

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/18/2015

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. TGIF. The fourth of four consecutive briefings this week, which has been a pleasure. I hope today's goes well, as well.

Q Week ahead? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I do have a week ahead. I'd be happy to jump right to it, if that's where we wanted to go. Let me do a short announcement at the top and then we'll take a least a couple of questions.

On December 17th, President Obama announced historic changes to our nation's Cuba policy, beginning the process of normalizing relations between our two countries. The embargo remains in effect, but over the past year the administration has worked to enhance trade and commerce with Cuba, and published regulatory changes to existing Cuba sanctions.

Today, the Departments of the Treasury and Commerce took additional steps to implement the President's new policy direction, announcing additional revisions to existing Cuba sanctions that will further advance our goal of empowering the Cuban people. The United States remains committed to our enduring objective of promoting a more prosperous Cuba that respects the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all its people. We believe the regulatory changes announced today will allow the United States to continue to advance our interests and improve the lives of ordinary Cubans.

So for more specific details about some of those technical changes, I'd refer you to the Department of Treasury and the Department of Commerce, respectively. But it's an important step in advancing the policy changes that the President announced at the end of last year.

So with that out of the way, Darlene, let's go to your questions.

Q Great, thanks. Staying on Cuba, could you talk a little bit about why the administration thinks that now is the right time to do what you're doing in Cuba in terms of easing travel and making it easier for American citizens to do business there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Darlene, this is part of the policy process that the President envisioned and kicked off back in December of last year. For more than five decades, the policy -- the United States had pursued a policy of isolation against Cuba, and the thinking behind the implementation and strict enforcement of that policy was that by isolating Cuba we could compel them to change their habits when it comes to the government's respect for basic human rights.

And for more than five decades, the Cuban government essentially ignored the policy of the United States, freely engaged with a variety of other countries around the hemisphere and around the world, and our efforts didn't have -- or didn't yield the kind of results we were looking for. And after five decades, or more than five decades of that policy, the President determined that it would be more effective for the United States to begin engaging not just the Cuban government, but also the Cuban people. And the goal of some of these policy changes is to deepen our engagement with the Cuban people.

I'll just cite one example. And this is something you can get more detail from the Treasury Department on. But some of the policy changes enacted today relate to telecommunications and Internet-based services. Ensuring that the Cuban people have greater access to information is one way that we can give them greater opportunity, certainly more exposure to the kinds of values that we prioritize in this country. And we believe that will be in the best interest of our goal of empowering the Cuban people.

Q What steps has Cuba taken or has told the administration it will take as part of this process of normalizing relations between the two countries? It seems like the U.S. is the one that's making all the moves.

MR. EARNEST: Well, the U.S. is certainly capitalizing on opportunities to take some of these steps. Obviously the business community here in the United States is strongly supportive of some of these steps that have been announced by the administration, including some of these regulatory changes.

So while our principal goal here is empowering the Cuban people, there's an intended benefit for the American people too. It advances our interests in the hemisphere, and it certainly opens up some business opportunities for American businesses that are interested in capitalizing on the markets that exist in Cuba.

There's also the potential that some of these changes would ease travel restrictions and make it a little bit easier for individuals to travel to Cuba. The embargo hasn't changed; we still want Congress to take action to remove the embargo. But some of the regulatory changes would enhance people-to-people exchanges between the United States and Cuba. We believe that that's good for the Cuban people, but there are benefits for Americans, as

well. And that's, again, a policy that would not have been possible had we continued to adhere to this failed policy of isolation that didn't advance our interests and didn't yield the kinds of changes on the island nation of Cuba that we'd like to see.

Q By now you've probably seen clips on television of Donald Trump in New Hampshire, and the question he got from someone who said the President is a Muslim and is not an American. Are you surprised that that issue is still out there and still coming up after the President tried to put it to rest a few years ago by releasing his birth certificate?

MR. EARNEST: It's funny the way that you've phrased your question. I had the opportunity to think through what my answer might be to this kind of question. (Laughter.) But I think my first observation is, is anybody really surprised that this happened at a Donald Trump rally? I don't think that anybody who's been paying attention to Republican politics is at all surprised.

The reason for that is that the people who hold these offensive views are part of Mr. Trump's base. And Mr. Trump himself would be the first to tell you that he's got the biggest base of any Republican politician these days. Now, it is too bad that he wasn't able to summon the same kind of patriotism that we saw from Senator McCain who responded much more effectively and directly when one of his supporters at one of his campaign events about seven years ago raised the same kind of false claims.

Now, what's also unfortunate is that Mr. Trump isn't the first Republican politician to countenance these kinds of views in order to win votes. In fact, that's precisely what every Republican presidential candidate is doing when they declined to denounce Mr. Trump's cynical strategy, because they're looking for those same votes. Now, other Republicans have successfully used this strategy as well. You'll recall that one Republican congressman told a reporter that he was "David Duke without the baggage." That congressman was elected by a majority of his colleagues in the House of Representatives to the third highest-ranking position in the House.

Those same members of Congress blocked immigration reform. Those same members of Congress oppose reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act. Those same members of Congress couldn't support a simple funding bill because they're eager to defend the confederate flag. So those are the priorities of today's Republican Party, and they'll continue to be until someone in the Republican Party decides to summon the courage to stand up and change it.

Q Should Donald Trump apologize to the President?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not really -- I haven't seen any evidence to indicate that he's interested in my advice about what he should do.

Ayesha.

Q Hi. So I wanted to ask, Secretary Kerry said today in London that the U.S. believes that military talks with Russia regarding Syria are an important next step. And the Pentagon today said Secretary Carter spoke with the Russian Defense Minister. I wanted

to ask, what are the plans for additional talks with Russia, and at what level do you expect them to occur? And what specific issues does the administration believe needs to be ironed out in these talks?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we have hinted for a couple of days now that we believed there would be some value in some tactical, practical discussions with the Russians about how to advance the goals of our counter-ISIL operation, and to ensure the safe conduct of those anti-ISIL operations.

Secretary Carter did have the opportunity to speak to his Russian counterpart today. And they agreed in the context of those conversations to discuss further mechanisms for de-confliction in Syria, essentially making sure that the actions of our counter-ISIL coalition don't come into conflict with any Russian military actions that they may have planned for Syria.

I'll repeat one point that I think is something I've said before but bears repeating, which is that Russia has long had a military presence inside of Syria because they essentially used Syria as a client state in the Middle East and they were an important part of propping up the Assad regime.

The fact is, we have seen the Assad regime become isolated, lose its legitimacy to lead that country, and according to many analysts, begin to lose its grip on power. That's why we've described doubling down on Assad as a losing bet for Russia. And we're going to continue to encourage Russia to find a constructive way to support ongoing counter-ISIL operations inside of Syria.

Q On a separate issue, today a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said that China is extremely concerned about the comments from Admiral Harry Harris that the U.S. should challenge some of China's claim for territory in the South China Sea by patrolling close to some of the artificial islands. China urged the U.S. not to take risky or provocative actions. What is the administration's response to these concerns raised by China?

MR. EARNEST: I didn't see the Admiral's comments so I can't respond to those directly. I can say as a general matter that we have long encouraged China to find a constructive, diplomatic way to work with other countries that have claims in the South China Sea to try to resolve the differences of opinion there.

The stakes of resolving those tensions are not insignificant. The fact is, the South China Sea is a significant area when it comes to international trade; that there's a lot of international trade that moves through those waters. And it's in the interest of all the countries in that region of the world and it's in the interest of countries like the United States that have an impact on the global economy to ensure that those tensions don't interfere with the free flow of commerce.

So what we have steadfastly urged the Chinese to do is to engage with other countries in that region to find a diplomatic resolution to some of these differences. And we are strongly supportive of the efforts of those other countries to find a diplomatic resolution with the Chinese.

Jim.

Q I know that with respect to Donald Trump and what happened at that rally, and the comments that you made, I know that you said that they are a reflection of what's going on inside the Republican Party and certainly at Donald Trump rallies. But I'm just curious if you think there's a more deeply rooted issue here, and that this has been going on inside this country ever since Barack Obama was running for President. And what does it say about political culture in this country? And is it disappointing to the President to hear that this is still going on, months before he leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, I think the first thing the President would say is that there is a long history throughout American politics of a robust and in some cases quite tough rhetorical debate on a range of political issues. So it's not the toughness of the debate that the President is concerned about.

I think more broadly the concern is that we've seen a variety of leaders in the Republican Party countenance offensive views just to try to win some votes. That's had a significant impact on the presidential race, but it's also had a significant impact on the ability of Congress to function effectively and to pass legislation like immigration reform that has broad bipartisan support across the country, would do good things for our economy, would reduce the deficit. But yet it's blocked by Republicans who countenance some of those views.

And I think that's the point here is that this is a cynical strategy that too many Republican politicians have dabbled in because for some of them it's proved to be successful. But there are consequences for it. There are consequences for their ability to govern the country and there are consequences at the ballot box, too, because I'm confident that voters are paying attention.

Q And apparently Donald Trump's campaign has said, well, he didn't hear the comment. What do you make of that?

MR. EARNEST: That's not what he said.

Q And Hillary Clinton apparently said at one of her campaign events that if the Obama administration doesn't hurry up with a decision on Keystone, she is going to let her feelings be known soon. What did you make of that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, in some ways these Keystone questions are some of the easiest ones that I have to answer because, fortunately, all of you already know the answer to them, which is that there is an ongoing process at the State Department, where this particular project is being considered, that's consistent with the way that these infrastructure projects have been considered by previous administrations and it's why -- and it's the way that this administration is considering this project.

I would acknowledge that this project -- the consideration of this project has taken longer than many previous projects. There are a variety of reasons for that, including that there are some -- litigation by some people would be affected by the construction of the pipeline

that has delayed the consideration of this study that's being conducted by the State Department.

But for timing in terms of when this review will be completed, I'd refer you to the State Department.

Q Shouldn't she know that about the process since she was Secretary of State?

MR. EARNEST: I think that she does, but I think that she is also articulating a view that I've heard from many of you, which is that you're eager to hear an answer. And as soon as we have one, we'll let you know.

Mark.

Q Can I follow up just about the South China Sea?

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q It's been -- I believe it was 2012 the last time U.S. warships passed through some of these disputed waters. And there was some suggestion at a Capitol Hill hearing yesterday that it's time for the administration to send some more U.S. warships through those waters. What's the response to that? Is it in consideration at least?

MR. EARNEST: For those kinds of operational decisions, Mark, I'd send you to the Department of Defense. I'm not suggesting that --

Q For goodness sake, Josh, that's something that would not happen without the President's say-so.

MR. EARNEST: I was just going to say, I'm not suggesting that the Commander-in-Chief wouldn't have a view on that. But at least for questions about the last time that this occurred, I don't have that information in front of me. The Department of Defense would have that.

But what we have indicated is that it's important for these kinds of disputes to be resolved diplomatically among the parties who are directly involved. And the United States has a clear stake in the peaceful resolution of those disputes because there are significant economic consequences for some of those differences of opinion having an impact on global trade. And there are significant -- there's a significant flow of U.S. products from the United States to markets in Asia and other places around the world that traverse those waters. And we want to make sure that that flow of commerce is not interrupted. It would have significant consequences for the U.S. economy and that's the stake that we have in resolving it.

But I don't have a policy position to share with you in terms of any upcoming operational decisions about the deployment of U.S. warships in that region of the world.

Q You don't think it's a policy matter the U.S. ought to be sending warships through those waters to assert the right of freedom of navigation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, at this point I don't have any additional details about what may be in the works here.

Victoria.

Q Yes. You've talked about the Trump-Muslim-Obama-non-American thing from a policy and political point of view, but I'd like to address it more from President Obama and how he feels about this personally at this point -- point of view. Does this annoy him? Does it irritate him? Does it amuse him? Does it flummox him? Is he upset about it? What is his response to it? It has gone on for years now.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, well, I think that for that reason, because these are the kinds of questions that all -- many of us have had to answer in a variety of different settings, including on places like buses in Iowa, that I think we're all sort of long past being particularly concerned about them. I think that the bigger concern, and I think, frankly, the most relevant issue here is the frequency with which significant, influential players in Republican politics continue to countenance these views as they build political support. And that has consequences. It has consequences for the ability of a Republican majority in Congress to run the country, to pass common-sense legislation that has strong bipartisan support across the country. But it also has consequences in terms of the way that voters across the country view the Republican Party and view the candidates that are running under the Republican Party banner.

Q Why do you think that the view that President Obama is a Muslim of 43 percent in this latest CNN poll among Republicans just seems to be if not growing, at least staying the same, that it just doesn't tap down. Why do you think that is?

MR. EARNEST: I have no idea. I have no idea.

Devon.

Q Thanks, Josh. I wanted to ask about the other part of the Trump controversy. His campaign, as Jim said, says he didn't hear the question but also that the questioner, who is kind of in the spotlight here, mentioned Muslim terrorist training camps preceding his question, so they're saying that Mr. Trump was referring to wanting to get rid of these Muslim terrorist training camps. Does the White House have any view on these supposed camps? Are there Muslim terrorist training camps in this country, in your view?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen anybody produce any evidence to substantiate the claim that there are. So I guess you could say that I think the vast majority of Americans would take a rather dim view of those views.

Q And Hillary Clinton today, she's campaigning in New Hampshire. She said a couple times talking about the economy that she believes the economy is stalled and it's stalled domestically. She used that word a couple times today for the first time. Is it the administration's view that the economy is stalled?

MR. EARNEST: It's not. I think you heard the President talk about this at the Business Roundtable earlier this week that our economy has made really important progress since recovering from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression; that we're in the midst of the longest, sustained stretch of private-sector job growth in the history of the country. And whether you evaluate our progress by looking at job creation, the unemployment rate that's been cut nearly in half since its peak five or six years ago, if you take a look at GDP growth, even despite the volatility in the financial markets, even the stock market has rebounded significantly from the depths of the economic recession.

Now, what's true is that the President believes that there is a whole lot more than can and should be done to advance our recovery and make sure that more middle-class families are benefitting from it. There's no denying that. In fact, that's one of our principal arguments about why Republicans shouldn't follow through with threatening to shut down the government. But there's also no denying the significant progress and momentum that our nation's economy has built up. In fact, that's why our economy right now is the envy of the world.

Q Does it trouble the White House, though, that she's out there saying -- pushing the view that's so contrary to what you just said?

MR. EARNEST: Not particularly.

Q And real quickly, just on her comments on the Keystone pipeline. Setting aside the whole process, her question, wanting to put the White House on notice so to suggest that it's your view, the White House view, that perhaps she show deference to the President before she announces her view. Is there any indication from the White House that she should wait to say what she thinks about this?

MR. EARNEST: Oh, I've been, on a number of occasions, been given the opportunity to offer campaign advice to the Clinton campaign, and I have a lot of good friends and colleagues who are slaving away on that campaign and they don't need advice from me.

Q But you're saying the White House doesn't have a preference as to when she makes her declaration?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what I'm saying is that she is entitled to make her own decisions about what she says in the context of her campaign.

Justin.

Q Your counterpart in Moscow today said that Russia would be willing to consider sending combat troops into Syria if they were requested by the Assad regime. And so I'm wondering, first, if that was an issue that was discussed directly in Ash Carter's phone call today. And then more broadly, kind of on this outreach effort, why sort of in light of what happened in Ukraine you guys find this dialogue with Russia helpful and why you think there is some reason for optimism in discussing with President Putin these issues and trying to get him to deescalate this conflict.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have more details about Secretary Carter's telephone call that I can share with you. I think it is notable that the kind of military-to-military cooperation that we're seeking to restart here is cooperation at a practical, tactical level. That's obviously different than the kind of military-to-military cooperation between our two countries that was in place prior to Russia's inappropriate and unjust interference in eastern Ukraine. So our goal here is to pursue this practical cooperation to try to advance the interests of our anti-ISIL coalition and to try safeguard as much as possible the operations that are underway as a part of that mission inside of Syria.

Q Switching topics. French diplomats have said that Ban Ki-moon and other U.N. officials are trying to organize a conference of 40 world leaders, including the President, on the day before UNGA to talk about climate change. I know that you haven't formally the President's schedule, but I'm wondering if you can talk about whether the President would be attending that, and a little bit about if you see that as important in the buildup to Paris.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have details about the President's schedule yet, but we should have more details on that soon. What I can say is that the United States, and certainly the President, does believe that the United Nations has played and will continue to play an important coordinating function in trying to bring the world together to make some significant commitments to fight climate change. And there are talks that are scheduled for the end of this year in Paris, where leaders or representatives of nations will come hopefully ready to make some serious commitments.

And the United States, in coordination with China, has made some significant commitments. The Chinese have made significant commitments to reducing carbon pollution in the context of those talks as well. There are other countries, like South Korea and Mexico, that have also announced steps.

So it's the policy of this administration that those talks in Paris could serve as a very important catalyst for eliciting commitments from countries around the world, thus making an important contribution to reducing carbon pollution. So there clearly is an important role for the United Nations to play here, and the United States has been playing, as you'd expect, a leading role in encouraging countries around the world to make significant commitments in the context of those talks.

So we obviously are strongly supportive of the process that's being run by the United Nations. We are taking an active role to try to ensure its success, but there's a lot of important work that needs to get done. But we'll have more details on the President's itinerary in New York next week.

Q After attending that after a couple of days -- after the meeting with Senator Reid and Leader Pelosi yesterday, you guys said that you'd back a CR. I'm wondering if a requirement for that CR would be reauthorizing the Ex-Im Bank, if that's sort of the concrete principle that you guys are holding.

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point I don't have any contingencies to add on here. What we are seeking to do is to find a way to get Republicans in Congress to accept the invitation that's been on the table from Democrats for months now to engage in bipartisan talks to try to resolve the budget standoff. And we've taken what I think is merely a realistic approach to acknowledging the facts, which is that Republicans have put off these talks for so long that it now is difficult to imagine that they'd be able to reach a bipartisan budget agreement before the deadline.

So, that said, the President's opposition to locking in the sequester is steadfast. And that's why I would not envision a long extension of funding at current levels, but rather enough time for Congress to finally convene the talks, reach an agreement, and implement it, thereby avoiding a government shutdown but also ensuring that our national security and economic priorities are properly funded.

Q One last quick one on Hillary, since she seems to be in vogue today. I noticed yesterday in the briefing you said that sort of what had been going on with the Syrian -- the training of Syrian rebels was an indication that those who had been kind of pushing arming the Syrian rebels was the solution to the process there had been wrong, and you said that it was time for them to sort of admit it. I'm wondering if Secretary Clinton is one of those people who you think should be kind of admitting after this that she'd been wrong on this issue.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the point that I'm making is that there are some -- and I would not put Secretary Clinton necessarily in this category. There are some who have suggested that this essentially the only necessary part of the strategy for success inside of Syria. And I'll let Secretary Clinton describe her position, but I think that she -- I feel confident in saying that she, while she was in office and serving under the President, was supportive of the kind of multilayered approach that we've been pursuing inside of Syria. And that's everything from airstrikes in support of operations on the ground; some support for opposition groups inside of Syria that have made important progress against ISIL there; trying to prioritize the counter-financing operations to essentially shut off the strategies that ISIL uses to fund their activities. We've also been actively working with our allies to -- and our partners to try to stop the flow of foreign fighters to Syria.

This is an important multifaceted strategy that we're trying to implement here. One aspect of that strategy has been a training-and-equipping operation. And as I mentioned earlier, that is something that has proved to be even more difficult than we expected, despite the important cooperation that we've gotten from some other countries in the region.

So I think the reason that I have cited this is that we have frequently found that our most ardent critics when it comes to the situation in Syria have very little to say when asked about alternative policies that they think would work better. And the most frequently mentioned one is typically a backward-looking suggestion that we should have at an earlier date been more aggressive about providing arms to fighters, and seeking to train and equip more of them.

And the President's view is that it would have been unwise to provide that kind of assistance without thoroughly vetting and getting to know the individuals who would be receiving it. And there are good historical lessons to be learned about the value of being responsible when providing that kind of assistance.

Byron.

Q Thanks, Josh. There's an independent report out today that says the VA needs a "system-wide reworking." The report says that the VA has significant flaws, including the blow to bureaucracy, problems with leadership, and a potentially unsustainable capital budget. Can I get the White House reaction to this report?

MR. EARNEST: Byron, I haven't seen the report. I've heard, though, that it's some 1,400 pages long. So I don't have a comprehensive response to offer you. I will just say, as a general matter, the President has made it a priority to ensure that America's veterans are getting the kind of health care and benefits that they have so richly earned.

And the President and this administration have implemented a variety of reforms, including the nomination of Bob McDonald to the VA Secretary. He's somebody that had a particular experience in the private sector when it comes to customer service and understanding processes and operations to try to streamline and reform the processes at the VA. And the early metrics of the reforms that he's put in place are encouraging.

We've made important progress. But the President, Secretary McDonald and other senior officials at the VA are not going to rest until we have accomplished our goal of making sure that all of our veterans are getting the kind of care and benefits that they deserve on time.

Q I know you were asked about this yesterday, but we reported today that a transgender Catholic activist, an outspoken nun, and a gay episcopal bishop will all be here at the White House for the Pope's visit. Is the White House trying to make a statement by inviting these folks? Is the White House planning on raising any LGBT issues with the Pope when he's here?

MR. EARNEST: Byron, I think the goal here is to invite up to 15,000 people to the South Lawn of the White House and the Ellipse to welcome the Pope to the White House. And there's been overwhelming interest in attending that ceremony. And we've worked with religious organizations, including some Catholic organizations, to distribute tickets to that event. And we would expect a wide variety of Americans, who are enthused about the opportunity, to see the Pope. And I think that reflects the Pope's stature and the significance of his visit, and the way that he has inspired so many Americans, including a bunch of us that aren't Catholic.

So I would expect that there would be a diverse crowd on the South Lawn of the White House and on the Ellipse to attend that ceremony. And again, I think the diversity of that crowd reflects the diversity of people in this country that are moved by the teachings and actions of this Pope.

Q One more. You've said that the power to determine oil export rules properly belongs at the Commerce Department. Is that correct?

MR. EARNEST: That is correct.

Q If my memory serves, didn't the President propose eliminating the Commerce Department? And if he still supports that plan, what agency does he think that power belongs to, or should belong to? And why not Congress?

MR. EARNEST: Byron, I believe what the President proposed several years ago is merging the Commerce Department with a number of other government agencies that have I think what you could call overlapping jurisdictions. And this is a process that I think got started over at OMB, I believe -- they started taking a look at this. But ironically we've run into some pretty stiff congressional opposition to putting in place what I think otherwise could be described as some pretty common-sense reforms.

The goal of making those changes is not to shirk basic governmental responsibility, like determining the policies about oil exports, but rather to make sure that those policies are made and coordinated more efficiently. And that was the goal of that particular proposal, but it hasn't made much progress in the face of stiff opposition from Republicans in Capitol Hill.

Q But under those common-sense reforms, where would the power to determine oil exports go, do you know?

MR. EARNEST: Presumably it would -- I haven't looked at specific proposals in quite some time. I don't know if there was a proposal to move it to another existing agency, or if that authority would reside in the newly formed agency.

Mark.

Q Josh, you mentioned the Business Roundtable speech a little while ago. In that speech, President Obama stressed that the deficits have come down on his watch, but he didn't mention the extent to which the national debt has risen on his watch. In fact, he rarely mentions the debt. Is that an oversight, or does he not fear that is a heavy burden on the economy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Mark, what most economists and the President are focused on is the sustainability of the debt. And that is why we have been so focused on driving down the deficit to try to get to a level that is sustainable compared to the overall size of the economy. And that's the case that we have regularly made. I know that case has often fallen on deaf ears when talking to some Republicans about this. But the fact is, the best way for us to pursue a responsible budget approach is to make smart spending decisions that reduces the deficit down to a sustainable level without shortchanging the kinds of investments that are so critical to overall economic growth. That overall economic growth is significant to preserving some fiscal stability. And we've made remarkable progress over the President's tenure in office in reducing the deficit by nearly two-thirds at this point.

Q Does President Obama believe the debt is sustainable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point, Mark, what economists tell us is that getting the debt and deficit -- or getting the deficit down to this level below three percent does sort of put us on a sustainable trajectory, and will allow us to continue to make smart investments that we know are critical to economic growth while at the same time ensuring that we're making responsible fiscal decisions.

Q On another subject, in an interview this week with "60 Minutes," President Rouhani was asked about the oft used chant by Iranians, "death to America," and he said it's not aimed at the American people, but American policies. Do you believe that? Does that give you any source for comfort?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen the entire interview at this point, so I think I'll withhold judgment on that until we get a chance to see the interview. But I think it's going to air on Sunday night, right?

Q Right.

MR. EARNEST: So there's the free plug. (Laughter.)

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. Just a quick one on UNGA, and you talked a little bit earlier about making agreements with China on climate change. Have you made any headway in conversations with other emerging economies, large economies, like Brazil and India, ahead of Paris, in particular?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update on the status of deliberations in those other countries. I think that we've been quite clear that when the President has met with the leaders of those countries this is an issue that rates highly on their agenda. The President traveled to India at the beginning of this year and climate change was among the topics that was discussed between the two leaders. And you saw at the news conference that President Obama convened with President Rousseff where they talked about the importance of continued U.S.-Brazilian cooperation when it comes to steps that would address climate change and reducing carbon pollution.

So these issues are certainly on the agenda at the presidential level, and I know that there are other conversations between officials in our countries and those countries that you mentioned about this topic that are ongoing.

Q I know we've also talked a little bit in here about so-called manipulation of intelligence information. Recently we heard from the head of the House Intelligence Committee that he believes that as far back as 2012, intelligence may have been manipulated. Any response to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, what we are focused on is dealing in facts and in evidence, and that's exactly what the Inspector General is taking a look at. And so I'm going to withhold judgment on that until the Inspector General's work has been completed.

I'll just restate the principle that I've stated before, which is that this President and senior members of his team are not interested in cooked-up numbers or doctored facts; they're actually interested in ground truth because that is what will best serve the policymaking and decision-making process that the President takes quite seriously.

Q And simply for the record, without qualification, no one in this administration exerted any pressure on anyone at the intelligence level to shade or create an environment that was in any way inaccurate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm certainly not aware of anything like that. Certainly the President wouldn't approve of anything like that. But again, I don't even think that's the accusation that the Inspector General is investigating at this point. The Inspector General, I believe -- it the Department of Defense Inspector General that is considering actions that may or may not have been taken by a range of officials inside the Department of Defense. I don't think there's any accusations that have been made against White House officials.

Q And just two more, real quick. H.R.3504 says it would impose new legal requirements related to the provision of abortion services in certain circumstances which would likely have a chilling effect, reducing access to care -- that was part of a statement that you all made about the Born Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act. I just want to ask you about your statement -- it would likely have a chilling effect on access. Do you have any empirical evidence to prove that? Or is there something that you're pointing to specifically and you can say that's what happened?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I do think that is the assessment of many public health professionals who have taken a look at this, that essentially this kind of legislation could serve to put some health care providers out of business, and those are health care providers that many families rely on on a regular basis. So we can refer you to a health care expert that may have more specific explanation to describe to you if you would like.

Q And because it's Friday, I always like to throw a sports question in there. You're a Kansas City guy, right?

MR. EARNEST: Yeah.

Q So how about that loss to the Broncos last night? Any words for the down-trodden folks in Kansas City after suffering what had to be a brutal loss last night? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I think "brutal" is the way to describe it. It was quite disappointing. I think what I would say is that I think it's after tough losses like that that character is revealed. And I think we're going to learn about this team in the next couple of weeks, and how they respond to it I think will give us a very good indication of how optimistic we can be about the rest of the year.

So we'll be tuning in on Monday to see how they fare against the Packers. Next Monday, of course.

Chris.

Q Well, if that's how you measure character, as a lifelong Cleveland fan, I just want to say I have a lot of it. (Laughter.) But that's neither here nor there. Let me ask about the meeting yesterday, 90 minutes of the leaders and the President. When they came out, Nancy Pelosi suggested that she was still optimistic about a budget deal, and Harry Reid kind of joked that he's always on the other end of the spectrum. And I wonder where the President is -- is he closer to Nancy Pelosi right now, or Harry Reid on prospects for a deal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say that I think right now the President is in the mode of trying to find some cause for optimism.

Q Successfully trying to find --

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's still a work in progress. The President is -- we know -- and again, when I say "we," I don't just mean the President and me; I mean that anybody who's been observing these sort of budget battles over the years, we know how to solve this problem and we know what it takes to avoid a government shutdown and to make the kind of bipartisan compromises that are so clearly in the best interests of the country and our economy.

And the best way to reach those compromises is for Democrats and Republicans to sit down together in good faith and broker a compromise. And it will yield a compromise that I feel confident in predicting will have me saying things like, "this piece of legislation is not perfect, but the President is prepared to sign it because he knows that it's good for the economy." And my counterparts on the other side of the aisle can certainly say the same thing. That's what we're looking for here. We're not looking for the perfect piece of legislation. We're just looking for the kind of bipartisan compromise that prevents a government shutdown, that adequately funds our national security priorities, and makes sure that we're not shortchanging the kinds of investments that are critical to the success of middle-class families.

That's the recipe. That's the package. And it shouldn't be too hard to find some bipartisan common ground on that. I would acknowledge that the devil is in the details and we're going to have some differences of opinion about how to implement those priorities. But if we're guided by those priorities and we're guided by the best interests of the American people, then a budget agreement should be achievable.

So I guess that puts -- let me say, I think that at least puts me in the optimism camp.

Q There are 12 days to go, though, and a lot of that time they'll just have -- the House is scheduled not to be in session. Do you have any doubt that this is going to go down to the wire, to the 29th or 30th?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that is typical of Congress that they're going to wait until the very last minute before they make a decision. So I would not be surprised if we're a day or two before the deadline and we're still waiting on Congress to pass legislation to at least prevent a shutdown. But what we're interested in -- and as Leader Reid and Leader Pelosi indicated yesterday, we're willing to go along with a short-term CR to give members of Congress time to negotiate a budget agreement, but it shouldn't require that much time. And what it will require, though, is a willingness on the part of Republicans to actually sit down at the negotiating table with Democrats. That's something they've refused to do thus far.

Q Just one on another topic. The President tweeted a couple days ago about the 14-year-old Muslim boy and said, "Cool clock." And you stood at the podium and talked about people examining their conscience and unreasoned prejudice. And I'm wondering - not to overly conflate things -- but in refusing to make any comment when the audience member said what he said yesterday, last night, did Donald Trump show prejudice?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't think I'm going to opine on that. I think what he did show is a willingness to countenance the offensive views of at least one member of his audience in order to try to win political support for his campaign. And we have seen far too many leaders in the Republican Party successfully use that strategy in a rather cynical way. And pursuing that kind of strategy has consequences. And it has consequences when it comes to trying to govern the country, and it has consequences when your name is on the ballot and you're being considered by the voters.

Jerome.

Q The President of France has now officially or formally invited all world leaders for the heads of state summit that will take place at the very beginning of the climate conference in Paris. Will the President attend that summit, which is scheduled for November 30th?

MR. EARNEST: Jerome, at this point, I don't have travel plans for the President to announce yet. Obviously you heard me earlier when I talked about important the President and the administration believes those climate talks are, but I don't have any updates on the President's travel schedule at this point.

Q Does he have reservations about the summit?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think the President is hopeful about the prospects for the summit. But it's going to require a lot of hard work. It's going to require a serious commitment on the part of countries around the world to this effort, and there's still a lot of important work to be done. But as it relates to the President's travel, I just don't have any updates quite yet.

Steve.

Q Yes. So Secretary of State John Kerry was talking about not having a long-term presence of Assad as the President of Syria. I'm wondering if the President -- our President -- would consider that to be anything -- if Assad is still President of Syria when

the President leaves office in a year and a half, would that be long term? Is there any scenario where he could countenance Assad staying in office past him?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Steve, ultimately the view of our policy position is simply that President Assad has lost the legitimacy to lead that country. He's lost legitimacy to lead that country because he has shown a willingness, even a propensity, for using the military might of that country to carry out terrible acts of violence against the Syrian people. The kinds of atrocities that we've seen are stomach-turning. And it has led to a whole domino effect of consequences that have greatly destabilized that region of the world.

We've seen extremist groups, including ISIL but not just ISIL, operate much more freely in that country. We have seen millions of Syrians flee their homes, trying to escape violence. Many of those Syrians are still inside of Syria; they're just internally displaced. Millions of other Syrians have had to leave the country entirely in search of refuge.

All of those things, all those terrible things are a consequence of President Assad's failed leadership. And that's why, for years, the administration position has been that he should leave. That's also why the administration has readily acknowledged that, for all of our military activities inside of Syria, which are critical to our strategy for degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL, and critical to protecting the American people, we know that ultimately the solution is a diplomatic one that brings about the kind of political transition inside of Syria that's long overdue. Only by putting in place more stable, effective and legitimate leadership inside of Syria are we going to address the root cause of so many of these problems that plague the Middle East right now.

Q Given that I've heard similar statements from the podium for three or four years now -

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MR. EARNEST: It's true.

Q -- and the complete failure of the train-and-equip mission and any sign that Assad is going to leave, is there anything that gives this President or this White House any confidence that come January 20th, 2017, Assad is not going to still be there, still in power, propped up by Russia, while the President is off with his library? Is there anything that he is doing, any new look at revamping his strategy that would get Assad out of power before that?

MR. EARNEST: The President has readily acknowledged for some time that our involvement in the anti-ISIL coalition is a long-term proposition. And he is mindful of the fact that we will make progress and we have made important progress, including on the ground inside of Syria. But we've also sustained some setbacks. And what we've been focused on is to try to take the steps that we believe are immediately necessary to protect the American people, to try to reduce the ability of ISIL to project power into Iraq and destabilize that country. But we've also been very supportive of the U.N.-led effort to try to facilitate political transition inside of Syria.

There have been a number of starts and stops associated with that diplomatic effort, and we haven't seen it get the kind of traction that we'd like to see, but the United States

remains engaged in that process and strongly supportive of it.

Q I have not heard any sort of tangible thing that's different, that's new, whether it be we finally found a rebel force that is a moderate force that we can give arms that would change the facts on the ground -- or the boots on the ground that you've acknowledged that we need in Syria. I have not seen anything that would give us clout or leverage with Vladimir Putin, who is sending troops and planes to Syria today that would get them to change their calculus. Is there anything tangible, or is the President asking his team for give me some tangible thing that would give us new leverage on the ground in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Steve, that there have been profound changes inside of Syria in the last year. Over the last -- all within the last year, the President built an anti-ISIL coalition of more than 60 nations. That included four or five Muslim-majority nations in the region that are carrying out airstrikes alongside military -- American military pilots inside of Syria.

We have seen effective coordination with Syrian Arabs, Syrian Turks -- I'm sorry -- Syrian Kurds, Turkomen, and other local fighters on the ground in Syria that, when supported by the coalition, including through military airstrikes, has succeeded in moving ISIL off of some 17,000 square kilometers of area that was populated that they'd previously controlled that they now can no longer freely operate in.

There have been strikes that have been carried out by the U.S. military, including one operation inside of Syria that resulted in the death of a senior ISIL official and the exploitation of large reams of information that have given us more insight into operations inside of Syria.

So we've made a lot of important progress in building relationships inside of Syria, by working closely with those that are operating on the ground, and that has resulted in ISIL sustaining some significant losses both on the ground and among the ranks of their leadership.

Q Right, but I'm really asking about Assad. And I'm imagining that Assad sees those reports and is cheering them on, that's the reason why he is allowing our planes to go in uncontested and he is happy that we're bombing ISIL because they hate Assad, too. I mean, you said yesterday that you're okay with Russia taking on ISIL but not propping up Assad, but isn't both things reality if they are going to join the coalition? If they are going to carry out bombing missions against ISIL, isn't that de facto helping out Assad keep him in power?

MR. EARNEST: And we've long acknowledged that there is an impact or there's a connection between these two policy goals that we've articulated. The first policy goal is that Assad has lost legitimacy leading the country and should leave, and the second policy goal is to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. Those two things are not unrelated, and that's something that we have readily acknowledged.

What is clear is that the most significant, urgent, destabilizing aspect of this crisis situation inside of Syria is the growth and continued violence that's being carried out by ISIL. And that's why you've seen such a strong focus on our military actions, including military airstrikes against ISIL, coordination with ground forces taking the fight to ISIL, the efforts to shut down their financing and to stem the flow of foreign fighters. That is why that particular priority has attracted a lot of interest. But it has not diminished in any way our interest in trying to bring about the long overdue political transition that's needed inside of Syria because we know our ultimate success in degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL will require legitimate and effective leadership inside of Syria that reflects the will and ambition of the Syrian people.

Q Well, does the President bear any responsibility for the fact that this strategy hasn't worked for year after year after year? Does he have some regret, have some sense that he should have found a better solution, something that would have created a situation where Assad would have left by now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, Steve, I think that you're highlighting one of the significant challenges here -- that there is this desire on the part of a lot of people, particularly the President's critics, to suggest that the mess inside of Syria is somehow the fault of the President of the United States. But they do that without offering any sort of recommendation about what the President can or should do instead of what he's already doing.

The one thing that we frequently hear from people is that, well, you should really have invested significantly more in a train-and-equip operation. And, frankly, pinning all of our hopes on a train-and-equip operation was not going to be a smart strategy, and that's why the President insisted that once that strategy was pursued, that it be effectively integrated with the other elements of our strategy. And what the Department of Defense is continuing to do is to evaluate that program and determine what sort of changes could be made to the program so that we can get some better results.

Richard.

Q Thank you, Josh. I want to go back to Ahmed Mohamed, the teenager invited to the White House. There's another teenager who was more and more popular on YouTube who criticized the President, claiming he has a pro-Muslim bias, saying when cops are killed, their families are not invited to the White House. This woman in California was presumably killed by an illegal immigrant, her family was not invited to the White House, but in this case, oh, he's a Muslim, he is invited by the White House. How does the White House react to this kind of accusation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen the video so I hesitate to comment on it in any direct way. As it relates to the families of police officers who have been killed in the line of duty, you'll recall that the President did speak at the Peace Officers Memorial up at the Capitol earlier this year and had the opportunity to greet many of the families there that were honoring the memory of their loved ones who had been killed in the line of duty. The President was proud to participate in that ceremony, as he has in years past.

Q Back to Trump's controversy yesterday again. You repeated several times during the briefing that the Republicans have successfully -- successful, that's the last word you used, used that strategy. So they're successful in using it just in how it works, that somehow there's something right.

MR. EARNEST: Well, it certainly has for Mr. Trump if you take a look at his polls. Again, he'd be the first one to --

Q But the American people feel there is something there. I mean, the administration hasn't been able to break this impression that Muslims are gaining in the U.S., the President is Muslim, and all this. If they're successful, as you acknowledge, it's because there is something that you haven't been able to do to convince the American people that it's not there.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what it is, is that we have seen a variety of leaders in the Republican Party, including the third highest-ranking Republican in the House of Representatives, engage in a cynical strategy to win votes. And in many cases, by countenancing the offensive views of a minority in this country have succeeded in building large and durable bases of political support. And that's a fact.

The problem is, is there are consequences for it. And those consequences take a variety of forms. One of them is in the approval rating of Republicans in Congress. Another is of the pieces of common-sense legislation that the vast majority of Americans would be good for the country that Republicans are not able to pass and, in some cases, actively block -- like when it comes to immigration reform.

And I know the truth is, the kind of people who can speak to this probably more persuasive than I can are the leaders in the Republican Party here in Washington, D.C., at least one of whom actually commissioned a report after the last election to try to figure out how to solve these problems. It may raise some questions about what impact that report has had, but the fact is, there is an awareness among some in the Republican Party of this significant problem that they have; that this cynical strategy has yielded some short-term benefits for some individual leaders in the Republican Party. But there are consequences for it.

Laura.

Q Just a follow-up on that. You're saying that there's a cynical strategy to win votes. Is it a strategy of hate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think what it is -- it is a strategy to countenance offensive views in an effort to try to curry favor with some segment of the voting population. And it is clear that's what Mr. Trump was doing. But it's also clear that's what his competitors in the Republican primary are doing when they refuse to denounce his cynical strategy. So, again, there is a significant challenge that's resting with the leaders of the Republican Party right now and it's clear what their priorities are. And at some point, if the leaders of that party or the members of that party are interested in changing it, it's going to require somebody to summon some courage and stand up and speak out.

Q What's the view of President Obama of Muslims all over the world?

MR. EARNEST: The President I think has spoken to this on a number of occasions, including a speech that he delivered in Cairo early on in his presidency. I would note that even President Bush over the course of his presidency went to great lengths to make clear that the American people and the West was not at war with Islam. And there is some evidence that we have gathered from some of the documentation that was recovered in Osama bin Laden's compound that the successful -- that successful messaging was undermining the strategy of al Qaeda; that the strategy of al Qaeda was predicated on starting a holy war between Muslims around the world and the West.

And so that's why President Bush deserves credit, both from a strategic perspective, but also from a perspective of the values that the vast majority of the American people share. I mean, he won two national presidential elections. But it's apparent that some of the leaders in the Republican Party now are pursuing a different strategy.

Fred.

Q Just on the same topic. You talked about the cynical strategy that panders to -- among Republicans leaders. And you mentioned specifically Donald Trump and Steve Scalise. If it's part of the party -- who are some of the others that have engaged in this strategy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I would ascribe some blame to Mr. Trump's competitors.

Q The entire GOP presidential field?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at least those that have refused to -- or declined to denounce his cynical strategy. And the reason for that -- they're doing it for the same reason that he is, which is they're trying to win votes. So that's -- as I mentioned earlier, that stands in pretty stark contrast to the patriotism of somebody like Senator McCain, faced with a similar situation in the middle of a presidential campaign, in a town hall meeting, there was somebody that popped up and started saying to him the same things that Donald Trump heard last night, and you'll recall Senator McCain had the microphone taken away from that person. And I think that's -- again, I think it's a testament to Senator McCain's character, but I think it's also a testament to the kinds of questions that are facing Republican leaders right now.

JC, I'll give you the last one and then we'll do the week ahead.

Q Thank you, Josh, I appreciate it. Josh, how concerned is the President and this administration that among the massive refugee population that is now making headway through Europe, that there could be, in fact, members of al Qaeda, ISIL, or those who could be trained by those organizations whose main objective is to get a stronghold in Europe and do significant damage? And I have a follow-up question.

MR. EARNEST: It's difficult for me to offer a specific assessment from here. I think our intelligence officials could give you a better sense of how significant that risk would be.

I've made quite clear that in terms of the refugee resettlement process that the administration -- or that this country has long followed, it includes thorough vetting of the background of these individuals to ensure that the safety and security of the American people is not put at undue risk by the resettlement of these refugees.

Q May I follow up?

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q Significant sort of coming off the same topic. There is some thought in Europe that the EU, the European Union, because of what we talk about, the basic premise of their existence is open borders and open trade where people can go freely through one country to another. There's concern that that basic premise will no longer hold and that the EU, in fact, its very existence, could be in jeopardy, which could cause enormous ramifications for the U.S., including trade.

MR. EARNEST: Well, JC, I've merely observed that the scale of this challenge in terms of the hundreds of thousands of people that we're talking about here is not something that can be solved by just one country in Europe; that we're -- in order to successfully confront this challenge, the nations of Europe will have to do what they've done in the past, which is to effectively cooperate in terms of implementing policies to ensure that they can deal with this difficult challenge. Hopefully they'll do that.

Julie, I saw your hand up.

Q I just wanted to go back to Cuba for a moment. It seems like a lot of the regulations that have been announced today will only have their desired effect if Cuba actually takes a corresponding action to reform its economy and, in fact, Secretary Pritzker said today that economic reforms there are overdue. So I wonder if the administration is going to take the opportunity of issuing these new rules to call on Cuba to do that now. Given that you've said that engagement is more effective than isolation, are you going to use that leverage here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the -- I can answer that in a couple of ways. First of all, it sounds like that's what the Secretary of Commerce did, and she should do that.

The second thing is that it is now clear that the Cuban government and the Cuban people now have an incentive that they didn't have before to start implementing those reforms so that they can take advantage of the opportunity that the United States has extended to them. Now, this is not an opportunity that comes at the expense of the American people; it's actually an opportunity that the American people can benefit from as well. And so the United States government, through a variety of officials, including the Secretary of Commerce, will continue to press the Cuban government to implement the kinds of reforms that we believe are long overdue.

Q And what's your assessment now of what the prospects are for Congress actually lifting the embargo, which would obviously go a lot farther than these rules today.

MR. EARNEST: Unfortunately, I don't think we've seen a whole lot of evidence to indicate that those prospects have significantly improved. We continue to believe that Congress should lift the embargo, but there are a range of policy changes that, short of lifting the embargo, that the administration can pursue that would make progress in normalizing relations between our two countries, enhancing engagement between our two governments and between the people of the United States and Cuba.

Let me do a week ahead, and then I will let you get started on your weekend.

On Monday, the President will attend meetings at the White House.

On Tuesday, the President, the First Lady, the Vice President, and Dr. Biden will greet His Holiness Pope Francis upon his arrival at Joint Base Andrews here in the United States.

On Wednesday, the President and the First Lady will welcome Pope Francis to the White House. During the visit, the President and the Pope will continue the dialogue which they began during the President's visit to the Vatican in March, 2014, on their shared values and commitments on a wide range of issues. These issues include caring for the marginalized and the poor, advancing economic opportunity for all, serving as good stewards of the environment, protecting religious minorities and promoting religious freedom around the world, and welcoming and integrating immigrants and refugees into our communities. The President looks forward to continuing his conversation with the Holy Father during his first visit to the United States as Pope.

On Thursday, the President will host a private dinner for Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China.

On Friday, the President and the First Lady will welcome President Xi and Madam Peng to the White House for an official state visit. This reciprocates President Obama's state visit to China in November, 2014. President Xi's visit will present an opportunity to expand U.S.-China cooperation on a range of global, regional and bilateral issues of mutual interest while also enabling President Obama and President Xi to address areas of disagreement constructively.

At the end of that long week, the President will take Saturday off but then on Sunday, the President will travel to New York City to begin participating in the United Nations General Assembly. So we'll have more information about his schedule on Sunday and that next week at some point in the next few days.

Q Press conference with Xi?

MR. EARNEST: That is the plan, yes. There is a plan for a news conference here at the White House with President Xi. We'll have more details about timing and format.

Q Friday, right?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, on Friday.

Have a good weekend, everybody.

END

2:16 P.M. EDT