

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 2/24/12

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/24/press-briefing-principal-deputy-press-secretary-josh-earnest-22412

February 24, 2012

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 24, 2012

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

Please see below for a correction (marked with asterisks) to the transcript.

11:55 A.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good morning -- or afternoon -- everybody. I have -- as you may have seen from the pool reports, Mr. Carney returned from Florida with the President rather late last evening. So rather than do the briefing himself, he asked me to step in and take a few questions today. So I'll start with a couple of announcements before we get to that part of it.

As we speak, the President is meeting with the Democratic Governors Association, and I just wanted to give you a quick readout of that meeting.

The President was eager to continue the ongoing discussion with Democratic governors about the ways that the federal government and the states can work together to create jobs and grow the economy, a conversation that will continue on Monday, when the President meets with the full National Governors Association. One of the ways to do that, as the President laid out in the State of the Union address and has reiterated many times since, is to accelerate the growing trend of insourcing, where companies are bringing jobs back to the United States and making additional investments right here in America. The President will discuss his proposals to support insourcing, including tax incentives to encourage business investment in the United States, and investing in a 21st century infrastructure.

And as you're probably aware, the Democratic governors will be going to the stakeout location in about 45 minutes or so when their meeting with the President concludes.

The second thing: On Tuesday -- a little heads-up -- we'll do a week ahead at the end, but one piece of the week ahead here at the top because it's interesting. On Tuesday, the President will speak at the annual UAW -- United Auto Workers -- Community Action Program Conference, a gathering of 1,700 UAW leaders from across the country.

At the conference, the President will discuss the steps we must take to build an economy - to create an economy built to last, an economy where everybody has a fair shot, where the middle class and those fighting to get into it get a fair shake. He'll discuss the steps we took to get our economy back on track, including saving the American auto industry, which has created approximately 200,000 new jobs since the spring of 2009. The President will discuss the progress we've made and the work left to be done to ensure we strengthen job growth so everyone who wants a good job can get one.

Q Is that here in D.C.?

MR. EARNEST: That is here in Washington, D.C.

So with that, we'll wade in to taking a few questions. Mr. Feller, would you like to take us off?

Q Thanks, Josh. Is Lawrence out here for you, or are we going to see your -- (laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: -- be paying attention to the whole briefing today.

Q We're not expecting the President out here?

MR. EARNEST: I don't expect that he's going to. That would be a way to really kick off the first one, though, wouldn't it? (Laughter.)

Q Especially after the understudy stuff, right?

MR. EARNEST: I know. I know.

Q Two topics. On Afghanistan, the President's apology of the burning of the Korans has not seemed to quell the violence, the protests at all. I believe that now 20 people have been killed. I'm wondering if the White House is worried that there's no clear end in sight to this.

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you pointed out, Ben, General Allen, Secretary Panetta, and President Obama have all, in different forms, expressed their apology on behalf of the American people and the American military to the Afghan people to articulate that the United States military and, indeed, the American people have enduring respect for the religious views and religious practices of the Afghan people.

We were pleased today to see that President Karzai himself has also called -- or appealed for calm in Afghanistan. And while this is a difficult circumstance that we're working through, we're confident that our goals in Afghanistan -- which I'll remind you is to defeat, disrupt and dismantle al Qaeda and to ensure that al Qaeda [Afghanistan] cannot be used as a safe haven for al Qaeda or other religious extremists -- violent extremists -- so it is our view that we will work through these difficult circumstances and remain on track to making progress on our goals there.**

Q Is there anything else -- as this incident continues, is there anything else the President can do or plans to do that you know of?

MR. EARNEST: Nothing that I have to announce at this time.

Q Speaking of no end in sight, on a much broader scale, of course, as you know, the slaughter in Syria continues. Secretary Clinton, at the conference in Tunisia, said that the regime will have more blood on its hands if it doesn't comply with the cease-fire. And I'm wondering what the White House's thinking is about what happens if it doesn't. Is there any thought being given right now that you can help us understand about what happens next?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you point out, Ben, Secretary Clinton is in Tunisia right now meeting with the "Friends of Syria" group in Tunis to talk about a number of things, including a political transition in Syria. They're also talking about the need to find a way to deliver humanitarian aid and medical supplies to areas like Homs and other areas of Syria where Syrian citizens -- innocent Syrian citizens -- have been heinously attacked by the Assad regime.

So the question you're raising is a question that's being actively discussed by the United States, our allies, partners, and even other countries in the region, about the way forward in that country, about what we can do to facilitate a political transition there. It is the collective view of all of the nations who are participating in that conference that there are two important things that we need to do.

The first is, it's important for us to continue to increase the international pressure on the Assad regime, to isolate further the Assad regime, to ensure that we're working in an integrated, coordinated fashion to apply the sanctions for maximum effect. It's also the collective belief of the people who are participating in that conference that a political transition will take place that ends with the Assad regime no longer being in power in Syria. That's a foregone conclusion, and it's one that the international community is working together to achieve.

Q But you say it's a foregone conclusion, and I know that the White House has said that for some time now, but in the meantime, people are dying by the day including children. Is there a point at which the President's patience simply runs out?

MR. EARNEST: Certainly the images that we're seeing on television are appalling. The violence that's being perpetrated by the Assad regime, as you point out, against innocent civilians -- men, women and children -- is outrageous. It is something for which we have zero patience. That's why you're seeing a coordinated international effort to get it to stop, to bring some humanitarian relief, and to ensure a prompt political transition in Syria.

Q Last one on this. Is there any update you can give us about the deliberations on arming the rebels?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update to our position on this. As you've heard Jay and others say, it is our view that further militarization in Syria at this point in time is not a wise -- is not the policy that we believe is the wise one to pursue at this point.

Q Josh, I'd like to ask you about the SPR. This morning, Treasury Secretary Geithner said that the United States will continue to evaluate use of the SPR. But what are the criteria that you're using to evaluate tapping the SPR, and how are you making that decision? And the follow-up would be, if you could describe the process that you'll use to make the decision -- who's involved, how that will take place.

MR. EARNEST: I appreciate the question. I did see Secretary Geithner's interview on CNBC this morning. Like Secretary Geithner, I'm not going to speculate about any policy outcomes that may or may not be contemplated by this administration at this point. So I don't have anything on that for you.

What I can tell you is that the President will continue to pursue, as he talked about at some length yesterday, an all-of-the-above approach to our energy challenges. So that includes a wide range of options. We're not taking anything off the table. But I'm not going to speculate about what kinds of things may or may not be on the table, or how we're going to make decisions about what's on the table.

Q You can't say anything about what criteria will be used to make the decision?

MR. EARNEST: I cannot. I cannot. Thanks.

April.

Q Josh, I'm going to ask you a couple questions on the President's conversations of late. Has the President -- one, has the President been consulting with the Muslim leadership in this country about what's been going on with Afghanistan and the disposal of the Korans?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any meetings to read out to you on that front, April. There are officials at the White House who work in the Office of Public Engagement, who are responsible for reaching out to people all across the country -- and certainly faith leaders fall in that category. But I don't have any specific meetings on this specific topic to read out to you.

Q Is the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives possibly reaching out as well?

MR. EARNEST: You'd have to ask them to check, and I can check on that for you if you'd like. But I don't -- to be honest with you, I don't know.

Q And also, on the gas price issue, what is the President saying to OPEC? And what are the conversations around here like as gas prices are rising? For instance, yesterday I was in California -- in one day gas prices at a regular station went from \$4.17 to \$4.29 -- and that's in a day. They're likely to see \$5.00 quicker than many other parts of the country. What is this President doing and what's the conversations like?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President, as he described yesterday, is certainly concerned about the impact that rising gas prices is having on family budgets all across the country, where family -- as we've discussed, practically every day throughout the President's three years in office -- this is a difficult time for middle-class families in this country, and the

rising gas prices only adds to that burden. That's certainly one reason why it's so important that Congress passed a payroll tax cut extension that will put an average of \$40 per paycheck back in the pockets of the average American family's budget. That certainly is an important step to offering a little bit of a financial cushion to those families.

But what the President is doing, broadly, is pursuing an all-of-the-above approach when it comes to energy in this country; that we have taken a number of steps related to oil and gas production in this country. The President has recently announced an agreement with the nation of Mexico to explore and develop oil and gas reserves along the boundary in the Gulf of Mexico between our two countries.

The President -- or the Department of Interior recently announced steps toward additional drilling -- or further drilling in the Arctic Ocean around Alaska. The President has recently also asked his -- or directed his Department of Interior to ensure that 75 percent of the recoverable oil reserves are being developed.

So there are number of steps related to drilling and production. And those steps have actually yielded a benefit, which is that every single year that this President has been in office we've seen an increase in oil and gas production. But what that also illustrates is that if your answer to this challenge of rising gas prices is just drilling for oil, you're not going to find a very good answer, because an all-above -- all-of-the-above approach is required. So that also is why the President is pursuing a range of other things -- investments in biofuels and renewable energy, wind and solar. The administration is backing the first -- the construction of the first nuclear power plant in this country in 30 years.

So there are a range of things that the President is doing, and he's doing that because he's concerned about the energy challenges facing this country and our economy.

Q Visions of the future, long-term approach -- people are saying, great. But when it comes down to the possibility of putting \$5 a gallon, that is in need of a short-term approach. Is the President looking at the possibility of tapping into the oil -- the strategic oil reserves.

MR. EARNEST: Well, your colleague at Reuters asked me the same question. I'm not going to speculate about any sorts of discussions that may or may not be taking place related to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. I'm just not going to do that. But what I can tell you is that there are plenty of people involved in the political process who are willing to make phony promises about what they can do to address rising gas prices -- that if -- and I can tell you that they're empty promises. That if there were a magic wand that you could wave, one of the previous Presidents would have waved it. Right? This is something that this country has been dealing with for decades. So if --

Q We've never seen \$5. We've seen \$4. Now we're going into the possibility of \$5.

MR. EARNEST: Sure, but we've seen gas price spikes that have had a significant impact on our economy and have significantly stretched the budgets of middle-class families all across the country. That's not a new phenomenon. And if somebody is going to promise

that they can wave a magic wand or sprinkle the pixie dust or plant the beans in the right place so that we can get out of this problem, they're just not being straight with you and they're not being straight with the American people.

So it's the view of this administration, and it's the view of this President, that we need to constructively pursue an all-of-the-above approach when it comes to energy. So that means taking advantage of domestic oil and gas production in this country. It means important investments in renewable energy, like wind and solar and biofuels. It means the President's success in negotiating a historic fuel-efficiency standards rule that would raise fuel-efficiency standards in this country -- that would ensure that we are essentially doubling fuel-efficiency standards for cars and trucks.

And what that means, when you double the fuel efficiency, it means that you have to go to the gas station half as often, half as frequently. So if you go once a week now, you're only going once every two weeks. This will have a significant impact on our reliance on foreign oil, but also it will have a significant impact on the budgets of families all across the country.

So this is -- these are difficult policy challenges, and anybody who says that there's an easy answer to doing something about it right away is just not telling the truth.

Bill.

Q All that sounds great, but if the President was willing to tap the SPR a year ago, at the beginning of summer driving season, why wouldn't he be willing to do so this year in what happens to be an election year?

MR. EARNEST: Well, principally because the President is not making these decisions based on the fact that we're in the middle of a political season. The President is making these decisions based on the best interests of the country and the best interests of our economy, and the best interests of middle-class families that are weathering the storm of a spike in oil and gas prices.

Q A lot of middle-class families might feel it was in their best interest to have cheaper gas.

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's the point of this discussion, right? That we need an all-of-the-above approach to energy in this country. And that's the only way we're going to be able to do something real about securing energy independence for this country.

Here's why that's important. The price of gas, the spike in the price of gas is related to the spike in the global oil market. The impact of the global oil market is significantly outside the ability of anybody inside the United States to influence prices at that level. So the global oil market is influenced by the fact that in China, 10 million new cars were added to the roads in China in 2010. That has added to the demand in the global oil market. We're seeing a booming economy in India, where there is an increasing demand for oil in India - that's affecting the price of oil in the global oil market. We're seeing a stronger economy in Brazil, where the demand for oil and gas in Brazil has significantly increased -- that's affecting the global oil market.

The key here to solving this problem over the long term and making sure that we don't have to deal with these challenges moving forward, that we're not susceptible to the spikes and declines in the global oil market, is to make the United States of America finally independent of foreign energy. And that's the course that the President's pursuing.

Q Sure, but why not in the short term, too?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I pointed out, in the short term, what the President has pursued was a payroll tax cut that would put \$40 in the pocket of every working -- of the average American family every two weeks. That's the kind of thing that's going to help American families deal with the spike in gas prices.

But anybody who says that they can wave a wand or plant the magic beans to lead to a reduction in oil prices is just not telling the truth.

Q Well, he can wave a wand and release some from the SPR. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Jake.

Q The President ran a lot of commercials in 2008 about gas prices. It was a big part of his reelection campaign. So I don't understand -- there seems to be a tone of indignance from the White House about the fact that people are talking about gas prices. This is one of the reasons why you guys have your jobs.

MR. EARNEST: If I'm showing a sign of indignance, it may be because I'm a little nervous in my first time. I'm not trying to demonstrate that there is some indignance up here. I think --

Q I actually meant the President. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I appreciate that. It's very generous of you. (Laughter.) Certainly the future of energy production in this country, certainly the challenges that's posed by a volatile oil -- global oil market, those are legitimate -- how to confront those challenges is worthy of a policy debate. There is a legitimate debate we can have about how to address those challenges. It is not legitimate to suggest that you can wave a magic wand and solve those problems right away.

What is legitimate is for us to have a debate about what kind of policy we should pursue. There are some who say we should have -- as the President alluded to yesterday -- a three-step approach to dealing with oil prices in this country, which is -- step one is we should drill, the second step is that we should drill some more, and the third step is that we should keep drilling. It's the President's view that we can't drill our way out of this problem, that we need to avail ourselves of a wide range of options, all of which the President is pursuing.

And that is something that the President campaigned on extensively as a candidate for President in 2008, and is an example of the President making good on those promises.

Q How is he making good if gas prices are going to be higher this year, potentially, than ever before?

MR. EARNEST: Well, because the promise that he was talking about was making America independent of foreign oil. And certainly the historic agreement on fuel efficiency standards that the President reached with a range of stakeholders and the auto industry will do more to accomplish that goal than any other recent policy announcement. And in some ways, by many other measures, it's one of the most important accomplishments of this administration, which is that we can significantly reduce our reliance on foreign oil because of those increased standards. It will also -- it will reduce our reliance on foreign oil by 12 billion barrels of oil, and it will actually lower fuel costs for families and businesses in this country by \$1.7 trillion -- trillion with a "t".

So that is one example of a substantive difference that the President's policies have made and will make into the future. Many of the benefits of that policy are yet to be enjoyed, but we're on track to get that done.

Q Also I'd like to follow up on a question from Ben about the apology that President Obama -- the apology letter to President Karzai. That's also emerged as an issue that Republicans have criticized the President on. Without getting into their charges, can you walk us through the process and decision-making when it comes to issuing an apology? What concerns are taken into account? When is it thought that something rises to the level of needing an apology? When is something not? When is there a concern that that's probably too much, or the United States doesn't need to be too apologetic about such-and-such? I mean, how is a decision made to do such a thing? Is it only the lives of people protesting in the street, or the U.S. service members that are taken into account?

MR. EARNEST: This is a difficult thing to discuss in a hypothetical context, but I can talk about this specific context.

Q Okay.

MR. EARNEST: And it was the President's view that an apology was appropriate because he's putting the best interest and safety and welfare of our service members and our civilians who are currently serving in Afghanistan right now -- that we have seen a spike in violence around this mistake. And the President believed that it was in the best interests of their safety to make it clear that an apology was appropriate, and that the American people and the American military in particular does have respect for the religious views and the religious practices of the Afghan people.

So in this case, the President believed it was in the best interests and in -- of safety for American servicemen and women in Afghanistan, and for the civilians that are serving in Afghanistan.

Q There have been other incidents in recent months involving U.S. service members doing things that the U.S. military, the Pentagon expressed regret over. When does it -- who advises the President that something rises to the level of needing an apology from him, as opposed to General Allen or Leon Panetta or whomever?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's hard for me to speak to those range of issues. I can tell you that the President obviously consults with his national security team and with the military; certainly General Allen is prominent in those kinds of discussions. But I would tell you that I can't imagine -- I obviously wasn't here in 2008, when President Bush issued a similar apology after there was an American serviceman who had damaged a religious document of some kind.

Q Was it the sniper?

MR. EARNEST: I believe that's correct. So my guess is that those kinds of discussions are not altogether different, that I think President Bush was making -- reaching the same calculation, which is that it would be in the best interests of the safety and welfare of our American servicemen and women to issue an apology and make it clear that those actions were unintentional. And that's clear in this case, too.

Victoria.

Q Yes. My understanding is that there is now some training of the service members in terms of how to deal with this kind of situation -- disposal of the Koran, respect for holy books, things like that -- for service members serving in Afghanistan. Why has this not been done before? We've been there for 10 years now, and we've had this sort of situation previously with burning of Korans.

MR. EARNEST: It's my understanding that there are some new training methods that are being put in place. I don't have any details about what those training methods are, though, so I'd refer you to ISAF for that.

Q But why has it not been in place before? And are you also confident that the kind of cultural training that is in place for service members is sufficient?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I can't speak to the training standards that were in place before and in place now. For those kinds of details you're just going to have to check with my colleagues over at ISAF.

Brianna.

Q The classified report that came out from NATO about a month or two months ago that talked about the uptick in attacks by Afghan soldiers on NATO soldiers talked about how most of those attacks were as a result of personal issues, feeling that the NATO soldiers -- in particular the U.S. soldiers -- were disrespecting their culture. Do we have a cultural disconnect here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen the report that you're referencing, Victoria. But the issue that you're raising is precisely the reason that the President himself -- and General Allen, and Secretary Panetta -- have made clear to President Karzai and to the Afghan people that the actions that took place at Bagram Air Force Base do not reflect the official

United States policy and flagged that they were a mistake. And it was important in the view of General Allen, Secretary Panetta and President Obama to make sure that that was clear to the Afghan people.

Brianna.

Q Thanks, Josh. President Obama yesterday claimed credit for domestic oil production being at an eight-year high. But many independent energy analysts say that because of the lag time between lease and production, he can't accurately claim credit, and a lot of the credit should go to the Bush administration. Does the President think that his energy policies are responsible for that high?

MR. EARNEST: The President believes that it was important for this country to put in place an all-of-the-above approach when it comes to energy. That all-of-the-above approach includes many things that the President talked about on the campaign trail extensively -- investments in renewable energy, investments in biofuels, investments in nuclear technology including the construction of the first nuclear power plant in the United States in 30 years, and including expanded domestic oil and gas production. It is simply a fact that every single year that President Obama has been in office, that oil and gas production has increased every year. And our imports of oil and gas have declined every year.

I will let all of you in this room assess who deserves the credit and who deserves the blame, but at the end of the day, the facts are the facts. And there have been some who have suggested that that -- who have contested those facts, who have suggest somehow that this President has curtailed production. That's just not true. That's not what the numbers bear out. And so the President was merely underscoring the fact that production has increased while he's been in office, and it has done so because it is part of the all-of-the-above approach to energy that the President is pursuing.

Q So he's not claiming credit? Is that just -- he's saying that under -- he said "under my administration" --

MR. EARNEST: I think what the President was doing was he was being very specific about the circumstances that we find ourselves in, which is that oil and --

Q So is it semantics? He's not claiming credit?

MR. EARNEST: I think you're the one that's sort of injecting semantics here. What I'm suggesting, and what the President is suggesting -- are you not? You're the one that raised the issue of credit or blame. I'm not suggesting that. I'm merely restating what the facts are.

Q He said yesterday "under my administration," and he talked about the high in domestic oil production, which would be an indication that he's sort of -- I mean, I think it's pretty logical -- it's not a huge cognitive leap, right, to say that he's sort of saying that under --

MR. EARNEST: It's also not a huge cognitive leap to suggest that the President was merely using the opportunity of his speech at the University of Miami to talk about what kind of policy he's pursuing and what impact that has had on this country, and our progress toward becoming independent of foreign oil.

Q But he was talking specifically about domestic oil production. I'm just asking --

MR. EARNEST: He was talking about domestic oil production. That's correct.

Q So then, dissecting what he said aside, does he think that his policies on domestic oil are responsible for that eight-year high or for the fact that there's this trajectory in domestic oil production?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't really contemplated sort of the -- as I pointed out when I sort of first attempted to answer your question, I haven't really contemplated the credit or blame thing. There are certainly plenty of people on the outside who are attempting to assign credit or blame in different areas -- assigning that credit or blame without proper recognition of the facts. The facts are what they are, which is that oil and gas production under this President has increased every single year that he's been in office. I will leave it to you to decide whether or not the President deserves credit or blame for that.

Also under this President's leadership --

Q Well, I'm asking if the President thinks he deserves credit.

MR. EARNEST: I think what the President believes is that he deserves credit for pursuing an all-of-the-above approach to dealing with our energy challenges. So that certainly means -- includes increasing production every single year that he's been in office. It includes the important investments that we've made in renewable energy and biofuels. It certainly includes the historic agreement with the automakers to make fuel-efficiency standards much stronger -- to double fuel-efficiency standards so that we can save consumers and businesses \$1.7 trillion at the pump. It certainly includes the construction of a new nuclear power plant in the United States for the first time in 30 years. It includes all of those things.

Q On the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, I know you're not going to say -- (laughter) -- not making an announcement today --

MR. EARNEST: Am I not being subtle about it?

Q Yes, but does the administration think that releasing oil from the SPR could help affect gas prices?

MR. EARNEST: That's a hypothetical related to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and I'm just not in a position to get into that right now.

Q That's not a hypothetical.

MR. EARNEST: Could it happen or could it not? I'm just not in a position to --

Q Could it help --

MR. EARNEST: I'm not in a position to address that question.

Ed.

Q You're getting indignant again. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Am I? Somebody calm me down. (Laughter.)

Q A magic bean?

MR. EARNEST: Exactly. I need a magic bean, maybe.

Q Sprinkle them around. (Laughter.)

Q Again, wasn't talking about you. (Laughter.)

Q To follow up on Jake's -- the substance on the Koran burning. Since you laid out the criteria where the President decides when he thinks the U.S. government should apologize, is the President seeking an apology from President Karzai for the fact that U.S. service personnel were killed because of this?

MR. EARNEST: The President is certainly gratified that President Karzai has appealed for calm in Afghanistan, as we work through what is a very challenging situation. At the end of the day, what the President and his national security team and our generals in Afghanistan are focused on is making sure that we accomplish our goals in Afghanistan. There is no doubt that we're working through a difficult situation there. But we are going to stay on track of accomplishing our goal and continuing to make the significant progress that we have made in ensuring that Afghanistan cannot be a safe haven for al Qaeda or other violent extremists.

Q In the Univision interview, the President said, when asked about immigration reform, "My presidency is not over. I've got another five years coming up." Specifically said, "I've got another five years," like it's a done deal. Do you run the risk there of looking like you're taking the election for granted, that the President is assuming he's going to win?

MR. EARNEST: No. The President is confident that when we get to a vigorous debate with his Republican opponent about whose vision is best for the future of this country, about which person will be a President over the course of the four years between 2013 and 2017 to put in place the kinds of economic policies that will ensure middle-class families get a fair shot and a fair shake and that everybody is playing by the same rules, that when we compare the President's vision for achieving an economy in a country that fulfills those values, that he's going to win.

Now, the President, none of my colleagues in Chicago, nobody that works in this building, is under the illusion that it's going to be an easy election; that there will be a time and a place for a vigorous debate, and a competitive election that's good for the democratic

process. It's one that the President and his campaign team will be engaged in, but at the end of the day, the President is confident that he'll be successful.

Q How is he so confident, given the fact that your friend Jay Carney keeps saying here at the podium that the President not watching the debates, he's not focused on the campaign, he spends about 10 percent of his time on that? How has he made that judgment?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think something that Jay has said many times and something that I'll tell you now is that even if the President is not watching the debates live, he certainly is following the race. And at the end of the day, the reason that the President is confident is not because of anything that the Republicans candidates are saying. It's because of the vision for the country that he wants to put forward to the American people.

He feels that his approach for the economy in terms of standing up for the middle class and giving -- ensuring that middle-class families all across the country get a fair shot and a fair shake, and that everybody in this country is playing by the same rules, that that's a vision that the American people have responded to, and will respond to when we get into the context of a political debate.

At the end of the day, though, we're not there yet. There's still a vigorous Republican primary that's ongoing. I know that there's a big election on Tuesday. Again, this is all good for the democratic process. The President himself will turn more attention to his own candidacy once there is a Republican candidate in place, and once there is more of an opportunity to compare the President's vision for the future of this country with a Republican opponent.

Q Last thing, on super PACs. After the President blessed the kind of Democratic super PAC out there and said that his supporters could give money to that despite him not believing the Supreme Court decision on it, Bill Maher just gave a million dollar check last night, as opposed -- we've seen Republicans get way more, \$10 million or so, from Shelly Adelson.

My question is, the President has said he's not going to raise money for the super PAC but his Cabinet may. What is the White House going to do to disclose which Cabinet secretaries are raising money, which events they're appearing at, since this is kind of uncharted territory?

MR. EARNEST: That's a good question. I may have to get back to you on that. Certainly there are rules that we will follow related to the political activities of members of the President's Cabinet and senior members of the President's staff here at the White House.

I don't have all the background on what those rules are. All I can do is assure you that the lawyers are familiar with those rules. They will ensure that those rules are followed.

Mike.

Q Josh -- Syria. About 10 months ago, the then leader of Syria, Muammar Qaddafi, gave a speech. He said --

MR. EARNEST: Of Libya.

Q I'm sorry, Libya. Said he was sending his troops to Benghazi; they were on their way. The rebels could hide in their bedrooms but they're going to be taken from their closets and killed.

He never followed through on that threat, but the President repeatedly used that as a justification for military action, allied military action -- the no-fly and other action over the skies of Libya. Bashar Assad has actually gone to people's homes and killed them. There's a massacre underway. So what's the difference?

MR. EARNEST: There are a couple of important differences, but I will start by restating something that I said a couple of times from this podium, but it would -- I would be remiss if I didn't restate it -- which is that the violence that's being perpetrated by the Assad regime against innocent civilians in Syria is appalling and should stop. It should end right away. That is not just the view of the President, but it's a view of a large number of countries around the world.

As I mentioned earlier, those countries are currently meeting in Tunisia -- Secretary Clinton is representing the United States at that meeting -- to have conversations about what we can do try to bring some humanitarian aid and relief, to get some more medical supplies into communities like Homs and other areas of the country that have been under siege by the Assad regime.

At that meeting they're also discussing what they can do to ratchet up the pressure on Assad. There are already pretty severe sanctions that are in place. But part of the discussions at that meeting will be integrating those sanctions to make sure that we're closely cooperating to maximize the impact of those sanctions. And we'll also be talking about what's necessary to achieve a political transition in that country. So a wide range of these topics are being discussed at that meeting.

In terms of what makes this different than Libya, certainly the violence that's being perpetrated by the leaders of those two countries is similar. But the other important difference, however, is that there was unanimity of opinion of the United Nations Security Council about military action in Libya. And that unanimity of opinion does not exist in relation to this situation. That's unfortunate.

As you know, Ambassador Rice and other Obama administration officials were actively engaged in an effort to try to build international consensus. And that's something that we've had a large degree of success in doing -- that there are a number of -- I think there's something like 70 countries that are represented at this meeting in Tunisia. So there is a broad international agreement about the way forward in Syria, about the fact that Assad should cease and desist his violence against innocent civilians; that the aspirations of the Syrian people should be realized; that humanitarian aid should be brought there and that Assad should leave power in Syria.

Q I have a follow-up on a completely different and more parochial issue.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q Does the President agree on a general -- in a general sense with the notion that the Postal Service has to get leaner? And, specifically, does he agree -- or does he agree with the approach taken that some people in rural areas object to, and that is they -- that they are being inordinately asked to bear a greater burden by having their local post offices closed under the plan that was put forward today?

MR. EARNEST: The President has indeed put forward a plan -- and I believe it was contained in the budget -- about what we can do to stem some of the red ink that's flowing from the United States Postal Service, that there are some measures that can be taken to improve the financial condition of the Postal Service. I'll confess, however, I'm not briefed up on the details of that proposal.

Q -- 35,000 jobs, 223 facilities.

MR. EARNEST: So there are -- so the President has put forward a plan. In terms of the specifics of the way in which that plan will be implemented, I'll have to get back to you on that.

Laura.

Q Is the timing of the event on Tuesday with the UAW and talking about saving the auto industry related to the fact that that's the day of the Republican Michigan primary?

MR. EARNEST: I actually think that it's related to the fact that that's when the conference is being held in Washington. So I do think this is the circumstance.

Q Well, so are you saying it's a coincidence?

MR. EARNEST: It appears to me to -- I guess you'd have to talk to the schedule that's dictated by the organizers of the convention.

Q Well, the White House makes decision about where it's going to speak and when, and --

MR. EARNEST: Well, we didn't make the decision on which day the UAW would hold their conference.

Q You did make a decision to accept this invitation.

MR. EARNEST: Sure. Sure.

Q I'm wondering if that decision to accept this invitation was related to the timing.

MR. EARNEST: No, the decision to speak to the UAW is related to, as I mentioned at the very top of the briefing, related to the President's interest in talking to the United Auto Workers about the success of the President's policies, and the hard work of the men and women of the American auto industry have made in turning around that industry -- that

for the first time in many, many years, we're seeing increasing profit share -- I'm sorry -- increasing profits, increasing market share, and even jobs being created in the auto sector -- 200,000 jobs created in the auto sector in just the last couple of years.

So that's what the President is going to talk about, and that's why he's there to talk about it.

Q One other question. In response to the last question on Syria, you said that the main difference between Libya and Syria was the lack of international consensus on the U.N. Security Council that we have this time. Does that mean that if that changed, and if Russia and China came around on this, that, therefore, military action would be a real possibility?

MR. EARNEST: So those of you who disagree about whether that was -- Brianna's question was hypothetical, I think will agree with me that that one is a hypothetical. So I don't think I'll weigh in on that one.

Q Well, that is the implication of what you said, though, was that that was the difference and that's --

MR. EARNEST: The implication is that it is a significant difference from the situation the Security Council -- when they confronted the challenges in Libya and when they're confronting the challenges in Syria. But in terms of what would be the policy process if that difference didn't exist, I'm not going to speculate at this point.

Q The implication is waiting for unanimity before military action can be -- can go forward.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I don't want to engage in a hypothetical discussion about what we would or would not do if Russia and China were to change their votes on the Security Council. I'm just not in a position to -- maybe I'm not enough of a big thinker to go there. But I'm not in a position to speculate about what would change if they were to change their votes.

Certainly, if they're willing to change their votes, we would be pleased to see that. That would be a welcome development. We believe that the votes that they cast to veto that resolution were the wrong votes. So we certainly -- if they want to revisit those votes, we're more than open to that.

Peter.

Q Has there been any progress from the renewed contacts with North Korea on the nuclear issue, the meetings going on in China?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen the reports of those meetings, but I don't have any readout or update on those meetings to give you at this point.

Q What do you hope -- what does the White House hope it will lead to?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly -- what we hope they'll lead to eventually is for the North Koreans to abandon their nuclear weapons program and abide by the international standards that so much of the rest of the world community follows. That's the eventual goal here. That certainly is the goal of our diplomatic efforts. It's the goal of the diplomatic efforts of the six-party talks. But I don't have anything new to update you on in terms of the progress toward that goal.

So -- let's see. Mark.

Q Josh, just to I hope clarify this Syria issue one more time. I think maybe the way to clarify this is to ask you sort of directly, does the administration now believe that military action might be warranted in the case of Syria?

MR. EARNEST: I don't want to speculate about what might be warranted in the future. What we have said on this issue is that further militarizing the situation in Syria at this point in time is not a wise course -- that is not the wise policy course to pursue at this point.

What we're engaged in now with our partners and other countries in the region is an effort to see if there's things that we can do to bring humanitarian relief and aid to those who are affected by the violence, including medical supplies, to see if there are things that we can do to offer support to the Syrian National Council, to speed a democratic transition, a political solution in Syria; and to increase the pressure through sanctions on the Assad regime. That's our posture at this point.

Q And that's irrespective of the position of Russia and China and the Security Council? Further militarization you don't think is a good idea?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, but again, you're sort of alluding to this idea that what -- would things be different if they had cast a different vote on this issue, and I just am not in a position to speculate on that.

Q One more thing on this.

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q On this issue of humanitarian aid, there is a proposal that was made by the former policy planning director at the State Department in our paper today that one thing that you could do to help in that regard is create zones that she calls "no-kill zones" that border Turkey and other neighboring countries of Syria, and have humanitarian corridors run into those zones. In order to do that, she says that you would have to arm the Free Syrian Army enough to allow them to secure these zones.

Given what you've said about not wanting to arm the opposition at this point, is that not a proposal that you guys would consider?

MR. EARNEST: In terms of specific proposals, I don't want to get ahead of the conversations that are currently ongoing in Tunisia, so I wouldn't want to weigh in on a specific proposal or not. It's proposals like these that would allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid and medical supplies that involve the support of the Syrian opposition - these are the kinds of policy choices that are being evaluated at these meetings, and at this point I don't want to get ahead of those talks.

Q Josh, there's a new -- Iran -- there's a new IAEA report that has some new concerns about the military dimension, as it calls it, of Iran's nuclear program and also very specifically talks about a missing quantity of uranium that the Iranians have yet to account for. Have you seen the report? Do you have any reaction to what's in it?

MR. EARNEST: About 10 minutes before I walked out here somebody told me about the report, so we are aware of the report and we're reviewing it, but I don't have any immediate reaction for you on it right now. You may check with our national security staff later on today and if they have a specific readout or reaction, they can give it to you.

John.

Q Thank you very much, Josh. In '09, the President said that U.S. donations to the International Monetary Fund were woefully inadequate and he supported a measure of Congress -- went along with appropriating \$100 billion more for the IMF from the U.S. Recently Congressman Cathy McMorris Rodgers has introduced legislation to rescind that vote and get the money that remains in the line of credit at the IMF back to the United States and apply it to the deficit. Does the administration have an opinion on that and does the administration consider -- will it consider any future request from the IMF for further funding?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not able to comment on the legislation that you've cited that's been offered by Congresswoman McMorris Rodgers. I'm not familiar with it so I'm not able to comment on that. In terms of further contributions to the IMF, that question has previously been asked in the context of offering some financial stability and support to the eurozone region.

What we have said previously -- we've said a couple of things previously, including as recently as this morning -- Secretary Geithner was talking about the IMF and referenced specifically the fact that it was important for there to be a firm European solution in place, a strong European firewall that would inspire the confidence of the international community and would inspire the confidence of the IMF to offer up additional support as needed. But the support or resources that would be offered by the IMF would not be a substitute for anything that the eurozone countries would collectively do. And what also has been the previously articulated position of the administration is that we do not believe at this point that additional American resources into the IMF is something -- that is not something that is being considered right now.

Q Thanks, Josh.

Q It's off the table?

MR. EARNEST: That's correct.

Ann.

Q Thank you. The Obama campaign has a little donation ad running on the Internet that's a picture of the President and his daughters and his wife. It appears to be a photo-shopped version of the official photograph that you all released in December showing the family in the Oval Office. Does the campaign buy the rights to photographs from official White House government photographs and video? Does it have free access to all government video and pictures taken of the President?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen the email that you're referencing.

Q It's not an email -- it's a little ad on the --

MR. EARNEST: Oh, an ad. I assume -- it's a photo that's available on our Flickr website?

Q That's correct.

MR. EARNEST: And what we have found is that a whole lot of people who have access to the Flickr website use these photos for a wide range of reasons -- whether to put them on their Facebook page, to send them to their friends because they think they're interesting --

Q But they cannot be used for commercial --

MR. EARNEST: They cannot be used for commercial uses, that's true. But we've also seen a number of political campaigns, certainly in 2010, that used Flickr off the photo -- photos off the Flickr website and incorporated them into their television advertisements and other advertisements.

Q So does the Obama campaign have free access to video like West Wing Week and any of the resources done at federal government --

MR. EARNEST: It's a compliment I will take that they might be interested in -- obtaining that footage is a compliment.

Q Photographs and video of the President taken at taxpayer expense -- are those freely used for the campaign, which can be compared to a commercial enterprise -- it's seeking donations.

MR. EARNEST: my understanding about the way that that material that's publicly released is, is that with the exception -- with the commercial uses exception that you stipulated, that these are basically items in the public domain. So I will confirm with the lawyers and see if there's any more specific guidance that I can offer you on that, but that's my understanding of the situation.

I'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you. Totally off this topic -- retired British businessman Christopher Tappin is on his way to a Texas jail today after he was extradited to the United States from Great Britain because he was illegally exploiting weapons parts to Iran. He denies it. He says it was part of a sting operation by U.S. agents. Do you have any knowledge about this?

MR. EARNEST: I know that Secretary Clinton was asked this question yesterday, and I don't have anything beyond what she said. So I'd refer you her remarks.

Q Week ahead.

MR. EARNEST: Week ahead. I almost forgot, but I do have one. Jay assured me that I should not forget because he knew you would be asking. Oh, wait, wait, it's right here in the front.

On Sunday, the President and First Lady will welcome the National Governors Association to the White House for the 2012 Governors dinner. It says in my book here "2011" and I assume that's a misprint. So we're editing on the fly here. (Laughter.) The Vice President and Dr. Biden will also attend.

On Monday, the President and the Vice President will host a meeting with the National Governors Association in the State Dining Room.

On Tuesday, the President will deliver remarks, as I mentioned, to the United Auto Workers Conference in Washington, D.C.

On Wednesday, as you have previously heard, the President and First Lady will host a dinner at the White House to honor our armed forces who served in Iraq -- let me say that again -- our armed forces who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn to honor their families.

This dinner, an expression of the nation's gratitude for the achievements and enormous sacrifices of the brave Americans who served in the Iraq war and of the families who supported them, will include men and women in uniform from all ranks, services, states and backgrounds, representative of the many thousands of Americans who served in Iraq.

Q Do you know the press coverage on that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't, but we'll work with you on figuring that out.

On Thursday, the President will travel to Nashua, New Hampshire and will deliver remarks on the economy. In the evening, the President will attend campaign events in New York City.

And finally, on Friday, the President will end his week by traveling to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland to visit wounded service members.

Q That's Friday?

MR. EARNEST: That's on Friday.

I don't have any updates on a possible presidential news conference for you, so in the meantime you'll just have to satisfy yourself with hearing the answers from Jay and me.
(Laughter.)

So with that, thanks, everybody. Have a good weekend.

END

12:41 P.M. EST