

News Conference by the President

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THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon -- or good morning, everybody. I am here to answer questions in honor of Ed Henry, as he wraps up his tenure as president of the White House Correspondents Association.

Ed, because of that, you get the first question. Congratulations.

Q Thank you, sir, I really appreciate that. And I hope we can go back to business and being mad at each other a little bit. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not mad at you.

Q Okay, good. Thank you, I appreciate that.

THE PRESIDENT: You may be mad at me. (Laughter.)

Q I'm not. A couple of questions on national security. On Syria, you said that the red line was not just about chemical weapons being used but being spread, and it was a game-changer -- it seemed cut and dry. And now your administration seems to be suggesting that line is not clear. Do you risk U.S. credibility if you don't take military action?

And then on Benghazi, there are some survivors of that terror attack who say they want to come forward and testify -- some in your State Department -- and they say they've been blocked. Will you allow them to testify?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, on Syria, I think it's important to understand that for several years now what we've been seeing is a slowly unfolding disaster for the Syrian people. And this is not a situation in which we've been simply bystanders to what's been happening. My policy from the beginning has been that President Assad had lost credibility, that he attacked his own people, has killed his own people, unleashed a military against innocent civilians, and that the only way to bring stability and peace to Syria is going to be for Assad to step down and to move forward on a political transition.

In pursuit of that strategy we've organized the international community. We are the largest humanitarian donor. We have worked to strengthen the opposition. We have provided nonlethal assistance to the opposition. We have applied sanctions on Syria. So there are a whole host of steps that we've been taking precisely because, even separate from the chemical weapons issue, what's happening in Syria is a blemish on the international community generally, and we've got to make sure that we're doing everything we can to protect the Syrian people.

In that context, what I've also said is that the use of chemical weapons would be a game-changer not simply for the United States but for the international community. And the reason for that is that we have established international law and international norms that say when you use these kinds of weapons you have the potential of killing massive numbers of people in the most inhumane way possible, and the proliferation risks are so significant that we don't want that genie out of the bottle. So when I said that the use of chemical weapons would be a game-changer, that wasn't unique to -- that wasn't a position unique to the United States and it shouldn't have been a surprise.

And what we now have is evidence that chemical weapons have been used inside of Syria, but we don't know how they were used, when they were used, who used them. We don't have a chain of custody that establishes what exactly happened. And when I am making decisions about America's national security and the potential for taking additional action in response to chemical weapon use, I've got to make sure I've got the facts. That's what the American people would expect.

And if we end up rushing to judgment without hard, effective evidence, then we can find ourselves in a position where we can't mobilize the international community to support what we do. There may be objections even among some people in the region who are sympathetic with the opposition if we take action. So it's important for us to do this in a prudent way.

And what I've said to my team is we've got to do everything we can to investigate and establish with some certainty what exactly has happened in Syria, what is happening in Syria. We will use all the assets and resources that we have at our disposal. We'll work with the neighboring countries to see whether we can establish a clear baseline of facts. And we've also called on the United Nations to investigate.

But the important point I want to make here is that we already are deeply engaged in trying to bring about a solution in Syria. It is a difficult problem. But even if chemical weapons were not being used in Syria, we'd still be thinking about tens of thousands of people, innocent civilians -- women, children -- who've been killed by a regime that's more concerned about staying in power than it is about the well-being of its people.

And so we are already deeply invested in trying to find a solution here.

What is true, though, is, is that if I can establish in a way that not only the United States but also the international community feel confident is the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, then that is a game-changer because what that portends is potentially even

more devastating attacks on civilians, and it raises the strong possibility that those chemical weapons can fall into the wrong hands and get disseminated in ways that would threaten U.S. security or the security of our allies.

Q By game-changer you mean U.S. military action?

THE PRESIDENT: By game-changer I mean that we would have to rethink the range of options that are available to us.

Now, we're already, as I've said, invested in trying to bring about a solution inside of Syria. Obviously, there are options that are available to me that are on the shelf right now that we have not deployed. And that's a spectrum of options. As early as last year, I asked the Pentagon, our military, our intelligence officials to prepare for me what options might be available. And I won't go into the details of what those options might be, but clearly that would be an escalation, in our view, of the threat to the security of the international community, our allies, and the United States, and that means that there are some options that we might not otherwise exercise that we would strongly consider.

Q And on the Benghazi portion, I know pieces of this story have been litigated, you've been asked about it. But there are people in your own State Department saying they've been blocked from coming forward, that they survived the terror attack and they want to tell their story. Will you help them come forward and just say it once and for all?

THE PRESIDENT: Ed, I'm not familiar with this notion that anybody has been blocked from testifying. So what I'll do is I will find out what exactly you're referring to. What I've been very clear about from the start is that our job with respect to Benghazi has been to find out exactly what happened, to make sure that U.S. embassies not just in the Middle East but around the world are safe and secure, and to bring those who carried it out to justice.

But I'll find out what exactly you're referring to.

Q They've hired an attorney because they're saying that they've been blocked from coming forward.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not familiar with it.

Jessica.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. There's a report that your Director of National Intelligence has ordered a broad review -- this is regards to the Boston Marathon bombing -- that your DNI has ordered a broad review of all the intelligence-gathering prior to the attack. There is also a series of senators -- Susan Collins, Saxby Chambliss, Lindsey Graham -- who allege that all these years after 9/11, there still wasn't enough intelligence shared prior to the attack. And now, Lindsey Graham, who is a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, has said that Benghazi and Boston are both examples of the U.S. going backwards on national security. Is he right? And did our intelligence miss something?

THE PRESIDENT: No, Mr. Graham is not right on this issue, although I'm sure generated some headlines.

I think that what we saw in Boston was state, local, federal officials, every agency rallying around a city that had been attacked -- identifying the perpetrators just hours after the scene had been examined. We now have one individual deceased, one in custody. Charges have been brought.

I think that all our law enforcement officials performed in an exemplary fashion after the bombing had taken place. And we should be very proud of their work, as obviously we're proud of the people of Boston and all the first responders and the medical personnel that helped save lives.

What we also know is that the Russian intelligence services had alerted U.S. intelligence about the older brother, as well as the mother, indicating that they might be sympathizers to extremists. The FBI investigated that older brother. It's not as if the FBI did nothing. They not only investigated the older brother, they interviewed the older brother. They concluded that there were no signs that he was engaging in extremist activity. So that much we know.

And the question then is was there something that happened that triggered radicalization and an actual decision by the brother to engage in the tragic attack we actually saw in Boston, and are there additional things that could have been done in that interim that might have prevented it.

Now, what Director Clapper is doing is standard procedure around here, which is when an event like this happens we want to go back and we want to review every step that was taken. We want to leave no stone unturned. We want to see, is there, in fact, additional protocols and procedures that could be put in place that would further improve and enhance our ability to detect a potential attack? And we won't know that until that review is completed. We won't know that until the investigation of the actual crime is fully completed. And that's still ongoing.

But what I can say is that based on what I've seen so far, the FBI performed its duties, the Department of Homeland Security did what it was supposed to be doing.

But this is hard stuff. And I've said for quite some time that because of the pressure that we put on al Qaeda core, because of the pressure that we've put on these networks that are well-financed and more sophisticated and can engage in and project transnational threats against the United States, one of the dangers that we now face are self-radicalized individuals who are already here in the United States -- in some cases, may not be part of any kind of network, but because of whatever warped, twisted ideas they may have, may decide to carry out an attack. And those are in some ways more difficult to prevent.

And so what I've done for months now is to indicate to our entire counterterrorism team, what more can we do on that threat that is looming on the horizon? Are there more things that we can do, whether it's engaging with communities where there's a potential

for self-radicalization of this sort? Is there work that can be done in terms of detection? But all of this has to be done in the context of our laws, due process.

And so part of what Director Clapper is doing, then, is going to be to see if we can determine any lessons learned from what happened.

Q Are you getting all the intelligence and information you need from the Russians? And should Americans be worried when they go to big, public events now?

THE PRESIDENT: The Russians have been very cooperative with us since the Boston bombing. Obviously, old habits die hard; there are still suspicions sometimes between our intelligence and law enforcement agencies that date back 10, 20, 30 years, back to the Cold War. But they're continually improving. I've spoken to President Putin directly. He's committed to working with me to make sure that those who report to us are cooperating fully in not only this investigation, but how do we work on counterterrorism issues generally.

In terms of the response of the American people, I think everybody can take a cue from Boston. You don't get a sense that anybody is intimidated when they go to Fenway Park a couple days after the bombing. There are joggers right now, I guarantee you, all throughout Boston and Cambridge and Watertown. And I think one of the things that I've been most proud of in watching the country's response to the terrible tragedy there, is a sense of resilience and toughness, and we're not going to be intimidated. We are going to live our lives.

And people, I think, understand that we've got to do everything we can to prevent these kinds of attacks from taking place, but people also understand -- in the same way they understand after a shooting in Aurora or Newtown or Virginia Tech, or after the foiled attempts in Times Square or in Detroit -- that we're not going to stop living our lives because warped, twisted individuals try to intimidate us. We're going to do what we do -- which is go to work, raise our kids, go to ball games, run in marathons. And at the same time, we're going to make sure that everybody is cooperating and is vigilant in doing everything we can, without being naïve, to try to prevent these attacks from happening in the future.

Jonathan Karl.

Q Mr. President, you are a hundred days into your second term. On the gun bill, you put, it seems, everything into it to try to get it passed. Obviously, it didn't. Congress has ignored your efforts to try to get them to undo these sequester cuts. There's even a bill that you threatened to veto that got 92 Democrats in the House voting yes. So my question to you is do you still have the juice to get the rest of your agenda through this Congress?

THE PRESIDENT: If you put it that way, Jonathan -- (laughter) -- maybe I should just pack up and go home. Golly.

I think it's a little -- as Mark Twain said, rumors of my demise may be a little exaggerated at this point.

We understand that we're in a divided government right now. The Republicans control the House of Representatives. In the Senate, this habit of requiring 60 votes for even the most modest piece of legislation has gummed up the works there. And I think it comes as no surprise not even to the American people, but even members of Congress themselves that right now things are pretty dysfunctional up on Capitol Hill.

Despite that, I'm actually confident that there are a range of things that we're going to be able to get done. I feel confident that the bipartisan work that's been done on immigration reform will result in a bill that passes the Senate, passes the House, and gets on my desk. And that's going to be a historic achievement. And I've been very complimentary of the efforts of both Republicans and Democrats in those efforts.

It is true that the sequester is in place right now. It's damaging our economy. It's hurting our people. And we need to lift it. What's clear is, is that the only way we're going to lift it is if we do a bigger deal that meets the test of lowering our deficit and growing our economy at the same time. And that's going to require some compromises on the part of both Democrats and Republicans.

I've had some good conversations with Republican senators so far. Those conversations are continuing. I think there's a genuine desire on many of their parts to move past not only sequester but Washington dysfunction. Whether we can get it done or not, we'll see.

But I think the sequester is a good example -- or this recent FAA issue is a good example. You will recall that even as recently as my campaign, Republicans we're saying, sequester is terrible, this is a disaster, it's going to ruin our military, it's going to be disastrous for the economy -- we've got to do something about it. Then, when it was determined that doing something about it might mean that we close some tax loopholes for the wealthy and the well-connected, suddenly, well, you know what, we'll take the sequester. And the notion was somehow that we had exaggerated the effects of the sequester -- remember? The President is crying wolf. He's Chicken Little. The sequester -- no problem.

And then in rapid succession, suddenly White House tours -- this is terrible! How can we let that happen? Meat inspectors -- we've got to fix that. And, most recently, what are we going to do about potential delays at airports?

So despite the fact that a lot of members of Congress were suggesting that somehow the sequester was a victory for them and this wouldn't hurt the economy, what we now know is what I warned earlier, what Jay stood up here and warned repeatedly, is happening. It's slowed our growth. It's resulting in people being thrown out of work. And it's hurting folks all across the country.

And the fact that Congress responded to the short-term problem of flight delays by giving us the option of shifting money that's designed to repair and improve airports over the long term to fix the short-term problem -- well, that's not a solution. And essentially what

we've done is we've said, in order to avoid delays this summer, we're going to ensure delays for the next two or three decades.

Q Why'd you go along with it?

THE PRESIDENT: Hold on a second.

So the alternative, of course, is either to go ahead and impose a whole bunch of delays on passengers now -- which also does not fix the problem -- or the third alternative is to actually fix the problem by coming up with a broader, larger deal.

But, Jonathon, you seem to suggest that somehow these folks over there have no responsibilities and that my job is to somehow get them to behave. That's their job. They're elected -- members of Congress are elected in order to do what's right for their constituencies and for the American people.

So if, in fact, they are seriously concerned about passenger convenience and safety, then they shouldn't just be thinking about tomorrow or next week or the week after that; they should be thinking about what's going to happen five years from now, 10 years from now, or 15 years from now. The only way to do that is for them to engage with me on coming up with a broader deal. And that's exactly what I'm trying to do -- is to continue to talk to them about are there ways for us to fix this.

Frankly, I don't think that if I were to veto, for example, this FAA bill, that that somehow would lead to the broader fix. It just means that there would be pain now, which they would try to blame on me, as opposed to pain five years from now. But either way, the problem is not getting fixed.

The only way the problem does get fixed is if both parties sit down and they say: How are we going to make sure that we're reducing our deficit sensibly? How are we making sure that we're investing in things like rebuilding our airports and our roads and our bridges, and investing in early childhood education, basic research -- all the things that are going to help us grow? And that's what the American people want.

Just one interesting statistic when it comes to airports. There was a recent survey of the top airports in the country -- in the world, and there was not a single U.S. airport that came in the top 25. Not one. Not one U.S. airport was considered by the experts and consumers who use these airports to be in the top 25 in the world. I think Cincinnati Airport came in around 30th.

What does that say about our long-term competitiveness and future? And so when folks say, well, there was some money in the FAA to deal with these furloughs -- well, yeah, the money is this pool of funds that are supposed to try to upgrade our airports so we don't rank in the bottom of industrialized countries when it comes to our infrastructure.

And that's what we're doing -- we're using our seed corn short term. And the only reason we're doing it is because right now we've got folks who are unwilling to make some simple changes to our tax code, for example, to close loopholes that aren't adding to our

competitiveness and aren't helping middle-class families.

So that's a long way of answering your question, but the point is that there are common-sense solutions to our problems right now. I cannot force Republicans to embrace those common-sense solutions. I can urge them to. I can put pressure on them. I can rally the American people around those common-sense solutions. But ultimately, they, themselves, are going to have to say, we want to do the right thing.

And I think there are members certainly in the Senate right now, and I suspect members in the House as well, who understand that deep down. But they're worried about their politics. It's tough. Their base thinks that compromise with me is somehow a betrayal. They're worried about primaries. And I understand all that. And we're going to try to do everything we can to create a permission structure for them to be able to do what's going to be best for the country. But it's going to take some time.

Bill Plante.

Q Mr. President, as you're probably aware, there's a growing hunger strike on Guantanamo Bay among prisoners there. Is it any surprise really that they would prefer death rather than have no end in sight to their confinement?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it is not a surprise to me that we've got problems in Guantanamo, which is why when I was campaigning in 2007 and 2008, and when I was elected in 2008, I said we need to close Guantanamo. I continue to believe that we've got to close Guantanamo.

Q -- can do it?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think it is critical for us to understand that Guantanamo is not necessary to keep America safe. It is expensive. It is inefficient. It hurts us in terms of our international standing. It lessens cooperation with our allies on counterterrorism efforts. It is a recruitment tool for extremists. It needs to be closed.

Now, Congress determined that they would not let us close it -- and despite the fact that there are a number of the folks who are currently in Guantanamo who the courts have said could be returned to their country of origin or potentially a third country.

I'm going to go back at this. I've asked my team to review everything that's currently being done in Guantanamo, everything that we can do administratively. And I'm going to reengage with Congress to try to make the case that this is not something that's in the best interest of the American people. And it's not sustainable.

The notion that we're going to continue to keep over a hundred individuals in a no-man's land in perpetuity, even at a time when we've wound down the war in Iraq, we're winding down the war in Afghanistan, we're having success defeating al Qaeda core, we've kept the pressure up on all these transnational terrorist networks, when we've transferred

detention authority in Afghanistan -- the idea that we would still maintain forever a group of individuals who have not been tried, that is contrary to who we are, it is contrary to our interests, and it needs to stop.

Now, it's a hard case to make because I think for a lot of Americans the notion is out of sight, out of mind. And it's easy to demagogue the issue. That's what happened the first time this came up. I'm going to go back at it because I think it's important.

Q Meanwhile we continue to force-feed these folks --

THE PRESIDENT: I don't want these individuals to die. Obviously, the Pentagon is trying to manage the situation as best as they can. But I think all of us should reflect on why exactly are we doing this? Why are we doing this? We've got a whole bunch of individuals who have been tried who are currently in maximum security prisons around the country. Nothing has happened to them. Justice has been served. It's been done in a way that's consistent with our Constitution, consistent with due process, consistent with rule of law, consistent with our traditions.

The individual who attempted to bomb Times Square -- in prison, serving a life sentence. The individual who tried to bomb a plane in Detroit -- in prison, serving a life sentence. A Somali who was part of Al-Shabaab, who we captured -- in prison. So we can handle this.

And I understand that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, with the traumas that had taken place, why, for a lot of Americans, the notion was somehow that we had to create a special facility like Guantanamo and we couldn't handle this in a normal, conventional fashion. I understand that reaction. But we're now over a decade out. We should be wiser. We should have more experience in how we prosecute terrorists.

And this is a lingering problem that is not going to get better. It's going to get worse. It's going to fester. And so I'm going to, as I said before, examine every option that we have administratively to try to deal with this issue, but ultimately we're also going to need some help from Congress, and I'm going to ask some folks over there who care about fighting terrorism but also care about who we are as a people to step up and help me on it.

Chuck Todd.

Q Mr. President, thank you. Max Baucus, Democratic Senator, referred to the implementation as your health care law as a potential train wreck. And other Democrats have been whispering nervousness about the implementation and the impact -- and it's all self-centered a little bit -- the impact that it might have on their own political campaigns in 2014. Why do you think -- just curious -- why does Senator Baucus, somebody who ostensibly helped write your bill, believe that this is going to be a train wreck? And why do you believe he's wrong?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think that any time you're implementing something big, there's going to be people who are nervous and anxious about is it going to get done, until it's actually done.

But let's just step back for a second and make sure the American people understand what it is that we're doing. The Affordable Care Act -- Obamacare -- has now been with us for three years. It's gone through Supreme Court tests. It's gone through efforts to repeal. A huge chunk of it has already been implemented. And for the 85 to 90 percent of Americans who already have health insurance, they're already experiencing most of the benefits of the Affordable Care Act even if they don't know it. Their insurance is more secure. Insurance companies can't drop them for bad reasons. Their kids are able to stay on their health insurance until they're 26 years old. They're getting free preventive care.

So there are a whole host of benefits that, for the average American out there, for the 85 to 90 percent of Americans who already have health insurance, this thing has already happened. And their only impact is that their insurance is stronger, better, more secure than it was before. Full stop. That's it. They don't have to worry about anything else.

The implementation issues come in for those who don't have health insurance -- maybe because they have a preexisting condition and the only way they can get health insurance is to go out on the individual market, and they're paying 50 percent or 100 percent more than those of us who are lucky enough to have group plans; people who are too poor to get health insurance and the employers don't offer them. Maybe they work for a small business and this small business can't afford right now to provide health insurance.

So all the implementation issues that are coming up are implementation issues related to that small group of people, 10 to 15 percent of Americans -- now, it's still 30 million Americans, but a relatively narrow group -- who don't have health insurance right now, or are on the individual market and are paying exorbitant amounts for coverage that isn't that great.

And what we're doing is we're setting up a pool so that they can all pool together and get a better deal from insurance companies. And those who can't afford it, we're going to provide them with some subsidies. That's it. I mean, that's what's left to implement, because the other stuff has been implemented and it's working fine.

The challenge is that setting up a market-based system, basically an online marketplace where you can go on and sign up and figure out what kind of insurance you can afford and figuring out how to get the subsidies -- that's still a big, complicated piece of business.

And when you're doing it nationwide, relatively fast, and you've got half of Congress who is determined to try to block implementation and not adequately funding implementation, and then you've got a number of members of -- or governors -- Republican governors -- who know that it's bad politics for them to try to implement this effectively, and some even who have decided to implement it and then their Republican-controlled state legislatures say, don't implement, and won't pass enabling legislation -- when you have that kind of situation, that makes it harder.

But having said all that, we've got a great team in place. We are pushing very hard to make sure that we're hitting all the deadlines and the benchmarks.

I'll give you an example, a recent example. We put together, initially, an application form for signing up for participation in the exchanges that was initially about 21 pages long, and immediately everybody sat around the table and said, well, this is too long. Especially in this age of the Internet, people aren't going to have the patience to sit there for hours on end. Let's streamline this thing. So we cut what was a 21-page form now down to a form that's about three pages for an individual, a little more than that for a family -- well below the industry average. So those kinds of refinements we're going to continue to be working on.

But I think the main message I want to give to the American people here is, despite all the hue and cry and "sky is falling" predictions about this stuff, if you've already got health insurance, then that part of Obamacare that affects you, it's pretty much already in place. And that's about 85 percent of the country.

What is left to be implemented is those provisions to help the 10 to 15 percent of the American public that is unlucky enough that they don't have health insurance. And by the way, some of you who have health insurance right now, at some point you may lose your health insurance, and if you've got a preexisting condition, this structure will make sure that you are not left vulnerable.

But it's still a big undertaking. And what we're doing is making sure that every single day we are constantly trying to hit our marks so that it will be in place.

And the last point I'll make -- even if we do everything perfectly, there will still be glitches and bumps, and there will be stories that can be written that say, oh, look, this thing is not working the way it's supposed to, and this happened and that happened. And that's pretty much true of every government program that's ever been set up. But if we stay with it and we understand what our long-term objective is -- which is making sure that in a country as wealthy as ours, nobody should go bankrupt if they get sick, and that we would rather have people getting regular checkups than going to the emergency room because they don't have health care -- if we keep that in mind, then we're going to be able to drive down costs; we're going to be able to improve efficiencies in the system; we're going to be able to see people benefit from better health care. And that will save the country money as a whole over the long term.

Q Do you believe, without the cooperation of a handful of governors, particularly large states like Florida and Texas, that you can fully implement this?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it's harder. There's no doubt about it.

Q But can you do it without them?

THE PRESIDENT: We will implement it. There will be -- we have a backup federal exchange. If states aren't cooperating, we set up a federal exchange so that people can access that federal exchange.

But, yes, it puts more of a burden on us. And it's ironic, since all these folks say that they believe in empowering states, that they're going to end up having the federal government do something that we'd actually prefer states to do if they were properly cooperating.

Let's see how we're doing on time here. Last question. Antonieta Cadiz -- where's Antonieta? There you are. Tell those big guys to get out of your way. (Laughter.)

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Two questions. There are concerns about how the immigration bill from the House has complicated chances for immigration reform in the Senate. It seems to be a more conservative proposal. Is there room for a more conservative proposal than the one presented in the Senate? That's immigration.

Second, on Mexico -- yesterday, the Mexican government said all contact with the U.S. law enforcement will now go through a single door, the Federal Interior Ministry. Is this change good for the U.S. relationship with Mexico? Do you think the level of security and cooperation can be maintained?

THE PRESIDENT: On immigration reform, I've been impressed by the work that was done by the Gang of Eight in the Senate. The bill that they produced is not the bill that I would have written, there are elements of it that I would change, but I do think that it meets the basic criteria that I laid out from the start, which is: We've got to have more effective border security -- although it should build on the great improvements that have been made on border security over the last four to five years. We should make sure that we are cracking down on employers that are gaming the system. We should make the legal immigration system work more effectively so that the waits are not as burdensome, the bureaucracy is not as complicated, so that we can continue to attract the best and the brightest from around the world to our shores in a legal fashion. And we want to make sure that we've got a pathway to citizenship that is tough, but allows people to earn over time their legal status here in this country.

And the Senate bill meets those criteria -- in some cases not in the way that I would, but it meets those basic criteria. And I think it's a testament to the senators that were involved that they made some tough choices and made some tough compromises in order to hammer out that bill.

Now, I haven't seen what members of the House are yet proposing. And maybe they think that they can answer some of those questions differently or better. And I think we've got to be open-minded in seeing what they come up with. The bottom line, though, is, is that they've still got to meet those basic criteria: Is it making the border safer? Is it dealing with employers in how they work with the government to make sure that people are not being taken advantage of, or taking advantage of the system? Are we improving our legal immigration system? And are we creating a pathway for citizenship for the 11 million or so who are undocumented in this country?

And if they meet those criteria but they're slightly different than the Senate bill, then I think that we should be able to come up with an appropriate compromise. If it doesn't meet those criteria, then I will not support such a bill. So we'll have to wait and see.

When it comes to Mexico, I'm very much looking forward to taking the trip down to Mexico to see the new President, Peña Nieto. I had a chance to meet him here, but this will be the first, more extensive consultations and it will be an opportunity for his ministers, my Cabinet members who are participating to really hammer out some of these issues.

A lot of the focus is going to be on economics. We've spent so much time on security issues between the United States and Mexico that sometimes I think we forget this is a massive trading partner responsible for huge amounts of commerce and huge numbers of jobs on both sides of the border. We want to see how we can deepen that, how we can improve that and maintain that economic dialogue over a long period of time.

That doesn't mean that we're not going to be talking about security. I think that in my first conversation with the President, he indicated to me that he very much continues to be concerned about how we can work together to deal with transnational drug cartels.

We've made great strides in the coordination and cooperation between our two governments over the last several years. But my suspicion is, is that things can be improved.

And some of the issues that he's talking about really had to do with refinements and improvements in terms of how Mexican authorities work with each other, how they coordinate more effectively, and it has less to do with how they're dealing with us, per se.

So I'm not going to yet judge how this will alter the relationship between the United States and Mexico until I've heard directly from them to see what exactly are they trying to accomplish.

But, overall, what I can say is that my impression is, is that the new President is serious about reform. He's already made some tough decisions. I think he's going to make more that will improve the economy and security of Mexican citizens, and that will improve the bilateral relationship as well.

And I don't want to leave out that we're also going to be talking to, during my visit to Costa Rica, Presidents of Central American countries, many of whom are struggling with both economic issues and security issues, but are important partners for us -- because I think that the vision here is that we want to make sure that our hemisphere is more effectively integrated to improve the economy and security of all people. That's good for the United States. That will enhance our economy. That can improve our energy independence.

There are a whole range of opportunities, and that's going to be the purpose of this trip. And I'm sure that those of you who will have the chance to travel with me we'll have a chance to discuss this further.

All right? Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you, guys.

Q Jason Collins? Do you want to say anything about it?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I'll say something about Jason Collins. I had a chance to talk to him yesterday. He seems like a terrific young man. And I told him I couldn't be prouder of him.

One of the extraordinary measures of progress that we've seen in this country has been the recognition that the LGBT community deserves full equality -- not just partial equality, not just tolerance, but a recognition that they're fully a part of the American family.

And given the importance of sports in our society, for an individual who has excelled at the highest levels in one of the major sports to go ahead and say, this is who I am, I'm proud of it, I'm still a great competitor, I'm still seven foot tall and can bang with Shaq -- (laughter) -- and deliver a hard foul -- and for I think a lot of young people out there who are gay or lesbian who are struggling with these issues, to see a role model like that who is unafraid, I think it's a great thing.

And I think America should be proud that this is just one more step in this ongoing recognition that we treat everybody fairly, and everybody is part of a family, and we judge people on the basis of their character and their performance and not their sexual orientation. So I'm very proud of him.

All right?

END

11:34 A.M. EDT