in an era of divided government. It's also what the vast majority of the American people expect from their government. They expect their government and their elected leaders in Congress to do their job.

And Republicans need to learn that doing their job doesn't mean catering to the extreme right wing in the hopes that they're going to win the next primary. It means actually working with the best interests of the American people at the top of their agenda.

Q And if I could just switch topics, then, on the news that came out yesterday after the briefing, when Hillary Clinton announced her opposition to the TPP agreement.

MR. EARNEST: I saw that, too. (Laughter.)

Q You did. So she cited concerns about the number of jobs it would create, currency manipulation, rules about pharmaceuticals and drug patents. I'm just wondering if, when she was Secretary of State and beginning to work on this agreement, did she cite those same concerns then?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have -- I'm not going to be in a position to discuss any private advice that then Secretary Clinton may have provided to President Obama as they were working on this policy issue. I think her campaign and she has, herself, acknowledged that this is an issue that she worked on in the administration, and I think everybody would expect that the Secretary of State would have an item of this significance on their agenda.

The fact is we continue to believe that there is a very strong case to be made about the benefits of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. This is an agreement that will allow American goods to be sold in some of the fastest-growing markets in the world. And it will slash the taxes that other countries have imposed on American goods that are being shipped to those countries. That is an important benefit for our economy. It's an important benefit for American businesses. And it's important to American workers. And that's an important part of why the President believes so strongly in this.

The second thing is that this really is a choice for America to make between engagement in the world and raising standards, or accepting the status quo. And it's many of the advocates on the Democratic side of the aisle who express significant concerns about the way that the global economy is currently having an impact on workers in the United States. And the President has often said that he shares those concerns. That's why the President believes strongly in investing in job training, and strongly in investing in opening access to a college education to every middle-class family and every student that's willing to work for it.

But at the same time, there's also something we can do on the other end of that equation, which is engage with the most dynamic countries in the world -- TPP covers about 40 percent of global economy -- and reach agreements with those countries that actually raise standards, that raise labor standards, that raise environmental standards. And in fact, the labor and environmental standards that are included in this trade agreement are the highest that have ever been included in any trade agreement, and they're enforceable.

So we've got a strong case that we'll be able to make to Democrats and Republicans in Congress who ultimately will be responsible for determining whether or not this agreement will move forward.

Roberta.

Q I want to go back to what Kathleen asked about sort of the practical impacts of what happened today. And we have this deadline coming up November 5th, right? How concerned should people be, Americans, markets, about the chaos that we saw today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the observation that I have, Roberta, is that there have been several instances since 2011 -- two or three instances since 2011 where a House Republican -- well, let me say it this way -- that a House that is comprised mostly of Republicans voted without drama and without brinksmanship to raise the debt limit. And those were specific instances where members of the House of Representatives in both parties put the interests of the country and our economy and middle-class families ahead of their concern about any political attacks that they may get from their right wing. That is the responsibility of members of Congress. And we're hopeful that in spite of this chaos that Republicans and Democrats in the House will do the same thing again.

Q You're hopeful, but how confident are you that that will happen without undue drama?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there's no denying that there has been some irresponsible rhetoric on the part of some Republicans in Congress and even some Republican presidential candidates. But we continue to be hopeful that cooler heads will prevail in precisely the same way that they have in the past.

Q Has the President spoken with Leader Pelosi yet since this has happened, or does he plan to?

MR. EARNEST: I don't believe that the President has had the opportunity to make any calls to congressional leaders since Mr. McCarthy's recent announcement.

Q And did the President speak with Hillary Clinton after she made her announcement, or in advance of it?

MR. EARNEST: I don't believe so.

Q And how did he feel when he heard the news? How did he take the news that she was going to oppose a deal that's really important to him? Was he surprised, angry?

MR. EARNEST: No, not either of those things -- particularly because the President remembers that she did not support the TPA legislation that he sought in the United States Congress. Over the summer, we had a pretty rancorous debate here in Washington with a lot of twists and turns, a couple of snafus even popped up. But we were able to successfully navigate all of those problems and build a durable bipartisan majority in both the House and the Senate to pass Trade Promotion Authority legislation even though it wasn't supported by any of the Democratic presidential candidates. And we continue to have confidence that we'll be able to build a similar bipartisan majority in the Congress to pass -- to ratify the TPP agreement.

April.

Q Josh, on McCarthy, how did the President find out and what did he say?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, I don't think it will be a surprise to any of you that the White House did not get a heads-up on this announcement. (Laughter.)

Q You mean about --

MR. EARNEST: About Mr. McCarthy's announcement today. So I do think the President, like most people in Washington, was surprised. But ultimately, there are some serious responsibilities that members of Congress have. And what the President is looking for is somebody who understands that, in an era of divided government and in a representative democracy, that compromise and a willingness to work across the aisle and an acknowledgement that you're not going to get 100 percent of what you demand will be necessary to get anything done.

And that recognition is critical to advancing the interests of the American people. And that's going to require some leadership. And we'll see if the successor to John Boehner is up to the task.

Q Next question on a different topic. This weekend marks the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington -- I'm sorry -- the Million Man March. Forgive me, the Million Man March. And the 20th anniversary. The first anniversary had no requests for permits to counter -- have a counter-rally. Organizers from the original event said that this event has many permits for counter-rallies. As we are a nation that is still grappling with issues of police-involved shootings, fatal shootings, and we've seen situations like South Carolina, what do you say from that podium about this weekend, about the Million Man March, the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March? And then what kind of counter-rally, when we're still grappling with issues of division in this country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, people often refer to the National Mall as America's front yard. And it is the place where the American people choose to assemble to make their views known. And I don't think it would be the first time that there might be people gathered on the National Mall who might have some differing views on some important issues.

But, in general, this event is organized to promote social justice and advancement on a range of issues that are in the best interests of -- that are priorities of middle-class families. And the President certainly has made the interests of middle-class families a priority in his presidency. That's everything from reforming our health care system to expanding access to job training, to expanding access to a college education. The President has also prioritized issues like criminal justice reform, something that we continue to hope will attract bipartisan support in the Congress.

And even outside of the legislative path, the President has used the bully pulpit of the presidency to advance other initiatives, including the My Brother's Keeper initiative. And these represent significant presidential priorities. And the President is committed to

using the 15 months that he has remaining in office to continue to make progress on them, and he certainly welcomes support from all across the country for these priorities that he's identified.

Q So he's in support of this 20th anniversary march -- Million Man March?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think there will be lots of different views that are represented on the National Mall, but all of those who are advocating for progress on a range of social and economic justice issues will be articulating values that the President supports.

Justin.

Q I wanted to ask about Hillary Clinton's tax bank plan that came out. One of the aspects of it was targeting high-frequency trading. She proposed charging a fee for canceled transactions. And so I'm just wondering, broadly, if high-frequency trading is something that the President is worried about, if there's anything he can do to tackle this issue in the last 15 months that he's in office, and whether he thinks Secretary Clinton's approach is the best one relative to some European countries, for instance, that have proposed a tax on the volume of trading rather than on cancelled trades.

MR. EARNEST: I haven't looked carefully or heard anybody who's done a careful analysis of her specific proposal. I will say, in general, based on the news coverage, it does sound as if she is seeking to build on the important progress that was made in this administration through Wall Street reform.

When it comes to high-frequency trading, one of the things that we have acknowledged throughout the process of trying to enact Wall Street reform is that technology has had a significant impact on the financial markets, in the same way that technology has had a significant impact on a variety of things in our world -- everything from communications in the media to even politics. But that's also true in the financial world. And it means that our regulatory system needs to be flexible and nimble enough to keep up with an innovative technological environment.

And the Treasury Department is currently taking a look at the way that technology has affected financial markets, and the way that the financial markets function. And we continue to be vigilant about monitoring the risks in the markets, but also ensuring that we're not putting in place regulations that are going to overly constrain innovations that could end up being good for the economy.

So there's a lot to balance here, but we certainly are mindful of the risk that's associated with something like high-frequency trading, and it's something that the Treasury Department pays close attention to.

Q Another aspect of her plan is calling for additional prosecutions when criminal activities are undertaken by corporations or members of corporations, and also not allowing companies to essentially settle without having to admit guilt. Kind of implicit in that is a criticism of the way the SEC has -- the Obama administration has handled these

regulatory issues. Has it ever (inaudible) the President at all that more bankers haven't gone to jail after the financial crisis, that you guys haven't done more to force companies to admit guilt even if they're paying penalties back to the government?

MR. EARNEST: It's not, Justin, and principally because the kinds of decisions that you're talking about, the prosecutions are made by independent prosecutors at the Department of Justice, and there are other enforcement decisions that are made at the SEC that are also independent of any sort of political influence.

The fact is if you take a look at the kind of enforcement measures that have been taken during this administration, you'll see that the President's tough words have been backed by forceful action. The CFPB, an agency that was created in Wall Street reform to protect the interests of consumers, has successfully recovered more than \$10 billion in relief for 17 million consumers across the country, based on actions that they have taken. They've only been in existence for a few years and were created by this administration.

Obviously the Department of Justice has carried out a range of enforcement actions -- more than 60 since 2009 that have recovered more than \$85 billion for taxpayers from financial institutions that were accused of wrongdoing. And there have been a series of other actions that the administration has taken with regulators and law enforcement officials to recover additional funds. So whether it's a settlement with the five major banks on the national mortgage servicing settlement -- that resulted in about \$50 billion for homeowners.

So there are a range of actions that this administration has taken, and we're quite proud of that record. But, again, this is a dynamic environment in which we're operating, and it is important for regulators to both be aware of the flexibility that's required to incorporate the kinds of changes that could result from innovation -- to both guard against those risks, but also not to overly inhibit innovations that could ultimately be good for the broader economy.

Q And the last one is kind of a variation on what Roberta was asking, which is with kind of the chaos that's going on on Capitol Hill, first, do you guys see that as giving you additional leverage in budget negotiations that are going on? And second, does it increase pressure on a deal to have kind of a longer lifespan -- I know Senator McConnell has certainly talked about trying to get a deal that would last through the end of the presidency. Is that the kind of timeframe that you guys are considering for such a budget deal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Justin, I think it's too early to assess all of the fallout of Mr. McCarthy's surprising announcement today. But we will continue to make a case about ensuring that our budget priorities and the need to adequately fund both our economic and national security priorities is reflected in a bipartisan budget agreement.

And that means the administration is prepared to not get 100 percent of what we're asking for, and whatever results from --

Q What are you asking for, I guess? That's what -- I know that you've said before that you want something based on the Ryan-Murray budget, but we haven't heard much in terms of timeframe, timeline, how long, how much you kind of want to add back in. Where is your starting point on these negotiations?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our starting point in negotiations is the budget that we put forward earlier this year; that there are a lot of numbers and a lot of details that are included in there. And that's where we'll start. But, again, we acknowledge that that's not something that we're going to get out of a Republican majority in Congress.

But, look, that's our starting point. And as likely as it is that you and I could probably sit down and figure out what would be an appropriate way for us to resolve all of these budgetary challenges, there's a process that we have to work through, and it has to incorporate the views of the Republican majority in the House and the Senate. But because it's going to be something that requires bipartisanship to pass, it's also going to have to incorporate the views of Democrats in the House and the Senate.

And that's why all those parties are engaged in conversations that we are hopeful will yield the kind of bipartisan agreement that will prevent a government shutdown, will ensure that our national security and economic priorities are adequately funded, and reflect what's most important to the American people.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. Would the White House prefer Speaker Boehner change his mind? Would that make things easier? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Look the House Republicans are going to have to determine for themselves who they believe is well-suited to leading their conference. And whoever that person is will face exactly the same challenge that John Boehner has faced over the last four or five years; they'll have to face exactly the same challenge that Leader McCarthy would have faced had he successfully been elected speaker. And that simply is managing the stark divide in the Republican conference between extreme ideologues who represent a minority but yet refuse to put the best interests of the country ahead of their own extreme ideology, and the majority of House Republicans who I think are quite concerned about being vulnerable to political attacks from that extreme minority and have let that fear about their political standing influence their ability to put the interests of the country first.

And that hasn't happened at every turn. We have seen areas where those Republicans have stood up and done the right thing. I mentioned the support for TPA earlier.

Obviously there was a vote to keep the government open that took place just last week, I believe. Again, we were certainly disappointed that a majority of Republicans voted to shut down the government, but at least some House Republicans did the right thing and put the interests of the country and our economy and middle-class families first.

And ultimately, what we'll need to see a leader in the House Republican caucus that's willing to ensure that the country's priorities are at the top of the agenda. And the President, in reacting to Mr. Boehner's surprising news from a few weeks ago, noted that despite the start differences of opinion that those two men have on a range of really important issues, Speaker Boehner was somebody who has acknowledged that in a divided government and in a democracy, you're not going to get 100 percent of what you demand.

So that certainly speaks well of Speaker Boehner. But Republicans will have to decide who can next take the reins over there.

Q Let me ask you about the cruise missile launch by the Russians. Is it the White House's sense that essentially now they're acting unilaterally and they will continue to do so? Is there anything different that the White House would do strategically to get Vladimir Putin to change his strategy in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's clear that Russia has been acting unilaterally for some time to prop up a client state that was on the verge of falling apart. And --

Q Does this escalate that from the White House perspective?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's on the same trajectory, which is that we have seen Russia for years now take actions, financial and otherwise, to try to prop up the Assad regime. They've now had to resort to military action to provide additional support to the Assad regime. They're being backed by the Iranians as well. And I think that serves to illustrate the kind of security civil war that Russia is involving themselves more deeply in.

And that has significant consequences for Russia. And I think it illustrates how, despite their tough talk and their actions that are often characterized as muscular, that the Russians are actually responding and reacting from a position of weakness to a situation that's spiraling further and further out of control.

Q Is it fair to say they were lying when they said they were only going in to fight ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's fair to say that the strategy that they're currently pursuing is not likely to be particularly successful in the fight against ISIL because most of their military actions are targeted in areas where there are few, if any, ISIL forces. So I don't know if it calls into question their credibility. I think it certainly calls into question their strategic thinking.

Q Can I ask you about something National Security Advisor Rice said about Hillary Clinton's accomplishments while she was Secretary of State? Among them, she said, "We've been negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement to bring that to fruition. We're looking forward to obtaining Trade Promotion Authority from Congress" -- which, of course, happened -- "That is another significant accomplishment," speaking of a few accomplishments for Secretary Clinton. Is that an accomplishment now do you think, seeing as how she opposes something that she worked with this administration on for months, if not longer?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think I noted earlier that the expectation that we would all have -- and I think that this was evident while she was serving as Secretary of State -- is she was involved in helping this administration negotiate the strongest possible deal for --

Q So she's a flip-flopper.

MR. EARNEST: -- for U.S. businesses and American workers. But when it comes to reconciling her actions in government with the current positions that she's taking, I'd refer you to the Clinton campaign.

But the fact is we believe that we've got a strong agreement and it is the kind of agreement that is in the best interests of American businesses and best interests of American workers. It will cut 18,000 import taxes that are currently slapped on American goods when they're shipped overseas. And the question that members of Congress will face is are they going to vote to keep those 18,000 taxes in place, or are they going to vote to cut taxes that will unleash opportunities for American businesses, large and small, and American workers right here in the United States.

Q And that's all fair. I'm just trying to understand how, from the administration's perspective, they view Secretary Clinton. It seems like this is yet another example where her political leanings seem to have shifted. Some would say it's flip-flopping. Some would say she's simply working now actively against things that she was for earlier. I mean, even as it relates to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan -- she was working actively -- she voted for the war in Iraq, for example, and she was working actively to help the administration draw down troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. And now she seems again -- that was an accomplishment that doesn't seem to be working out so well. Doesn't it frustrate the administration to have her out there now, saying, oh, I'm not so much with all the things I worked with them on?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I think that --

Q I know you have friends in their administration. I respect that.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, yes.

Q And you don't want to go too hardcore on this. I'm just trying to understand.

MR. EARNEST: But, look, the fact that I have friends that work on the campaign doesn't in any way prevent me from speaking candidly and representing the President's views directly.

Q Here's your shot. All right.

MR. EARNEST: So here's my shot.

Q All right.

MR. EARNEST: As the winner of the last two presidential elections that have been held in this country, the President understands that presidential politics are tough, and he understands that it is the responsibility of individual candidates to distinguish themselves, to give voters a reason to vote for them and to support their vision. That means distinguishing themselves from their competitors. And in some cases, that means distinguishing themselves from the current occupant of the office. That's part of the business.

And nobody is going to succeed in running for someone else's third term, no matter how successful the first two terms have been. So the President does understand that there are going to be differences. And he's not particularly concerned about that because his principal concern when it comes to politics is making sure that he's succeeded by a President that shares his values and is committed to building on the important success that we've made so far.

The President has often made the observation in recent months that the United States is positioned as well as we've ever been to capitalize on our influence around the globe and our economic strength right here at home. And the President has invested a lot in this -- both personally, but also in terms of his passion for this country and for public service. And he is rooting for a candidate who shares that vision and who will build on that progress to succeed him.

Q Wouldn't that be Joe Biden then?

MR. EARNEST: I think that there are -- even if you look at the -- and I'm going to pull it up here because it's in my folder -- even if you look at the statement that Secretary Clinton herself issued yesterday in which she acknowledged a difference of opinion with the administration on the Trans-Pacific Partnership --

Q Is wiggle room in that statement? Is that what you're saying?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not going to read between the lines. I'm actually just going to read the words that are written on the page.

Q All right.

MR. EARNEST: She notes that she strongly supports President Obama's investments in infrastructure. She strongly supports his investments in education. She strongly supports his investments in clean energy. She strongly supports his investments in innovation. She strongly supports his advocacy for raising the minimum wage. She strongly supports his advocacy for defending workers' rights. And she strongly believes in the President's vision for expanding and modernizing job training programs in this country.

So that's not to paper over the differences; there is a stark difference on this particular issue. But I do think that when it comes to the values and priorities that Secretary Clinton is articulating in the context of her campaign, those are the kinds of values that this President advocated for when he campaigned for this office, as well. And those are

certainly the kinds of priorities that he's set for this administration. And we've made important progress in each of those areas. And the President is hopeful that whoever the next President is, is somebody that will recognize that progress and seek to build on it.

Ron.

Q Just on the Secretary Clinton issue, she specifically mentioned currency manipulation as something that she did not think was addressed. How is that addressed in TPP?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there is a technical answer to this question and we can get that to you, but I can give you sort of the broad answer to this question, which is that for the first time in history in the context of a trade agreement, the 12 countries who are signatories to the TPP actually address unfair currency practices. And the concern that has been raised by many people is that there is a temptation on the part of some countries to manipulate their currency for an unfair trading advantage. And the currency provisions that are included in this agreement actually set a high standard for currency practices. They promote transparency and accountability while, at the same time, fulfilling an important priority of this President, which is protecting the ability of the United States to make independent decisions at the Fed that are in the best interests of our economy.

And so balancing those priorities is what makes this complicated, but it's also why the President believes that's something that was achieved in the context of this agreement.

Q So is there an enforcement mechanism of some sort on this issue?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what there is --

Q Without being too technical about it.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can have somebody follow up with you on the technical aspects of this. But what is clear is that Congress had the opportunity in the context of the Trade Promotion Authority debate to set what are called principal negotiating objectives.

Essentially, Congress made clear their views about what sort of currency provisions should be included in a final agreement that would eventually get the support of a majority of members of Congress. And we can conclude that the currency agreement that is currently part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement does satisfy those principal negotiating objectives that Congress had identified.

Q And this will protect American jobs?

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q The net result of this aspect of the deal will be a net non-loss or a gain of a -- will it be a gain? Will it help?

MR. EARNEST: This is a net positive for the U.S. economy because it does two things --

Q I'm talking about jobs.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, because it sets a high currency standard while, at the same time, protecting the ability of policymakers at the Fed -- who operate independently of the administration, by the way -- to make decisions that they believe are clearly in the best interest of the U.S. economy.

I'm certainly no financial analyst, but there has been a lot of reporting done about the impact that decisions at the Fed -- about decisions that were made at the Fed were critically important to the economic recovery that this country has enjoyed since the depths of the Great Recession in 2008 and 2009. So we want to protect the ability of independent policymakers at the Fed to make decisions that they believe are necessary and are clearly in the best economic interests of the country -- we want to protect their ability to make those kinds of decisions while, at the same time, setting the kind of high standards that will prevent other regulators from engaging in the kind of unscrupulous behavior that puts Americans businesses and the American economy at a significant disadvantage.

Q In Afghanistan, with Doctors Without Borders, there are reports of some 30 people still missing as a result of the American airstrike. Is the coalition, the United States involved in search-and-rescue operations there?

MR. EARNEST: I'd refer you to the Department of Defense for what activities are going on, on the ground there. I know that it continues to be a volatile environment around Kunduz and that certainly, I think as I acknowledged yesterday, is having an impact on the pace of the ongoing investigation. But for ongoing efforts to do additional rescue and recovery at that site, I'd refer you the Department of Defense.

Q So you don't know whether there are discussions between MSF and the United States about this issue or not?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not able to comment on those discussions, but the Department of Defense may have more for you.

Q And yesterday we went through the whole discussion about an independent, international -- is that a closed matter for the United States now? You relying on, as you did yesterday, the three other investigations you think will suffice? Or is there still some possibility that you -- that the United States might consider this demand by Doctors Without Borders?

MR. EARNEST: Ron, the United States continues to be confident that the full accounting that the President has insisted upon is something that will be delivered in the context of a thorough, objective, and transparent investigation that's being conducted by the Department of Defense.

Viqueira.

Q Thank you. One on the House, one on Syria.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q The President, in the Rose Garden, said, as you and Kevin were discussing, John Boehner is a good man; he's a patriot. As this point, would he be the best of what you might view of some bad options to continue running the House?

MR. EARNEST: Well, ultimately, this is a decision for House Republicans to make. And even as I alluded to I guess in response to Kathleen's question, even if that were the view of the administration, it would probably not be helpful for me to articulate it. So what I'm going to do is defer to the responsibility of House Republicans to decide who they believe would be the most effective leader of their conference.

Now, that's not to say that we don't have any stake in this, because the President is interested in having somebody who recognizes what John Boehner did -- to his credit -- that for all of his conservative beliefs and his differences of opinion with the President, John Boehner recognized that in an era of divided government that you can't get 100 percent of everything that you demand.

And that served him well, and it certainly served the country well. But it angered some extremist ideologues in the House Republican conference. And navigating that will be a challenge that wasn't just John Boehner's to deal with, to grapple with, but whoever the next Speaker is will have to grapple with that challenge.

Q Okay, I can't resist following on that. So not to be melodramatic or disingenuous, but for the good of the country, why is it so unthinkable for the President to endorse a candidate for the Speaker of the House who is willing to govern from the ideological middle of the House -- including Democrats and Republicans -- and that would include, on occasion, rolling conservatives -- with all the things that are coming up that are so important to the financial well-being of the country?

MR. EARNEST: Well, primarily because this is a decision that House Republicans have to make. If the President had a vote in the House Republican conference in terms of who they were going to nominate to the Speaker of the House, I'm confident that he would consider very carefully who he was going to vote for and I suspect would even announce and endorsement. But since he doesn't, we're going to respect the right that House Republicans have to choose the next Speaker of the House.

Look, this is part of being in the majority. When you are elected to the majority in the House of Representatives, you are going to determine the outcome of the Speaker's race. And that's not something that anybody in the Senate can influence. It's not something that the President can influence. It's not even something that the members of the minority party in the House can influence, as a practical matter. So this is something -- this is a decision that is left to House Republicans.

And as I mentioned earlier, the willingness of ideologues in the House Republican caucus to put their own ideological views ahead of the effective functioning of the U.S. government has now led them to put their own ideology ahead of the effective governing of the House Republican caucus. And that makes the next jobs of the Speaker a tough one.

Q And on Syria, it's widely assumed -- what is the nature of the support that the United States gives to those elements in the opposition militarily that are fighting the Assad regime?

MR. EARNEST: The Department of Defense -- I don't have that list in front of me. The Department of Defense has a way that they have described the kind of support that has been provided to some elements of the Syrian moderate opposition, so they can get you if not a list, at least a description.

Q You don't dispute that they're tied to the United States. They're backed by the United States. They're now under attack by Russia with cruise missiles. What does the President -- what does the White House want to do to protect those allies that are being attacked by Russia right now on the ground in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Mike, as a general matter, I would acknowledge that there are Syrian opposition groups, moderate opposition groups that have received support and assistance from the United States. That support and assistance has not included things like directing their actions on the ground. These are --

Q They're allies.

MR. EARNEST: Well, but they are independent groups that have received the support of the United States in a variety of forms. It also includes taking airstrikes in support of their missions on the ground. And the concern that we have raised is that Russia has failed to distinguish between those groups that are supported by the United States and our coalition partners, and the extremists in ISIL.

And the case that we have made is that Russia's efforts to counter the moderate Syrian opposition only make it harder for members of the moderate Syrian opposition to step forward and participate in a political transition that even Russia acknowledges will be necessary to solve the problem inside of Syria. So that's why we've raised fundamental questions about the strategy that Russia is pursuing.

Margaret.

Q On the chaos in the House -- as you are using that word, I'll use it -- to what extent does this endanger some of the legacy items for the President, his own agenda in this final year in office?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it certainly tells us that Dick Cheney's endorsement doesn't mean as much as it used to. (Laughter.) I've been waiting like 45 minutes to use that line. (Laughter.) I guess -- like somebody throw me a bone up here, huh? (Laughter.) Look, I think it is too early to assess the full impact of this surprising decision today. So I think the days ahead will tell us a little bit more about what the fallout is.

Q So no contingency plans on some of those hard-won things? This trade deal you just got -- you're going to need to fight for that.

MR. EARNEST: We will. And what we're hopeful of is that there will -- that the next leader of the Republican Party in the House of Representatives will be someone who acknowledges that the country will be very well served not by them sacrificing their conservative principles, but by being willing to work with members of the other party to advance the interests of the country.

And whether that's funding for national security or ratifying a trade agreement that has bipartisan support that would be good for middle-class families, there will be plenty of opportunities for Republicans to do that. But ultimately -- and here's the other thing -- we're having a little fun with all of this, but I don't mean to diminish the significance of this challenge that the next Speaker will face. It's going to be difficult to bridge this gap.

There has been a rupture in the Republican Party. It's on display in town hall meetings in Iowa and New Hampshire. But it's also on display in private meetings of the House Republican conference on Capitol Hill. This is a real challenge for the Republican Party. And it does threaten their ability to win national elections. It does threaten their ability to make a strong case to the American public that they have what it takes to govern the country. It does raise significant questions about the moral conviction and the priorities that are held by a lot of Republican politicians who aren't willing to stand up to a bunch of extreme ideologues in their own party who, in some cases serve in their own conference. That's the fundamental challenge.

And it is a big challenge for the Republican Party. It will be the big challenge for the next Republican Speaker of the House, whoever he or she may be. But it has significant consequences for the future of the country.

Q It does, or it could? Do you think this directly impacts -- or does this heighten the chance of a government shutdown?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think it's too early to say. This is --

Q Well, you got a November debt limit deadline. You got a December funding deadline. That's not far away.

MR. EARNEST: There is a lot of important work for the House of Representatives to get done. And I'd like to be able to say that these are ambitious goals that the House is hoping that they can achieve. The fact is we're actually talking about the basic fundamentals that any Congress has to deal with. This is not some visionary agenda that House Republicans are hoping to advance. They're just hoping that they don't do something that would significantly damage the U.S. economy. So this is not about -- unfortunately, this is not about advancing some conservative agenda for the country. This is about not ruining the country's economy.

Q I have a question on Syria. But just finally on this, there's an idea being floated about a sort of caretaker speaker, an interim? Does that sound like a contingency plan to you? (Laughter.) Viable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, these are the kinds of things that Republicans will have to work out for themselves. But even if it just a so-called caretaker speaker, that person will have a very difficult challenge ahead of them.

Q On Syria, you said over the past few days, Josh, you don't want Syria to become a proxy war with Russia in any way, shape, or form. Short of that, does this mean the United States has to acquiesce to Russia's actions in Syria? There is a clear escalation on the ground.

MR. EARNEST: There is a clear escalation on the ground in support of the Assad regime. Unfortunately, it's not an escalation against ISIL. And the fact is our operations against ISIL have continued unabated. I got an update today that the U.S. and our coalition partners have now taken 34 strikes against ISIL in Syria over the course of the last week, and that should be an indication to you that our efforts continue unabated.

And while we would welcome a constructive Russian contribution to our counter-ISIL coalition, even if we don't get it, our counter-ISIL coalition is going to move forward in implementing our strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy that terrorist organization.

Q But when it comes to stopping what Russia is doing, which you've drawn a direct line to then lengthening the duration of the war and perhaps a lifeline for ISIL, right?

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q What are you doing to stop Russia from making your goal even harder to achieve?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I've said before, the risks facing Russia, as a result of their unilateral military actions inside of Syria are significant. They risk further international isolation. They risk further involvement in a sectarian conflict, sectarian civil war inside of Syria.

Q That's all hypothetical at this point.

MR. EARNEST: I don't think it's hypothetical at this point when you consider that the only people who are enthusiastic about Russia's unilateral action inside of Syria are the Iranians and their proxies in the region, particularly when you gauge the reaction of those who are the other side of the sectarian divide. So I think that's on display.

And I think the other reason I guess it's not a hypothetical is these are hard lessons that the Soviet Union had to learn in Afghanistan a few decades ago; this is a hard lesson that the United States of America had to learn in Iraq in the last decade -- so you don't have to dig back into ancient history to see how this is going to play out for the Russians, and it's not good.

Q Just to button up, you used the word isolation. Is that code for sanctions? Are you talking about an actual threat of action?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think it's an indication -- that's not what I'm -- I don't mean to send that signal. And I know that we've used the word isolation in other contexts to try to imply that. In this case, I'm just observing that the United States has built a coalition of 65 nations to implement a strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. Russia says that they are unwilling to make a constructive contribution to that coalition and have even invited members of our coalition to join their efforts. The fact is that hasn't happened.

And, if anything, you've seen a long list of world leaders step forward who are a part of our coalition who are criticizing Russia's unilateral actions inside of Syria. And that is how what previously had been -- well, that is how I think I would illustrate that at least when it comes to the 65 members who are pursuing the goal that Russia says that they share are quite unhappy and unwilling to coordinate with the Russians as they pursue what I think is quite obviously misguided strategy that will fail.

Serena.

Q Josh, French train attack hero Adam Spencer Stone was stabbed repeatedly overnight. Is the President aware of this incident? Has he reached out?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if the President is aware of this particular incident. I know that this is something that the Department of Defense is tracking. So for updates on his condition, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense.

Q And last night, Rupert Murdoch seemed to suggest that President Obama wasn't a "real black President." Did the President take offense to this? Did he see the tweet?

MR. EARNEST: I don't think -- I don't know if the President is aware of this. I did note that Mr. Murdoch tweeted an apology this morning. I also noted that a Fox corporate spokesperson was asked about this and said something like, I'm not going to quote on Mr. Murdoch's tweets -- and I'm not going to, either.

Q And going back to Hillary Clinton, is there a concern that her opposition to TPP could deter some congressional Democrats from supporting the President?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't know what impact it will have on individual members of Congress. You can ask them what impact it has on their votes. But I would just note that Secretary Clinton did not support Trade Promotion Authority legislation in Congress, yet we did succeed in building a sufficiently large bipartisan majority for Trade Promotion Authority, that we did succeed in seeing that legislation passed. So that's why we continue to be confident about the prospects for TPP in Congress.

Q And the two of them are both attending the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Gala tonight. Do you know if they plan to talk? Does the President plan to address her break from the administration on this issue and a handful of others in recent weeks?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if the President will talk about trade at the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Gala tonight. But we'll try to get you a preview of his remarks. And I don't know if he'll see Secretary Clinton or not.

Q There's no plans for a side conversation between the two of them?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any plan like that now, but if they're moving in the hallway at the same time, I'm sure they'll stop and talk. (Laughter.) My point is there's nothing planned, but if they -- I didn't mean to be condescending. I'm just suggesting that if there's an impromptu meeting, I'm sure that it will result in a conversation.

Q Okay. And the Navy Times is reporting that the administration is considering sending a ship inside a 12-nautical territory limit in the South China Sea. When do you plan on making that decision? This would be a direct provocation to the Chinese military. Are you prepared for that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it shouldn't be, because there have been previous -- I can't comment on these reports because I'm aware of them but I don't know -- or at least I don't have anything to say about any future policy decisions in this regard. But it should not provoke significant reaction from the Chinese for a couple of reasons.

The first is, this is something that the United States has done on several other occasions, because the President is committed to the principle of the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. And we certainly make no claim on any territory in that region of the world, but we are actively engaged and encouraging all sides who have a difference of opinion about those territorial claims to resolve them peacefully and through diplomacy to ensure that the freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce continues uninhibited.

And all of that is certainly consistent with the principle that the President identified in the Rose Garden, standing next to the Chinese President, when he reiterated that the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows. And that certainly applies to the South China Sea region.

Q But it would be the first time since 2012 that the Navy has sent ships into this region, correct?

MR. EARNEST: I think there have been -- we can get the details on that. I don't have all of the dates in front of me. I think there have been five or six occasions where this has occurred since 2011, but I don't know if it's occurred since 2012, but we can certainly try to get you some figures on that.

Q If you add this Navy movement, though, into the possible sanctions on government officials for cyber, terrorism, intellectual property -- I mean, aren't we challenging China directly then on those two instances at the same time?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you might also say that by completing a TPP agreement, that the actions of the administration are certainly having an impact in protecting our interests around the world, particularly in the Asia Pacific region. And I know that the instinct of China is to feel that way, but the fact is, our policy continues to be -- and this is something

the President strongly believes in -- that we welcome a rising China, and that there are responsibilities associated with countries that are rising and looking to expand their influence around the world.

One example of that would be not bullying your neighbors just because you happen to be stronger and more influential and have a more advanced military, but that you actually seek to resolve disputes, even when those disputes are relevant to territorial claims.

That's certainly what we have encouraged China and everyone else in the region to do.

Jim.

Q (Music plays.) That was not me. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: That was quite an introduction. (Laughter.)

Q Getting back to the drama in the House, House Speaker John Boehner released a statement saying that he would stay on or he's planning on staying on until a new Speaker is chosen. Would that be the preferred outcome for the White House to get you past the debt ceiling and get you past a potential government shutdown?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not going to express a particular view about who should lead the House Republican caucus. That's something that House Republican members of Congress will have to determine. And, yes, I would readily acknowledge that any expression of support for any individual would lead to the opposite of the intended effect, so that's why I'm going to respectfully and appropriately defer to the views of House Republican members to determine who their leader should be.

Q And you said earlier about Hillary Clinton's reversal on the TPP that the President understands the rigors of presidential politics. To what degree do you think politics played into Secretary Clinton's decision there? She did, in fact, speak out in favor of TPP dozens of times.

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I mentioned to Kevin, to reconcile Secretary Clinton's previous statements with her current position I'd refer you to the campaign. But we've continued to feel quite confident about the strength of the case that we can make about why both Democrats and Republicans should support an agreement that cuts 18,000 import taxes on American goods. That will make it easier for American businesses to sell American goods in some of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

This agreement also includes enforceable labor and environmental standards. We know that's something that Democrats, in particular, are concerned about. It's something that the Democrat who sits in the Oval Office is particularly concerned about. And so that's why he is pleased that's part of this agreement. And that's part of the case that we'll make to members of Congress who ultimately have to ratify this agreement.

Q Do you think it's because she's seeing Bernie Sanders in her rearview mirror?

MR. EARNEST: I know there's been a lot of speculation among political pundits to that effect, but I'll let them speculate.

Q On Iran -- or, excuse me, on Syria, Russia. How concerned is the administration about where these missiles are going? There are hostages still being held in Syria by ISIS, presumably. Do you believe that Russia knows what it's shooting at?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say, Jim, that the case of any individual hostage is not something that we would talk about publicly. In most cases, it is our assessment that talking about them -- their cases publicly does not advance our efforts to rescue them.

Q But the administration believes that there are hostages still being held by ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Well, even that kind of acknowledgement we found is counterproductive to our efforts.

So setting that one particular issue aside, though, you raise a legitimate question about sort of the impact of this Russian military activity, and we have noted the either inability or unwillingness on the part of Russia to distinguish between the kinds of opposition targets that they are targeting. And the concern that we have about that is that it only serves to alienate and, in some cases, even degrade -- some of these Russian strikes have hit the target that was intended -- degrading the moderate Syrian opposition only makes it more difficult for that moderate Syrian opposition to be part of a political transition that Russia acknowledges is necessary.

It's not also hard to imagine that some of that moderate Syrian opposition who comes under fire from Russia, has been under fire from the Assad regime, might make common cause with extremists, only exacerbating the extremist problem inside of Syria -- a place where the Russians are expanding their footprint.

Q Have the Russians reached out in any way to try to obtain intelligence or information that would help them pick out targets? Is there any kind of discussion like that going on? I know it's been a challenge just to get to the de-conflicting point in this process. That would lead one to believe that there isn't much conversation going on about what they're hitting.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, we've made clear that if Russia is willing to make a constructive contribution to our counter-ISIL coalition, that we would welcome such a decision. We've seen Russia resist doing that, and we have said that if they're going to resist doing that, that, at a minimum, we would like to see Russia engage in low-level, operational, tactical discussions about de-conflicting our military activities inside of Syria in a way that makes it safer for our pilots to operate in the skies above Syria. And this includes a practical discussion about things like established and internationally recognized communications channels, following basic internationally recognized safety regulations -- those kinds of things.

But it has not risen to the level of any kind of coordination or cooperation when it comes to military operations in Syria.

Q And what do you make of -- there was a report by Reuters that suggested that the U.S. was caught off-guard to some extent by Russia's moves and that some blame lies with the intelligence community for not realizing or recognizing what Russia was about to be up to. What do you make of that? Because it does seem -- I mean, I think that the public has the impression that the President, the White House was just kind of surprised by all this.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not sure why they would have that impression. I don't put a lot of stock in the report, primarily because all of you were asking me questions about the Russian military build-up inside of Syria several weeks ago. So this was a well-known fact.

Q Did you know about that before they started --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not going to talk about our intelligence analysis. But I think you could be assured that if all of you knew and were reporting it that the administration and decision-makers were certainly aware of it. And I don't think there was anybody that had the expectation in the administration that Russia wasn't prepared to use that equipment to advance what they view as their interests inside of Syria.

And, again, their interests inside of Syria they've concluded is that they want to buck up the Assad regime, and propping them up -- that's what they've been doing for years. And those efforts thus far have succeeded in keeping him in power, but they have not succeeded in strengthening his grip on power.

And so Russia has now had to resort to using increasingly more significant military operations to try to protect Assad. And they're doing that because the things that they tried before weren't working anymore. And, again, I don't think that's a surprise. That's something that we've been saying for quite some time. The President, before Russia commenced their military activities, said that a decision by Russia to double down on Assad militarily would be a losing bet. That's something that the President said before we saw this Russian military activity and we continue to believe that that's true.

Alexis.

Q Josh, can I follow up on TPP for a second just to clarify? The White House indicated yesterday that the former Secretary had given the White House a heads-up about her decision. But it's unclear to me whether the former Secretary of State, who was, at one time, very interested in this trade pact and helped negotiate it, asked for or received a more complete briefing about the conclusion of the pact as it was described. Because we know it has not been publicly put in the public domain yet. So I just want to clarify -- did she ask for the full facts or a briefing so that she would understand all of the implications of what was negotiated?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Alexis, it's hard for me to account for all of the conversations -- or every conversation that may have taken place between the White House and the Clinton campaign. I know that there was -- that a heads-up on this was communicated through more than one channel. But I'm not aware that Secretary Clinton had access to any non-public information about the agreement. There's a substantial amount of information

that's already available about what was negotiated, but the administration has made a commitment to making the documents publicly available even before the President signs it and even before Congress has to consider it. And that's something that we're working to do.

It's a really long document and there are translation issues and lots of other concerns about making sure that the final text actually reflects the final agreement. So that work is ongoing, and as soon as it's done we'll make that information public so that everybody can take a look at it.

Q And then my second question is, if the former Secretary of State lacked the substantive information to make a full or complete appraisal of the negotiation and the pact, is it the President's hope that she will change her mind again when it becomes public and she and her team can fully analyze it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess you'd have to ask the Clinton campaign if they're open to revisiting the decision.

Q Is that the President's hope?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think what we're mostly going to be focused on is persuading people who actually have a vote in ratifying the agreement. And we're going to be focused on making the case to members of Congress about the benefits of this agreement. And we've got a strong case to make to both Democrats and Republicans about why they should support this agreement, and we certainly would welcome other expressions of support from people who don't serve in Congress.

But the fact is, there wasn't a single Democratic presidential candidate who supported TPA legislation, but yet we were able to build a bipartisan majority in Congress for that bill. And we continue to be confident that we'll be able to build a similar bipartisan majority for TPP.

Q But you don't disagree that the fast track vote was separate and distinct from a ratification vote on a full and completely negotiated --

MR. EARNEST: No, of course, there will be two separate votes. And I actually think we'll have a strong case to make now that we can marshal some details about what exactly is included in the agreement.

I made reference at the beginning of this briefing that we had a little topper here. There are a lot of details that you can dig through about the impact that this would have all across the country, and we've got a fancy whiz-bang presentation that we'll make on Tuesday -- (laughter) -- that I think will help you. The reason I mention that is because I think it will give you a good flavor of the kind of case that we'll be able to make to members of Congress across the country. I hope I didn't oversell the presentation, so we'll see how that goes. (Laughter.)

Q And one other question. Because the President met with Secretary Kerry and the Vice President to talk about a range of issues, can you tell us whether the President has reached a decision on the Afghanistan drawdown plan?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any updates for you on that process. We've acknowledged that there is a policy decision to be made, and General Campbell testified to Congress earlier this week that he'd made some recommendations to the President. And while the President highly values the input that he gets from General Campbell and other leaders in our uniform military, there are other voices that will also have an impact on this decision.

Q Is there a timeline or a rough timeframe?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a timeframe to share with you at this point.

David.

Q A little bit more on the TPP. The TPP is part of a broader administration strategy in Asia that's been called the pivot or the rebalance.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q And there are former administration officials who have said recently that without TPP that broader strategy is in jeopardy and that you can't succeed because Asian allies and even adversaries will think the U.S. is not committed to the region. Does the White House believe that's true? If the TPP fails, the entire strategy is not really feasible any longer, it's that important? And then, number two, does the White House believe that the next President would have more difficulty dealing with Asian allies if the TPP fails?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there's no denying that the TPP agreement is the core of our Asia policy. It's not the only element, but it is the core. And our ability and, frankly, our success now in organizing the interests of 11 other countries in the Asia Pacific region is a testament to the amount of influence that the United States wields. And to use that influence in a way that opens up economic opportunity for American businesses and American workers in 40 percent of the world's economy represents a substantial success in using that influence to benefit the American people.

So this is an important agreement when it comes to the U.S. economy. But this also is important in terms of the kinds of relationships that we want to build with countries around the world, including some countries that are home to some of the most dynamic economies in the world.

And we know that China is seeking to expand their influence in that region of the world. And the ability of the United States to cement our economic relationships with those countries and to do so in a way that raises standards -- raises standards when it comes to protecting intellectual property, raising labor standards and raising environmental standards -- will be in the best interest of the United States because it will create a more

level playing field on which American businesses and American workers can compete. And if given a more level playing field, the President is confident that American businesses and American workers can win and that will be good for our economy.

Q What would it mean for the next President to not have the TPP in trying to deal with Asia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, David, you actually know this because you've been covering this for most of the negotiations, and I admire your stamina in doing so, but this is something we've been negotiating for more than five years now and this is an agreement that was hard-won. And the likelihood that the United States could unilaterally back out of that agreement, and then try to bring all those countries together to renegotiate it and convince them that that negotiation could take place both in good faith and with the confidence that Congress would approve it I think is quite far-fetched.

And, again, we're fast-forwarding a little bit to the kind of case I think that we'll eventually be making to members of Congress because it is unlikely that a group like this could be reconvened if the United States were to unilaterally withdraw from it.

At the same time, there also is an opportunity to seize here, that we don't have to make the negative case here. There is a real question: Are we going to cut import taxes on 18,000 American goods, or are we going to leave those import taxes in place? Are we going to raise labor standards in some countries in South Asia that don't have what could be described as a sterling record of protecting workers' rights, or are we going to allow them to race to the bottom? Are we going to raise environmental standards and do something important about the illegal wildlife trade, or are we going to allow that black market to continue to operate virtually unabated?

So there's a real question, a real choice between making progress and advancing our interests, or just allowing the status quo to muddle along. And that will be a choice that members of Congress will have to make, and an argument that I suspect that we'll be making quite a bit later this year and into next.

Bill, I'll give you the last one.

Q Do we really have to wait until Tuesday for the slideshow? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Unfortunately, yes. And I hope I haven't oversold it. (Laughter.)

Q I want to go back to Murdoch for just a second. Yesterday when the question was raised I think by Jim about then-speaker-to-be McCarthy's comments about Benghazi and he tried to walk them back, and you said he can't walk them back, he made those comments -- well, today -- so Murdoch has apologized and you're letting him off the hook. Why are you letting him off the hook on his comments about Obama not being a real black President?

MR. EARNEST: Well, mostly because I think I'm going to follow the lead of the spokesperson that actually works for Mr. Murdoch and not comment on his tweets.

Q But really you can understand why the man who works for Murdoch wouldn't say anything negative. But why not you?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think the fact that he apologized is significant. Mr. McCarthy tried to make the case that somehow he -- that what he said was something that he didn't actually believe. And the reason that, frankly, we all didn't believe him when he said it is we know that what he said the first time actually happens to be true.

Mr. Murdoch's reaction has been a little bit different. He essentially has apologized for his initial comment.

Q And, of course, before -- he was talking about his meeting with Ben Carson and his wife, and before his apology, Ben Carson, on CNN this morning, said, when he was asked whether he believes President Obama is a Christian, he said, I'll take his word for it. But do you see this as a part of a continuing pattern? Seven years now in the White House, to continue to question the President being an American, being a Christian, now being an African American?

MR. EARNEST: Maybe it is part of a concerted strategy, but it's a strategy I think that has utterly failed; that the President has now won two national elections and has advanced an agenda that's made a real difference for the country in the short term, and that historians will have an opportunity to evaluate, but I feel confident that that evaluation will be quite favorable because it stacks up well against the record of other Presidents in modern American history. So I don't know if that's a strategy, but if it is, you'd think it's one that they would have dispensed with.

Thanks, everybody. Go, Royals! (Laughter.) Had to get that in.

END

2:13 P.M. EDT