

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 10/29/2015

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/29/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-10292015

October 29, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 29, 2015

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:18 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. Apologize for the delay in getting started.

Q Two more to go.

MR. EARNEST: Two more to go.

Q Do you want to show off your mug there a minute?

MR. EARNEST: I'll never pass up an opportunity to do that. (Laughter.) Just enjoy a little sip here. (Laughter.) Here we go. Now that we have that out of the way, we can go straight to your questions.

Q I wanted to ask about new Speaker Ryan. Has the President talked to him yet, called him, congratulated him? And can you give us any sense of when they might have their first meeting?

MR. EARNEST: The President yesterday had an opportunity to telephone Speaker Ryan and wish him well as he ascends to this leadership role in the House of Representatives. Obviously this is a position with substantial responsibilities. And the President has spoken publicly in the past about the respect that he has for Congressman Ryan, despite their significant policy differences. And the President is hopeful that he'll be able to work with Congressman Ryan to make progress on behalf of the American people.

As we've said all along, the American people have elected Republicans to be in charge of the Congress and a Democrat to run the White House, and that means for anything to make its way through the legislative process it's going to have to be bipartisan. And the President is hopeful that Speaker Ryan will lead the House of Representatives in that spirit and with that fact in mind.

Q In this conversation, this phone call, did they identify a first agenda item now that the barns have cleared? What's next?

MR. EARNEST: They didn't establish a timeframe for another meeting or anything, but I think the things that are at the top of the President's legislative agenda are the kinds of things that we've been talking about for a little while now. Obviously criminal justice reform is a prominent item on that agenda. The President's negotiators recently completed negotiations on the TPP. Then Chairman Ryan played an important role in building a bipartisan majority in the House for trade promotion authority legislation over the summer. So obviously when it's time for Congress to weigh in on the TPP agenda we had hoped that we'd be able to work effectively with the Speaker's office to build that bipartisan majority and build support for that bill.

There are some other undone items that could have been part of the barn cleaning but weren't. The most prominent of those I think is the transportation budget. Obviously there's some additional funds that need to be dedicated to upgrading and modernizing our infrastructure. The administration has put forward our proposal for what we believe is the best way to do that. I know that Speaker Ryan has some ideas about how that can be done as well, so we anticipate that that will be a discussion moving forward.

The House did vote yesterday -- I believe it was yesterday -- on reauthorizing the Export-Import Bank. This is something that has long been supported by Democrats and Republicans in Capitol Hill, but both Democratic and Republican Presidents have supported the Ex-Im Bank. We are obviously gratified to see that more than 300 members of Congress in the House voted to reauthorize the Export-Import Bank. And getting that reauthorized would obviously be good for our economy and something we'd like to see Congress do.

And there's still some work to be done on cybersecurity. I know that the Senate took an important step in that regard. So there's a lot of important work facing members of Congress, but I'll end where I began, which is that none of it is going to get done if there is a renewed commitment on the part of Republicans to try to pass those priority items along party lines. We're in an era of divided government, and Democrats and Republicans are going to have to work together to make progress on those priorities of the American people. And if Republicans in Congress are interested in doing that, if the new Speaker of the House is interested in doing that, they will certainly find a willing partner in the Oval Office.

Q And if I could change topics to the news that China is changing its one-child policy to what it looks like a two-child policy. Does the White House see this as progress? Do you have any reaction to this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, while this recent policy change does represent a positive step, we also look forward to the day when birth limits are abandoned altogether. The United States and our work around the world continues to oppose coercive birth limitation policies, including things like forced abortion and sterilization.

So this would fall in the category of policies that are directly related to universal human rights, and the kind of human rights that the President of the United States and that this government advocates for around the world, including in our dealings with China.

Jeff.

Q Josh, can you give us an update on the President's deliberations about sending Special Forces to Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Jeff, I know there's been some reporting about this, but a couple of things that I would say about this. The first is that I don't have any new announcements to make today. The second is that there are, maybe even as we speak, U.S. military pilots flying in the skies over Syria engaged in military operations against ISIL targets and other extremist targets inside of Syria. Those operations have been going on for more than a year now.

The third thing I'd point out is that there have been previous situations where the President has ordered U.S. military personnel to conduct operations on the ground inside of Syria. In at least one case, that was related to an effort to rescue American citizens who were being held hostage inside of Syria. In another situation, a more recent situation, U.S. operators carried out a mission against an ISIL leader, and that mission resulted in taking that ISIL leader off the battlefield and collecting important, valuable intelligence about ISIL.

Our approach to this all along has been to implement a strategy against ISIL that is focused on building the capacity of local forces to take the fight on the ground to ISIL in their own country. That is a critical part of the military component of our broader strategy. And there are a variety of ways where we've tried to build up the capacity of those local forces. In some cases, that was trying to take some of those fighters outside the country and train them and equip them. And we've talked about the fact that that program didn't produce the kind of results that we would like to see.

But there have been at least a couple of situations where the United States has taken military action to resupply and reinforce those fighters on the ground to give them greater capability to take the fight to ISIL. Some of those American military pilots that I referred to earlier have carried out airstrikes in support of those ongoing operations on the ground. And I think that's an indication of how central this is to our strategy.

And this has been a difficult part of our strategy -- because at least in Iraq, where the situation is similarly difficult, at least we have an organized central government with whom we can work, and that have command and control of security forces on the ground that we can support. Obviously that's not the situation inside of Syria, so it's more difficult.

But I do not envision a scenario anytime soon where that basic strategy is going to change. Ultimately, we're only going to be successful when we can succeed in building up the capacity of fighters on the ground inside of Syria who can take the fight to ISIL inside

their own country. The United States cannot unilaterally impose a military solution on the situation inside of Syria.

Q What has the President's reaction been to the proposals that military commanders and others have made so far? And when do you expect a decision on that next stage?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any -- well, I'm not going to get into the back and forth that the President has with his national security team, including his military advisors, other than to say that the President's approach time and again here has been to look for ways that we can redouble our efforts in those areas where our strategy is yielding some progress.

So, for example, we talked about this a couple of weeks ago when the President made a decision to expand our support to some of the opposition groups that are fighting ISIL in northern and northeastern Syria. That grew out of an earlier operation to offer some support to fighters in that region of the country where they used those weapons and those materials to actually make important progress against ISIL and to drive ISIL out of a large swath of Syria.

And recognizing the success of those efforts, the President wanted to further intensify them. And so the President has routinely given his instructions to his team to search for ways to intensify those elements of our strategy that are bearing fruit. But in terms of -- and so our military planners, in the presence of military advisors, are always looking for ways to do precisely that.

I don't have an update at this point in terms of timing of when any sort of changes along those lines will be announced, if any.

Jim.

Q Good afternoon, Josh. A couple questions on Russia, if I could please. So yesterday, it appears as though Russia may have flown near the carrier USS Ronald Reagan off the Korean Peninsula. Along with everything else that Russia has been doing with Ukraine and Syria, are our relations at the worst point since the Cold War? And are we in a new Cold War with Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, about that specific incident, my colleagues at Pacific Command I think can give you some more details of it. I was briefed on this incident earlier today, and my understanding is that the USS Ronald Reagan was operating in international waters in the Sea of Japan. They were involved in a military exercise with their military counterparts in South Korea, a close ally of the United States.

So these Russian aircraft were actually intercepted first by Korean military aircraft that were operating in the region. There were four F/A-18 fighters from Carrier Air Wing 5 that were launched to intercept the bombers. And the U.S. Navy aircraft did escort the Russian aircraft until they departed the area where the carrier, the USS Ronald Reagan, was operating.

We have previously raised concerns about Russian military aircraft essentially carrying out incursions on the sovereignty of other countries. We've raised concerns about this most recently in Turkey, I believe, but including also in places like the Baltic States. This was a little bit different than that. This is in international waters and international airspace.

So we have regularly urged the Russian military to make sure that their operations in this space were consistent with generally accepted international protocols. And this is a particular situation that did not result in a significant confrontation for that reason.

But to go to your broader question about the relations between our two countries, there's no doubt that there are some vigorous disagreements between our two countries on issues like Ukraine and Syria most prominently. And I think we've been pretty candid about our concerns about Russian behavior, particularly with regard to those two countries.

But the Cold War -- I'm certainly no historian, but the Cold War was characterized by two international superpowers who were in a sort of global test that was backed by the threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

The situation today is much different than that. Russia is no longer a superpower -- observed in the last couple of weeks that the condition of Russia's economy is weak and further deteriorating. They are now the 15th largest economy in the world, and they rank somewhere behind Spain. And their economy is getting worse. And Russia is isolated in a significant way -- not just from countries in Europe, but as they get further engaged in a sectarian quagmire inside of Syria, they're finding that the only friends that they have there to fight in a difficult fight with them are -- is a floundering Syrian government and the Iranian regime.

So Russia does not have the same kind of influence around the globe that the Soviet Union once did. Russia does not have the kind of economic power that the Soviet Union once was able to flex. And clearly the relationship between our two countries has been significantly affected by that because in that time period the influence of the United States has only increased and been enhanced. Our economy continues to get stronger. And that isn't just good for the American people, it also enhances our international influence, as well.

Q But are you saying they're not dangerous?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I didn't say that. Obviously, we're concerned about some of the activity that Russia has been engaged in, in both Ukraine and in Syria. And we believe that efforts to prop up the Assad regime in particular will be both counterproductive, and have already proven to be destabilizing. And there's no doubt that Russia felt like they had to take this step in order to prop up the Assad regime.

And the Assad regime has already shown itself to be a regime that's willing to use the military might of that country against its own citizens. It's despicable behavior that we've seen from them. And it has cost a lot of Syrian lives. And the fact that Russia is throwing

in their lot and using their military capabilities to only augment that use of force is something that we are quite concerned about.

Q But I guess what I'm trying to get at, Josh, is that for the American people, the people sitting at home, Russia meddling in either Ukraine or Syria is one thing. Flying over our carriers, engaging with our military sounds like something totally different. Are the Russians becoming now a danger to the United States rather than just a pest in areas far away?

MR. EARNEST: Right. Well, the relationship between our two countries is much different than it was during the Cold War. And we've got significant concerns with Russia's behavior, particularly the use of their military in places like Ukraine and in Syria. And obviously, anywhere around the world where we need to take steps to ensure the safety and security of our men and women in uniform, we're going to take those steps.

This was not a particularly threatening encounter. It was -- again, it was in international waters. And once the U.S. military aircraft had been launched, the Russian military aircraft were escorted away. And so I don't think this military situation that was recently reported reflects any change in the relationship between our two countries.

What does reflect a change between our two countries is the increasing international isolation of the Russians, the further deterioration of the Russian economy. And I think the question for the Russians is going to be, can they contribute to a political effort to try to resolve the situation inside of Syria. Right now their military actions inside of Syria put that political settlement further out of reach. And the question is, is Russia prepared to adjust their strategy and be more constructive. And this is something that Secretary -- this is a proposition that Secretary Kerry is testing in Vienna right now.

Q Just one on -- domestically, please, on Congressman Ryan, the new Speaker of the House. So he was pro-immigration reform. He supported the immigration reform bill, is my understanding, that was passed by the Senate. Yet, he has now said that it will not -- he will not -- no immigration bill will pass as long as President Obama is in office. He's been quoted as saying that. Are you disappointed that he is not leading in an area where he supported?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we've made no effort to hide the deep level of disappointment here in the White House on the part of many Republicans to put the perceived political interests of the Republican Party ahead of the best interests of the United States of America.

Now, I'm not quite sure why there are some Republicans who think that blocking immigration reform, something that has strong bipartisan support across the country, something that has a strong support of evangelical leaders, law enforcement leaders, labor leaders, and even corporate leaders like the Chamber of Commerce just across the street here, why they believe that that's going to enhance their political standing. I don't think it does.

But more importantly, it is a missed opportunity when it comes to taking a common-sense step to reduce our deficit, taking a common-sense step to grow our economy, and taking a common-sense step to deal with the millions of immigrants to this country that are currently living in the shadows.

The fact is a failed policy that is currently in place is not one that brings greater accountability to those individuals. The steps that the President has implemented using his executive action did finally bring some badly needed accountability to this system, and made sure that we have an immigration system that is consistent with our values as a country.

Q What does it say about his leadership, I guess is what I'm asking you, if he believes in something but says it won't go to a vote even though he has the power to do it? Is that a concern?

MR. EARNEST: It's certainly disappointing. And that was disappointing last year when House Republicans effectively blocked a bipartisan piece of Senate legislation that would have passed the House of Representatives in bipartisan fashion if Republican leaders had allowed it to come up for a vote.

So I don't know that there's anybody around here that's surprised by this recent declaration from Speaker Ryan, but it certainly continues to be a source of deep disappointment.

Olivier.

Q Thanks, Josh. Defense Secretary Carter was peppered this week with questions about U.S. responsibility to defend American-trained Syrian rebels. I'm wondering how far the President is willing to go to defend those rebels, particularly considering the possibility of Russian attacks on their positions.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Olivier, we have indicated that the United States can be supportive of the efforts of some moderate opposition fighters on the ground inside of Syria. In fact, this is a central part of our military strategy inside of Syria because there is no central government there with whom we can effectively coordinate, and therefore no central military with whom we can effectively coordinate.

The United States and our coalition partners need to find moderate Syrian opposition fighters with whom we can work. And this means -- there are a variety of ways that this support can be provided to them. There have been airdrops that have been carried out on at least a couple of occasions in northern and northeastern Syrian, providing much-needed supplies and military equipment, including some ammunition to fighters in that region of the country. This was a reflection of the desire of the President to intensify a strategy that had shown some progress.

So there are also steps that we can take when it comes to carrying out airstrikes against ISIL targets in advance of the work of these fighters on the ground to sort of soften up some targets and make it a little easier, and we have seen that with the support of those

airstrikes, that the performance of moderate Syrian opposition fighters has improved. So there is some level of coordination that's going on in that regard.

But ultimately, the President has also been quite clear that the situation in Syria is not going to turn into another proxy war, or a proxy war between the United States and Russia; that this is not akin to other Cold War conflicts that we saw several decades ago.

So I think -- at the same time, I think the Russians understand the desire to de-conflict their operations with ours, and we've made quite clear to the Russians about the importance of them doing that. It's important to the United States and our coalition partners because of the investment that we've made there, but it should be important to the Russians because this is a coalition effort to support those opposition fighters. And carrying out a sustained campaign against them would only further isolate the Russians.

But in some ways, most importantly, the Russians themselves have acknowledged that a political solution inside of Syria is the only way that we'll be able to resolve the violence in that country. The Russians themselves say that they have made ending the violence in that country a top priority. The problem is that their military strategy is entirely inconsistent with their stated political objective, and that as Russia continues to take strikes against the opposition inside of Syria, they only further prop up the Assad regime. They only make it easier for the Assad regime to reach the conclusion that they don't have to engage in a discussion about a political transition inside of Syria. And in fact, what the Russians are doing is further alienating the Syrian opposition, and in some cases even driving those opposition fighters into the arms of extremists.

So that's why we have urged the Russians to try to find a way to contribute constructively to this effort, both militarily but also diplomatically. And in terms of their constructive diplomatic contribution, Secretary Kerry is talking to them about that in Vienna right now.

Q You forced me into it.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. (Laughter.) I'm not sure what, but I --

Q Well, you pushed me from my original question into -- I know you love these -- into a hypothetical, which is essentially, is the President comfortable with the idea of Syrian rebels shooting down or shooting at the Russians with American-provided weapons?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't think I would entertain that hypothetical, but let me set out a couple of things. Let me restate the -- I'll try to be constructive, though, so let me state the -- re-state the proxy war policy here, which is the President has been clear -- the President said this himself -- that Syria is not going to be another proxy war between the -- or not going to be a proxy war between the United States and Russia, and is certainly not akin to those Cold War conflicts that we saw in a previous era.

The second thing that's important to understand about these opposition fighters is that while they certainly are in some situations coordinating their efforts with our coalition so that they can be backed by airstrikes, in some situations these moderate opposition

fighters are benefitting from equipment and ammunition that's being supplied by our coalition.

But it's not a situation right now where those opposition fighters are being led by U.S. military personnel. They're not under the command and control of the United States military. And I'd just point that out because the opposition fighters themselves are going to make their own decisions about what's necessary to protect themselves. And that's just a fact.

Laura.

Q Thank you. There was a detainee today who was freed from Guantanamo. What's the White House reaction?

MR. EARNEST: Laura, I can confirm that there was a detainee at the prison at Guantanamo Bay that was repatriated to Mauritania. The United States coordinated with the government of Mauritania to ensure that this transfer took place consistent with appropriate security and humane treatment measures. That brings the number of detainees at Guantanamo now to 113. And this is part of our ongoing strategy to eventually succeed in closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Q Do you think it will happen?

MR. EARNEST: Closing the prison? Let me tell you the reason it hasn't happened is because Congress has made a concerted effort to put obstacles in the way of our strategy to close the prison. And many of you have reported on the fact that the administration is working with Congress to if not remove those obstacles, at least lower them so that we can make additional progress in closing the prison. But there are -- I don't know if I have the statistics in front of me here, but there are -- we've made important progress -- and we can get you the statistics -- in terms of how much progress we've made in reducing the detainee population there. Just this year, we've reduced the detainee population from 127 to 113. The statistics over the course of the administration are more significant than that.

But there obviously is more work to be done in this regard. And rather than having Congress impede our efforts, we would welcome the contributions of members of Congress to at least just get out of the way so that we can get this important work done on behalf of the American people.

Q I have another question about the debate yesterday. Former Governor Bush spoke about the French work week -- (laughter) -- the three days working week.

MR. EARNEST: I hope you didn't take that personally, Laura. I can vouch for the fact that you certainly work more than most members of Congress. (Laughter.)

Q But it's a big story in France. The French Ambassador --

MR. EARNEST: Oh, you guys are so sensitive. (Laughter.)

Q Oh, my God, look who's talking.

MR. EARNEST: I bet you that Governor Bush is just jealous. (Laughter.)

Q (Inaudible.) And I was just curious to see what the President think about the French quality of life. (Laughter.)

Q How about an aperitif, first?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, exactly, right? I haven't spoken to the President about this particular exchange during the debate. But I do think that the President has visited France on a number of occasions and had an opportunity to talk about the warm welcome that he's received from the French people on a number of occasions. And he certainly has enjoyed the many opportunities that he's had to visit that country.

Q Does he like our quality of life?

MR. EARNEST: It certainly seems to be a quality of life that many French people have warmly embraced, as they should.

Ron.

Q In Vienna, with the Iranians participating, is the administration particularly hopeful that something will really happen this time around? Is there any reason for more optimism?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a couple of different ways to answer that question. Let me start by acknowledging that this kind of -- the political transition that is the goal of these talks is something that we have been seeking for years now. And some of you have covered this more closely than I have -- that these talks have started and stopped and started and stopped more times than I can count at this point. And each time they stop it seems like they have to start over from the beginning and, in some cases, backtrack even further.

So there's no irrational exuberance, if you will, to borrow a phrase, about the ability of the international community to coordinate their efforts in the near term on this. But I guess I'm feeling a little philosophical today -- the journey of a thousand miles begins with the one step, right?

Q What about the Iranian --

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry?

Q What about the Iranian participation now? What does the administration think that adds or subtracts from the process now?

MR. EARNEST: These talks were difficult before the Iranians were involved, and there has been a conclusion reached by the administration that -- and this is something that the President discussed in his speech at the United Nations earlier, I guess it was last month -- by acknowledging that, look, the Iranians and Russians, given the degree to which they have propped up the Assad regime, are going to need to be involved in this effort. And the reason for that is simply that if the Russians and the Iranians continue to prop up the Assad regime it's going to be very difficult for us to succeed in carrying out a political transition here.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, the Russian military strategy to prop up the Assad regime is entirely inconsistent with the political goals that they've laid out because, at the same time, the Russians themselves have acknowledged that the situation inside of Syria is not going to be resolved without a political transition.

So there's an inherent disconnect in what Russia is doing inside of Syria right now. And the only way to work through that is to try to engage them in this process with the other countries that are actually making a constructive contribution to counter ISIL and to bring about the kind of political transition inside of Syria that's necessary to end -- or at least diminish the kind of chaos that we've seen in that country; that starts first and foremost with the terrible bloodshed we've seen there.

But it has also led to this terrible humanitarian crisis with millions of Syrians fleeing their homes to escape violence. And in some cases, they're trying to flee to other countries in Europe, and they're dying as they do that. So this is a significant situation and obviously a significant problem for the international community. And the United States is playing the role that we often have, particularly under this President, in trying to bring the international community together to try to solve it.

Q On the fight against ISIL, ISIS, whatever you want to call it, there seems to be a lot going on now about the mission that seems to be a little bit unclear, and questions about whether the Defense Secretary and the President who are meeting this -- are on the same page. And we've heard all this debate about combat or not combat. And you've used language like "redoubling our efforts," -- "looking for opportunities where there might be more direction action by American troops." So has this whole fight reached a turning point now? Is there something really different now that the administration sees where there is an opportunity perhaps in the final stretch of its time here? Or are we over-interpreting this, over-analyzing this?

And I know that there are ongoing assessments. We've heard all the language, but it feels like at this moment there's something that's different happening and it's more aggressive, and it involves more Americans involved in combat right now.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by saying that I have no doubt about the fact that the Secretary of Defense is on the same page as the Commander-in-Chief with this regard. And I'm confident that if you had the opportunity to ask him that, he would tell you the same thing.

As it relates to this moment in time, I think you are right that the President has told his team that they need to be continually assessing our strategy inside of Syria and looking for ways to intensify those elements of our strategy that seem to be yielding the most progress.

And there are a couple different ways where -- that we've already talked about here where we've done that. And what's also true is that given the deeper involvement by the Russians and the Iranians, they now have an even greater stake than they did before in trying to bring about the kind of political transition that we all acknowledge is necessary; that as Russia and Iran get mired more deeply in the quagmire inside of Syria, it becomes even more in their interest for the kind of political transition that even they acknowledge is necessary to occur.

Q In the face of this increased Russian and Iranian involvement, is it fair to say the United States is amping up its game, too, military?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, at this point there's no denying that the United States and our coalition partners have made an important contribution to the joint effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. And that's required the United States to make a significant investment here. But it's far different than the kind of long-term, large-scale ground combat mission that the United States was previously engaged in in Iraq under the orders of President Bush. This President has a very different strategy, and it is a strategy that involves significant risk for our men and women in uniform, and it's why we owe them a debt of gratitude for their courageous service.

But the kind of commitment that we're making is a different one, and it reflects the recognition on the part of this President that the United States can't impose a military solution on this problem. This is a solution that the international community will have to work together to bring about the kind of political transition inside of Syria that's necessary. The U.S. can lead that effort, but we certainly are not going to be in a position to do it alone.

Q And just lastly, I have not heard in a while an assessment of the fight against ISIL. In weeks and months past you've given various statistics about what percentage of the territory has been taken back, or so on and so forth. And I don't want to oversimplify it by saying are we winning or are we losing. But in the state of play, is there evidence -- concrete evidence -- that the mission is successful, that we're making progress? Because again, it feels like that's not the case.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, we've always resisted the urge -- the understandable one, I think the American people have -- to do a play by play of what's happening inside of Iraq and Syria. These kinds of military situations don't lend themselves to that very well, primarily because, as the President himself has acknowledged, there will be periods of progress and there will be times of setback. And we've certainly experienced both as recently in just the last couple of months.

We've undertaken operations to even take out the number-two leader in ISIL. That certainly reflects some important progress. But there have been areas inside of Iraq where Ramadi comes to mind that did represent a setback. And the latest statistic that I have seen on this is a little different one than I was using earlier this summer, that if you combine -- according to our assessments, that if you sort of combine the areas in Iraq and in Syria where ISIL was previously able to -- areas that were previously under ISIL control -- these are populated areas -- that now, in about 20 to 25 percent of that combined area between Iraq and Syria, ISIL is no longer able to freely operate.

And again, we're not just talking about, like, large swaths of desert here. We're talking about a populated area. And that certainly represents progress, and that progress was yielded by the successful implementation of our military strategy on the ground.

But we're not ready to unfurl any banners as a result of that progress. There's a lot more that needs to get done, and there's a lot more that will be required to eventually complete the stated goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.

Q You mentioned the refugee crisis. The Greek government was saying the other day that they were involved recently in the largest rescue operation of the year along the Mediterranean. And as you know, there are awful harrowing scenes of children, families dying in the water, boats overturned, let alone what happens to them once they get inland. Is the United States contemplating any direct humanitarian involvement there at that point, where so many people are trying to come across? I know there are other ways that the United States is involved in contributing. But does the administration see that as such an acute crisis that there's a need for something more specific on the humanitarian level?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the United States continues to be the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian refugee crisis. And our contribution now is about \$4.5 billion. And this is money that goes to trying to meet the needs of Syrian refugees, both inside of Syria but also to those countries that are affected by the large influx of Syrian migrants.

The degree to which that money has flowed specifically to these places in Greece, where many Syrians are landing, I'd refer you to the State Department on that. They may be able to give you some more granular detail about where that assistance is actually going at this point.

Andrew.

Q You played down the incident off the Korean Peninsula for obvious reasons. I'm just wondering if you've sought an explanation from the Russians as to what they were doing. I mean, they must have known that this operation was taking place. Have you summoned the ambassador?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not sure what sort of communication we've had with the Russians since this incident took place, but I'd refer you to my colleagues at Pacific Command. They're taking most of the incoming questions on this, and they may be able to give you a

greater sense about whether there has been any military-to-military conversation about this particular episode. You could also try the State Department, too. I know sometimes they're involved in delivering those kinds of messages when they need to be delivered.

Q On a separate issue, the U.N. today said it would hear a case brought by the Philippines about the South China Sea, about territorial claims in the South China Sea. I was just wondering in the White House intends to push again for the U.S. to join that body and whether you welcome countries in the region taking their cases to the U.N. panel?

MR. EARNEST: Andrew, I'll have to follow up with you in terms of our specific posture on joining that organization. I don't know the answer to that question.

This may be an appropriate time for me to just repeat a couple of things I said before, which is that the United States takes no position on competing sovereignty claims to land features in the South China Sea. Rather what we have done is we have urged all countries with claims on territory in the South China Sea to work through diplomacy to try to resolve those differences. And no country, including China, should be trying to use their size or influence to try to resolve those confrontations militarily or through some other means. They should resolve them diplomatically.

And I will note that there's a lot of coverage of a recent U.S. military operation in the South China Sea, the freedom of navigation operation that we carried out. And the fact is that freedom of navigation operations are not a challenge to the sovereignty of land features, but in this case, the freedom of navigation operation was carried out consistent with what the President said when he was standing in the Rose Garden next to the Chinese President, and that simply is the principle that the United States will fly, sail, and operate anywhere that international law allows.

Q So you would expect that those operations will continue then? This wasn't a one-off?

MR. EARNEST: Well, for any future operations, I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. Those kinds of operational decisions will be announced at that level. But we certainly would, as a policy matter, that is set by the Commander-in-Chief would reserve the right to carry out those kinds of operations in the future, primarily because we believe in the freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce. And countries like China, ironically enough, have a significant stake in ensuring that free flow of commerce. The Chinese economy would be significantly impacted if the free flow of commerce were interrupted in that part of the world.

The reason the United States is interested here is that, as I mentioned earlier, we're not making claims on those land features there, but we certainly do have a financial interest and a broader strategic interest in ensuring that freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce continues unimpeded in the South China Sea.

Q Sorry, if I can follow on one question. The Rwandan parliament has voted to allow Kagame a third term. And I was wondering if you have a reaction to that given that it sounds very much like the thing that the President was talking about when he addressed

the AU in Addis.

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen that specific news. But what you just said about the President's remarks at the African Union is the first thing that popped into my head, as well. The President I think was quite colorful in describing why it's important for leaders around the world to follow the basic constitutional requirements of their government and the people that they serve.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to circle back on Ron's question for just a second. It's a question about language. You probably heard Defense Secretary Carter yesterday describe the death of Josh Wheeler as "in combat". Is there any hesitation from where you stand on behalf of the administration to use that word that he died in combat?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I think what the Secretary of Defense was quite clear about is that the specific operation that he was involved in brought him into combat in a very dangerous situation, in a dangerous part of the world. It's not the first time that American servicemembers have been a part of a combat operation like that. As I mentioned earlier, the rescue mission, the attempt to rescue American hostages that were being held by ISIL inside of Syria. I mentioned earlier that U.S. military personnel had carried out a raid against an ISIL leader in Syria. And there certainly were -- that ISIL fighter, that ISIL leader was taken off the battlefield. I think that would be a pretty clear indication that there was an exchange of fire there. And I think it should be pointed out that even as we speak we've got military -- U.S. military pilots -- potentially as we speak -- we have U.S. military pilots that are operating in the skies over Syria, carrying out military airstrikes against extremist targets on the ground.

So we have been quite candid about the significant risk that our men and women in uniform face. But what people need to understand is that while that particular operation brought Master Sergeant Wheeler into a very dangerous situation, the mission that our men and women in that region of the world have is quite different than the long-term, large-scale combat mission that they were given by President Bush in 2003. The situation now, while it continues to be dangerous, and while those men and women in uniform face a risk that we would certainly not downplay, there's no denying that the mission that they're carrying out is quite different.

Q So just so I'm clear, the mission may not be a combat mission, but there will be instances potentially where they are in combat situations -- is that accurate?

MR. EARNEST: That is accurate. And I think we've been quite clear about that. And that certainly is an apt way to describe what our military pilots who are flying over Iraq and in Syria right now face. That certainly is true any time our military personnel undertake an operation to go after a high-value target inside of Iraq or in Syria, and it certainly is the case when we see that our military personnel are engaged in an operation to try to rescue hostages. This is certainly the kind of operation that our search-and-rescue experts would be prepared to undertake if U.S. or coalition aircraft were shot down over Syria.

So I think this has been part of the risk that our men and women face in that region of the world, and have since the President sent them over there. But again, I keep going back to this because this is what the nature of the debate about terminology stems from, which is that the mission that our men and women in uniform are carrying out inside of Iraq and in Syria is a train-advise-and-assist mission. And that is because the President is convinced that the United States cannot impose a military solution on the effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. It's going to require us building up the capacity of local forces in Iraq. That task is a little bit easier because we have local security forces that are operating under the command and control of the Iraqi central government with whom we can partner, whom we can support. And we can offer them advice and some assistance. In Syria, the situation is a little bit more challenging because we can't rely on the government there and we have to rely on opposition forces. But ultimately, it's going to be the responsibility of fighters inside of Iraq and in Syria on the ground to take the fight to ISIL.

Q Just a couple more. I want to ask you about Iran at the negotiation table. And as it -- in regards to Syria, I'm just curious why, if they are creating so much havoc in the region, why, if Iran is partnering with the Russians to supply the Syrian government with weapons, why invite Tehran to the table?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Kevin, the most direct way I can describe it to you is to basically make what is a pretty obvious observation. Given the fact that essentially the Iranians are propping up the Assad regime, you might reasonably conclude that the Iranians have a lot of influence over the Assad regime. The Assad regime for years has been resisting a political transition. And the question now is are the Iranians willing to use their influence over the Assad regime to compel them to engage in this discussion -- constructively in this discussion -- to enact a political transition inside of Syria.

It's unclear right now whether the Iranians are willing to do that. Maybe they won't be. It certainly is in their interest to do so. They certainly have the capacity to do so, because we know that the Assad regime relies on them almost for their very existence. So the question is, how are the Iranians going to use that influence? And again, that's a proposition that Secretary Kerry is testing out. It's unlikely that it will be clear right away whether or not they're willing to use that influence to hasten this political transition. That continues to be up in the air, but we'll see. To exclude Iran and Russia from these conversations would be a missed opportunity.

Q Is it your understanding that a transition of power for Assad is not up for discussion, as has been reported in some circles?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what has been reported is whether or not there are preconditions for conversations. The position of the United States has not changed, and that is simply that President Assad has lost the legitimacy to lead Syria and he should go.

And that is not just because we are sickened by the grotesque way in which he has carried out acts of violence against innocent Syrian civilians -- although that's part of it. What's also true is that he's lost the legitimacy to lead that country in the eyes of the Syrian

people. He's used the military power of Syria to attack innocent Syrian civilians. Why would those innocent Syrian civilians continue to support his governance of the country? They won't. And so that means he has lost the legitimacy to lead that country.

And for all the disagreements that we have with countries like Russia and Iran, there is agreement about the importance of trying to protect the broader integrity of the Syrian country, to protect the institutions of that country, and to put in place a leadership that will do a better job of unifying that country so that extremist elements like ISIL can't proliferate.

So this is a tall order, and I don't think it's going to be obvious right away whether or not the Russians and the Iranians are going to make a positive contribution to this political transition. But we're going to start talking to them to figure out if they are willing to do that.

Q And Gitmo, lastly. Is it the administration's hope or desire or even intention to drive down below 100 the number of detainees that are still in custody by the end of the year?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't set a benchmark like that other than to say that our goal is to get the population at the prison at Guantanamo Bay down to zero. And the only reason we haven't been able to do that is because we've run into objections from members of Congress. And this is one of those instances where there's bipartisan blame to go around. Democrats and Republicans have not been helpful to this effort. And that's ironic because there actually is bipartisan agreement that closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay is clearly in the best interests of the United States. This is something that President Bush himself observed as well.

So we're hopeful that Congress, as I mentioned earlier, will, at a minimum, will just get out of the way so that we can do this important work.

Margaret.

Q Josh, thanks. Is the White House position now that the U.S. is willing to work with Tehran on crisis management in the Middle East?

MR. EARNEST: I think that the way that I would describe our policy right now is that we're willing to engage the Iranians at a diplomatic level alongside other interested parties inside of Syria to determine whether or not we can enact the kind of political transition inside of Syria that everybody acknowledges is necessary.

You've covered this difficult effort for a long time now. You probably have a better sense of how many times it's started and stopped. So the fact is that we're going to try this again. But I also wouldn't -- I think we're realistic about the significance of the challenge of completing this successfully. We're also realistic about the degree to which the Iranians can be an effective partner with the United States on anything. The fact is we've got grave concerns with Iranian behavior, and there are innocent Americans who are being detained inside of Iran. Iran continues to support terrorist organizations around the

world. Iran continues to support Hezbollah, which has destabilized the broader region including inside of Syria, to say nothing of the way that Iran routinely menaces our closest ally in the Middle East, Israel.

So we have significant concerns with Iran. The question really is, in this specific instance, do your interests align sufficiently to allow us to make the kind of progress that would benefit citizens in both of our countries. And again, that's not something that's obvious right now, and I'm not sure that's something that's going to be obvious right away, but Secretary Kerry is undertaking an effort to have these kinds of conversations to determine whether or not this is possible.

Q At this time -- and this is the first major diplomatic conversation since the nuclear deal. That deal hasn't even been implemented yet, and these talks are happening.

MR. EARNEST: That's true.

Q So does this offer have a limit to just Syria? Or would the U.S. engage with Iran on other issue?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I would just say that this is the only thing we're engaging with them on right now, is the situation in Syria, because our interests --

Q You're not holding out for other --

MR. EARNEST: No, but I also don't have anything else in the back of my mind, thinking that, oh, maybe we'll work with them on this, too. The fact of the matter is our interests inside of Syria when it comes to the need for political transition, the desire to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL and other extremist groups that are operating inside of Syria, those are at least two areas where our interests overlap. And for all our other differences with Iran where our interests come into vigorous conflict, the President and the Secretary of State determined that it's in our interests to test whether or not our interests overlap sufficiently that the Iranians can actually make a constructive contribution to this effort.

And again, this is something that the President made clear in his speech at the United Nations back in September, and this is just a continuation of that effort.

Q On Guantanamo, 15 months left in office; you still got 113 prisoners there. Is the President still trying to close it by the time he leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q Is that even a possibility given that there has not been a White House plan provided, there is no alternate in terms of locations for those guys who can't go back home who are going to remain behind bars?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there is a plan to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. And we've I think laid it out --

Q -- gone to Congress yet?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are detainees that have been cleared for transfer. There are detainees that can be prosecuted. And there are detainees that can't be safely released, and properly determining how to deal with each of these individuals is our strategy.

Now, there are elements of it that we're still putting together and will eventually present to Congress in an effort to try to convince them to stop making it harder for us to complete this critically important task. And that's something that we're going to continue to work on. It has involved scouting locations inside the United States where -- these are facilities that have previously held dangerous people. In some cases, they already are holding terrorists. And so the question is, could those facilities be used to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay and essentially to transfer those individuals that can't be safely released or transferred anywhere else.

Q But all that takes time, to retrofit those places or build a new one. So given that, is there a sense of urgency, and does that extend to the President's willingness possibly to use executive action to force some of these things to happen?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there certainly is a sense of urgency. And the President does believe that successfully closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay would be in the best interest of our national security. We know that images of the prison at Guantanamo Bay continue to be a powerful recruiting tool for extremists. And the President is committed to doing this. And again, our strategy would be much more effective if it weren't being essentially sabotaged by the United States Congress.

Q So, sorry, executive action -- that was a not ruling it out?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President has made clear that he's willing to use all of the elements of his authority to make progress on priorities that he's identified. This would certainly be one of those priorities. But there's no denying that Congress has made this much more difficult. And we're hopeful that we can find a way for -- again, even if there are members of Congress who don't really care about this or somehow don't want to be involved in this effort, we're not asking for them to be involved, we're mostly asking for them to not undermine the successful implementation and completion of a strategy that Democrats and Republicans agree is in the best interest of the United States national security.

Q May I follow up?

MR. EARNEST: Go ahead, John.

Q Thank you. The detainee that was released today was in custody for over 13 years. He was never charged with any crime. Does the U.S. owe this individual an apology?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any plan to do that.

Q Can you guarantee -- you speak on behalf of the President -- can you guarantee that this individual, Ahmed Abdel Aziz, will not return to the battlefield?

MR. EARNEST: John, as you know, before these kinds of transfers and repatriations can occur, the Secretary of Defense and other members of the President's national security team have to look closely both at the background of this individual as well as the arrangements that are in place at the destination country to certify that appropriate measures have been taken to mitigate any risk that this individual may pose to national security. So the Secretary of Defense had to certify that that was the case before this individual could be repatriated.

Q Is it difficult to make that guarantee, though, that this individual will not return to the battlefield?

MR. EARNEST: Again, the Secretary of Defense has to certify that sufficient steps have been taken to mitigate the risks that this individual posed to the national security of the United States. And that's what the Secretary of Defense has certified.

Q I have one final question. You mentioned in answer to numerous questions about Guantanamo that there's bipartisan support for closing Guantanamo. That's not a bipartisan majority, is it?

MR. EARNEST: What I'm referring to there is the support that was expressed by the Bush administration for closing the prison.

Joe, nice to see you.

Q Thanks, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: How are you?

Q I'm good. I'm good. You?

MR. EARNEST: I'm doing fine, thanks.

Q Do you have any concerns about the budget deal unraveling in the Senate given the fact that you have people, on the one hand, on the Republican side who are saying it doesn't reduce the debt, and you got others saying it was crafted in secret behind closed doors with the White House?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Joe, when it comes to this Congress, we don't take anything for granted. I think that is a posture that has served us well over the last few years. That said, we were gratified by the bipartisan support that this piece of legislation received in the United States House of Representatives and we remain reasonably confident that it will receive bipartisan support in the United States Congress -- or the United States Senate as well.

The thing that's important is that it represents a -- it reflects a compromise that Democrats and Republicans sat down at the negotiating table, they looked at the numbers and they made decisions based on their mutual assessment about what was in the best interest of the United States. And this meant avoiding another government shutdown. It mean ensuring that our national security and economic priorities were properly funded.

And they put together a piece of legislation that I'm confident that nobody thinks is perfect but a substantial bipartisan majority in the House did believe that it was in the best interest of the country, and we're hopeful that a bipartisan majority in the Senate will conclude the same thing.

Q Any observations about Rand Paul's threat to filibuster?

MR. EARNEST: Not really.

Q Purely political in motivations the use of the filibuster as a political tool?

MR. EARNEST: Look, the filibuster is a tool that has been used by members of the United States Senate for centuries right now. And some people have found that the filibuster has made the process in the Senate quite frustrating, but I know that there are also ardent defenders of that tradition in the United States Senate. So I'll let those folks fight it out.

Q A couple other housekeeping. When was the President notified on the problem with the blimp yesterday?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know when the President was told specifically about this incident, but I'm sure he's aware of it.

Q All right. And the last one -- inquiring minds want to know does the President have any thoughts about law enforcement officers in schools, given the incident that happened in South Carolina?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is obviously a policy that is on the front pages of the newspapers these days. I need to be careful here because there's a civil rights investigation that's been opened by the Department of Justice into this particular incident. So I will just say that, as a general matter, individual jurisdictions, including school districts across the country, have to make assessments about what they believe is in the best interest of the safety of students and teachers and individual schools and we certainly would leave it to those individual school districts to make those decisions. And it's certainly understandable how those kinds of decisions would be determined based on the unique environment of the schools, based on the neighborhood, based on the size of the schools, and those kinds of things.

Q It's a double-edged sword, though, right? Because in an urban school you may have a huge problem with gangs or whatever armed, but in a rural school it might not be so severe.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think each school district and administrators in each school district are in the best position to assess what sort of security precautions need to be instituted in order to protect students and teachers. And we certainly would respect the right of individual districts to make those kinds of decisions.

I suspect that most administrators are doing that mindful of the pretty vigorous debate that we're having in this country right now about criminal justice reform and about strengthening the relationship between police officers and the communities that they serve.

April.

Q Josh, I want to follow up on Joe. Does this White House view it as excessive force and it was the proper thing for the bosses to do to fire the officer who turned the girl over and strapped her down on the ground?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously that was a decision that was made by a local sheriff. Given the ongoing Department of Justice investigation into this matter, I'm going to reserve comment on it.

Q And also on the criminal justice issue, when President Obama was before the police -- the law enforcement officials in Chicago, he talked about criminal justice and gun control. What's the next step when it comes to gun control? I mean he's talking about it. Is he going to lean in and this time maybe try to present something? Because he's come out here again angry -- angrier each time he comes. Is he now willing to lean in and do something, send something to the Hill?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, shortly after the terrible incident in Newtown back in 2012, the administration did work to put together a legislative package of ideas that was sent up to Capitol Hill. The administration also put together a couple dozen executive actions that could be taken to close loopholes and put in place policies that would make it a little bit more difficult for those who shouldn't have guns from getting them. And these are regulations that were put in place that don't undermine the basic constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans, but would have some impact on keeping guns out of the hands of those who shouldn't have them.

The most significant step that could be taken in this regard is a step that Congress can take -- that is closing the gun show loophole. This is a step that is common sense. It is a step that is strongly supported by a majority of Democrats, a majority of Republicans, and a majority of gun owners. And the reason that it has such strong support is because people recognize that it would not undermine the basic constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans, but it would make it little bit harder for somebody who is a criminal or for somebody who is the subject of a domestic violence restraining order, for example, from getting a firearm. And again, I think that's a pretty common-sense proposition that it should not be easy for individuals like that to get guns.

Q Okay, since you're not going to try it that way, do you think now, in order for this to move forward, for this issue to really get some legs, and not just say both sides support it but to really get some legs and to be passed into law, do you think that it is now time for the NRA and Democrats and Republicans to maybe sit down at the table together and try to work something out since the NRA is considered the biggest hurdle and stumbling block in getting anything passed when it comes to gun control?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, we haven't seen much willingness on the part of the NRA to be particularly constructive in this regard. And in fact, I think they weighed in pretty aggressively back in 2013 to block the successful passage of this common-sense proposal.

Q But in 2015, is it time for everyone to sit at the table since we continue to see this and this President becomes angrier?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I don't think we're going to see constructive engagement in that kind of effort by the other side until the American people make it clear that this is a priority; until the American people make clear that the way that members of Congress vote on this issue is going to have a significant impact on the way that their constituents are voting in the next election. And that's the way that we're going to finally see the kind of change in this country that we'd like to see and the kind of change in gun safety laws that we'd like to see once Congress has been clear -- until it's been made clear to Congress what the American people want.

Q Lastly, Paul Ryan. Did the President watch the new Speaker of the House in his statement and Nancy Pelosi introduce him and the swearing in by John Conyers? Did he watch that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if he had the TV on when that was going on today or not.

Q So is this White House encouraged by the inclusion and the willingness to pray for one another -- for Democrats to pray for Republicans and Republicans to pray for Democrats - - when it comes to honesty and working closely together to make things done, to make the House work?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, we obviously welcome those kinds of steps and those kinds of gestures. And I don't think -- I certainly wouldn't question the motivation or the authenticity of those kinds of promises. But I will say that I think the way that the House Republican majority will be judged is by their actions, if we can see a House Republican majority actually seeking to lead the country in a bipartisan fashion and make progress for the American people by passing -- by taking action on some of the common-sense policies that we detailed earlier in this briefing. That's the way that we're actually going to see whether or not Republicans can be a governing party.

Right now, if you just took a look at their presidential candidates, you'd have some serious doubts about that. And I know that this is something that Senator McConnell has probably not said publicly, but I think we all are quite aware of the concern that he has, given the electoral map that Senate Republicans will face in 2016, that the pressure is on Republicans right now to demonstrate that they can be trusted with running the country. And based on the actions we've seen from a lot of conservative Republicans in the House of Representatives, there is a lot of doubt about that.

Now, the good news is that we did see Democrats and Republicans come together on this budget bill, and that is, I think, at least an early indication that Democrats and Republicans could possibly work together. But now there's a new Speaker in town, and we're going to have to see if that trend continues.

Q Then lastly, John Boehner has finally come out saying that the Holy Spirit led him to make his -- well, it had some piece, some portion of his decision to leave now. And Paul Ryan is talking about praying -- each side praying for one another -- and this all comes I guess a couple weeks after the Pope. Did the President have an epiphany as well?

Because we're seeing all these leaders just -- they're succumbing to the Holy Spirit. And I don't know. So did the President have -- yes, I'm asking --

Q -- born again.

Q Did the President have some kind of epiphany with the Pope here? What was the conversation with the Pope and the President, if you could tell us, and if he had some kind of -- I don't know -- spiritual awakening at some point a little bit?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President did have an opportunity to talk about this in the news conference he did in the State Dining Room a month or so ago. I think Major asked him about it.

Q I wasn't able to --

MR. EARNEST: Well, then maybe at the next news conference, you'll get called on and you can ask him about it.

Angela.

Q Thanks, Josh. Pfizer, the biggest U.S. pharmaceutical company, today said it's in talks to combine with Allergan, which is an Irish company, meaning if they did combine it would be the largest U.S. tax inversion in history. Obviously, this is something the President has said is a priority to stop. But it's been 13 months now since he announced that there would be rules out of Treasury to do something about it, to stop inversions. What is the slowdown? And is there frustration about this potential merger on the part of the administration?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a specific reaction to the proposed merger that was announced by a specific company. I'm just not going to comment on individual transactions like that.

For an update on the process at the Treasury Department, I'd refer you to the Treasury Department. But the President, I think more generally, has made quite clear that this is the kind of loophole that leaves a lot of Americans shaking their head and wondering why we've seen Republicans in Congress work so hard to aggressively protect corporate loopholes that only benefit the wealthy and well-connected, and not trying to look out for middle-class families and look out for the kinds of investments that we know are in the best interest of middle-class families -- things like investments in research and development, investments in job training and education.

Those are the kinds of investments that are going to make a real difference for the middle class, and that's money well spent. And money that's spent on tax giveaways for corporations is not serving the American people well. And, frankly, I'm surprised that

Republicans spent so much time at the debate last night defending those kinds of policies. That certainly is not consistent with the best interests of the United States. It's certainly not consistent with the best interests of the American middle class. And it certainly doesn't represent a coherent, realistic vision for the future of the United States with a really strong economy.

Q Well, will this news today lead the President to ask anew for Treasury to get those rules done?

MR. EARNEST: Again, for an update on that process I'd refer you to the Treasury Department.

Q The President is -- he's talked about this himself numerous times. Is he going to -- are we going to hear more out of him on this -- not about this particular deal but about the inversion rules in general?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President's views on this topic more generally, without speaking to any specific corporate announcement today, the President's views on this have not changed. And the President's passion for closing these kinds of corporate loopholes that only benefit the wealthy and well-connected has not changed, because the President believes that that kind of money that is wasted on corporate giveaways is much better spent by investing in job training, and research and development, and education and infrastructure -- the kinds of things that are critical to building a strong middle class in the United States of America.

Q And lastly, the Pfizer CEO specifically blamed the U.S. tax code as the reason that he's seeking this deal. Do you have a response to a CEO complaint about the tax code on this?

MR. EARNEST: I don't. I haven't seen his entire comments.

Mark.

Q Josh, Speaker Ryan today also urged Republicans and Democrats to wipe the slate clean between them. Is that something President Obama would be willing to engage in?

MR. EARNEST: Yes. I mean, I think the President has regularly made clear -- or at least tried to make it clear that he's willing to work with Republicans across the aisle to advance the country's interests. And this budget agreement I think is one example of that.

Obviously, there are White House officials who were involved in helping reach this agreement that is clearly in the best interest of the country. The administration did work closely with Republicans over the summer to build a bipartisan majority for trade promotion authority legislation. Chairman Ryan played an instrumental part of building that bipartisan majority and the successful passage of that legislation. And if there are other areas where Republicans are willing to work with the administration to advance the priorities of the country, then the President certainly is eager to get to work on that.

As the President himself has observed, he's not on the ballot anymore, so his only interest is getting things done for the American people.

Q Well, does that mean we may have heard the last from the President likening Republicans to the Grumpy Cat? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I think typically the President has described Republican presidential candidates -- rather aptly, I might add -- as the Grumpy Cat. I mean, we heard a lot of talk from Republicans last night, some of them bemoaning questions about the size of government, the tax rate, the size of the deficit. The fact is those are all situations that have dramatically improved under the Obama administration.

There are fewer government employees under President Obama than there were when he took office. The deficit under President Obama's leadership has been cut by almost three-quarters. And we've seen tax cuts for 98 percent of the American people protected and taxes go up on only about 2 percent of the wealthiest Americans.

So these are the kinds of policies that President Obama has implemented. They're the kinds of policies that have strong support across the country. They're the kinds of policies that are in the best interest of middle-class families. And they're the kinds of policies that have led to the longest sustained job growth that we've seen in American history.

So I guess Republican presidential candidates just need to turn that frown upside down.

Q How would you characterize the phone call yesterday between the President and the new Speaker?

MR. EARNEST: It was cordial. The President and Speaker Ryan had an opportunity to talk about the budget agreement itself. The President certainly wished him well on what was then the impending vote to elect him Speaker of the House. And, look, you've seen the President interact with Mr. Ryan before. Obviously, the President invited Mr. Ryan over to the White House after the last election. And the President and then-Congressman Ryan had an opportunity to talk about some budget issues when the President went and spoke at the House Republican Conference shortly after being elected. So there are a number of opportunities that the President and Speaker Ryan have had to interact.

And the President certainly respects Speaker Ryan as somebody who has a conviction about his world view. He's somebody who's willing to do his homework, and that's worthy of some respect. That doesn't in any way minimize the significant differences between the two of them when it comes to a governing policy. But we continue to be hopeful, and we're ready to wipe the slate clean and try to find areas where we can work together.

Q Do you think there might be a joint golf game in their future?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if the Speaker of the House -- this Speaker of the House plays golf or not, but I'm sure if he's interested, something like that could be arranged.

Q He could caddy.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not sure he would think that was fun.

Q Just a joke.

MR. EARNEST: Cheryl, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you, Josh. It just came in during the briefing -- it looks like the Senate is going to take up the budget agreement very, very late tonight. Is there a particular deadline for the President to sign this agreement? I know November 3rd is one deadline. Does he need to sign it earlier than that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know the particulars in terms of those deadlines. Obviously the debt limit has been attached to this budget agreement because there's a lot of optimism that the budget agreement would pass both houses of Congress. So we obviously would like to see that done so the President can sign it into law before the debt limit has been reached on November 3rd.

Q And also, just unrelated -- there's the legislation introduced on a two-year budget cycle. Does the White House have a position on having a biannual process rather than an every year, annual process?

MR. EARNEST: I would have to check with my OMB colleagues about that, but I would say that off the top of my head it certainly seems like one way to at least cut in half the number of budget showdowns that we have in this country. So that would be one benefit of such a proposal. But why don't you check with OMB for a more robust analysis of that proposal.

Thanks a lot, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

2:38 P.M. EDT