

Press Briefing by the Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 8/22/2016

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

****Please see correction marked by an asterisk below.**

1:03 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Long time no see. Hope everybody is doing well and got a little time away the last couple of weeks while the President did. I know that he certainly enjoyed the opportunity he had to spend some time with his family. And I hope all of you had the opportunity to do the same even if it wasn't quite for as long.

I do not have any comments at the top, so we can go straight to your questions. Kevin, do you want to get us started?

Q Sure, Josh. Thank you. Earlier this month, the administration flatly said that there was no connection between the \$400 million payment to Iran and the release of the four American prisoners. But last week, the administration acknowledged that the payment was contingent on the release of the prisoners. So I wanted to ask whether there is a shift in the way this is being explained, and has the administration been adequately forthcoming in explaining the scenario adequately?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, we've been quite direct since January, when the President announced this deal shortly after consummating it, exactly what the benefits would be for the United States. And the benefits that we have described have been verified and made public based on what exactly transpired. So those benefits are significant. Those benefits include preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, rolling back key aspects of their nuclear program. That was the nuclear track of negotiations that were completed -- that were read and completed by Secretary of State John Kerry.

That was a significant accomplishment. Many of our allies around the world had identified Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon as their most significant foreign policy concern. On a separate track, we completed negotiations to resolve a three-decade-old financial dispute between the United States and Iran in a way that saves taxpayers

potentially billions of dollars. And on a separate, third track of negotiations, the United States succeeded in executing a mutual prisoner release that allowed four Americans who were being unjustly detained in Iran to come home.

All of this was accomplished without a single shot being fired. All of this was accomplished without U.S. troops being deployed. And it's an indication of how effective the President's tough diplomatic strategy has proved to be.

Q Was the President aware that senior Justice Department officials at that time were objecting to the sending of cash at the same time as the four imprisoned Americans were to be released?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I think you won't be surprised to hear that I'm not going to get into a lot of the discussions. But what I can tell you is that the President, of course, discussed these arrangements with members of his national security team and there was unanimous agreement among his national security team that he should move forward because of the many benefits that I've just described in terms of preventing them from obtaining a nuclear weapon, in terms of rolling back key aspects of their nuclear program, in terms of reaching a financial settlement that saved American citizens potentially billions of dollars, and in terms of securing the release of Americans who had been unjustly detained in Iran.

And I think there is an on-the-record statement from the President's Attorney General indicating her strong support for moving forward with this arrangement.

Q In regard to the President's trip to Baton Rouge, did the White House schedule the trip in response to Donald Trump's visit?

MR. EARNEST: Of course not.

Q The local paper has said the President is "already late to this crisis, but it's better late than never." Has the President been tardy in responding more personally to Baton Rouge's floods?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, I can tell you what the President has been focused on, is the response on the ground and the people whose lives in Louisiana have been turned upside down by this terrible flooding event. And the response that you've seen from the federal government has been effective. And the President and the other members of his team that have operational responsibilities have been effective.

And, again, you don't just have to take my word for it. I would actually refer you to local officials in Louisiana who have said very positive things about the federal response -- including Republicans, including the highest-ranking Republican in Louisiana who has built his political career as far as I can tell on colorfully criticizing the administration. I'm referring, of course, to Billy Nungesser, the Lieutenant Governor of the state of Louisiana, the highest-ranking Republican official in the state. And his response was, when asked

about this just a couple of days ago, he said, "It's always nice to have the President visit as long as the team here on the ground is working closely with the local elected officials and the governor and getting the job done. That's what we are worried about."

That's what the President is worried about, too. That's why he sent his FEMA Administrator, Craig Fugate, down to Louisiana last week to see the damage firsthand. That's why the President sent his Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, down to Louisiana to see the damage firsthand. That's why the President was on the phone with the Governor of Louisiana eight days ago to talk to him directly about how his state was being affected by the flooding. And that's why in that phone call, the President informed the Governor that he was prepared to issue a disaster declaration to ensure that all available federal resources were being mobilized to support the local recovery efforts.

So I think the effectiveness of the response thus far speaks for itself. And I think, frankly, it's the most effective way to answer any of the politically motivated criticism that the President has faced.

Ayesha.

Q So a U.S. judge granted a nationwide injunction against the administration's bathroom policy for transgender students. I wanted to know, what's your response to this ruling? Was it a surprise? What are the next steps?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I will refer you to the Department of Justice about next steps. You will recall that this stems from guidance that the Department of Education had issued earlier this year that was in response to questions that they were getting from community groups and school districts all across the country. And the effort that was undertaken by the Department of Education was to collect best practices, to understand the experience of other school districts and individual schools that implemented policies to address this particular issue.

And this guidance was issued, again, in response to these requests for information and the request for advice, and the primary goal in offering this guidance was to ensure a safe educational environment for all students. That I think was the motivation of the vast majority of administrators who were seeking this guidance, and it certainly was the primary goal of the administrators at the Department of Education who were seeking to be responsive to that request for information.

It certainly was not a mandate and was never described as such by the administration. I know it was described that way by some of our critics. But, look, I recognize that there are people who are eager to play politics with an issue like this just a few months before a national election, but the focus of the administration has been on practical problem-solving. And we have worked effectively with local school districts across the country to try to help them address this complicated issue. But our goal has been from the beginning to provide for the safety and security and dignity of students all across the country.

So I guess the point is we've got a lot of confidence in the guidance that was put forward. We certainly have confidence in the legal basis for issuing that guidance. But obviously we're respectful of rulings that are put forward by federal judges, and I'll let my colleagues at the Department of Justice speak to the next step in the legal process.

Q Vice President Biden is going to be visiting Turkey this week. I was wondering, what is going to be his message to the Turkish government? And there are more and more, I guess concerns being raised from Turkish officials that the cleric is not extradited that there will be a rise in anti-American sentiment and that basically extradition is going to deal with that in Turkey. Do you have any concerns about that? And what will be the Vice President's message on that issue?

MR. EARNEST: First and foremost, the Vice President's message will be to indicate our continued, ongoing support for our allies in Turkey. It's a country that obviously is going through a lot. This is a country that was subject to a failed coup attempt earlier this summer. That is a coup attempt that was roundly and publicly condemned by the United States government. And we continue to strongly support the democratic government of our allies in Turkey. And there's been no ambiguity about that. And that is something that Vice President Biden will reiterate on his trip to Turkey.

You certainly can also expect to hear the Vice President indicate his support for and appreciation for the steps that Turkey has taken to make contributions to our counter-ISIL effort. There are a variety of ways in which their actions have benefitted the United States and the other members of our coalition, including additional efforts to secure the border between Turkey and Syria, and giving the United States and some of our coalition partners access to military facilities inside of Turkey.

As it relates to Mr. Gülen, the individual that's in the United States that is obviously the subject of some concern that's been expressed by -- to put it mildly -- by the Turkish government. Vice President Biden will, if asked, will say to his counterparts what President Obama has communicated directly to President Erdogan, which is that there is a treaty, an extradition treaty, that's been on the books between the United States and Turkey for more than 30 years. And the United States is committed to following the procedure and guidelines that are outlined in that treaty.

And you've already seen extensive coordination between officials at the Department of Justice and their Turkish counterparts. I understand that some Department of Justice officials are actually traveling to Turkey this week to meet with their counterparts to review some of the materials that have been produced by Turkish officials. But ultimately, this decision about extradition -- it's not a presidential decision. There is a process that is codified in that treaty and in U.S. law that we'll follow. And that's why U.S. Department of Justice officials are involved, and they certainly are going to do the due diligence that's required to follow that process, to follow those guidelines and to arrive at a conclusion. But it will be guided by the evidence and it will be guided by the rules and procedures that are codified in the extradition treaty and in United States law.

Toluse.

Q Thanks, Josh. On the \$400 million agreement, did the President know and agree that the payment should be used as leverage to ensure that the Americans would be released, that the money should not be released until we had confirmed that the Americans had been sent back?

MR. EARNEST: Toluse, the approach to this from, again, as we described this in January, has been that there was an opportunity for the United States to make progress on a variety of issues that had been a longstanding source of concern between the United States and Iran. And because of our success in completing that three different set of negotiations, the American people benefitted and our interests were advanced.

So we do now stand here, six months later, seven months later, at a place where Iran is not able to obtain nuclear weapons, where Iran has made significant commitments to roll back key aspects of their nuclear program, where Iran has agreed to cooperate with intrusive inspection measures to verify their compliance with the agreement. Iran did agree to settle a longstanding financial dispute between our two countries in a way that saved American taxpayers potentially billions of dollars. And there are now four American citizens who have been freed from unjust detention in Iran. And that's good news.

So that is the way that we have described this from the beginning. And the President himself made this announcement to all of you in the Roosevelt Room *Cabinet Room of the White House. So our story on this and the way that we have described what our goals are have not changed. The benefits of this agreement have not changed.

And look, I understand that there are right-wingers in Iran and right-wingers in the United States that would love to try to sully this agreement for their own political motivations. They were doing that before this agreement was reached. They were trying to prevent the nuclear agreement from moving forward. So it's not particularly surprising to me that they're now trying to criticize all of the engagement between the United States and Iran. They have their own political motive -- that's been well identified. You all have written about it.

So the criticism to me is not particularly surprising, but it also has not changed the motivation for making this deal. It has not changed the goals that we have laid out. And, frankly, it has not changed the benefits that the United States has enjoyed as a result of the tough diplomatic strategy implemented by the Obama administration.

Q Back on August 3rd, you were asked sort of about the coincidental timing that all of these things seemed to happen all over the same weekend -- the money being flown to Iran, the prisoners being released. And you said, in part, that it was because the Iranians were eager to have this money after 35 years and of this dispute being settled.

MR. EARNEST: I'm sure they were, but let me -- what I also did on August 3rd was I contested the notion that I ever described this as a coincidence. I never did. So I recognize that other people have raised that prospect. I'm not really sure why. I've never made the case that this was somehow a coincidence. What we sought to do was to try to

reach these agreements, to get them done, to move it across the finish line. And clearly, Iran was in the business of signing off on agreements, so we were going to go and get as much as we could out of the deal.

And what did we get? We got Iran committing to not getting nuclear weapons. We got Iran committing to rolling back their nuclear program. We got Iran to release Americans who were unjustly detained in Iran, and we got Iran to settle a longstanding dispute between our two countries that saved American taxpayers potentially billions of dollars. So the benefits are clear.

Q Right, but you never acknowledged at that point that this money was being used as leverage, and that the money would not be sent to Iran if the Americans were not released. So I think that's what's new that's come out since the last time we spoke about this. So I'm wondering, did you decide not to be as transparent as you could have been when you were given the opportunity to describe why these things happened around the same time?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what I described is the reason they happened around the same time is because Iran was in the business of signing off on agreements and so we were pushing the envelope to get as much as we possibly could. And, again, I've chronicled several times here the significant benefits that the United States enjoyed as a result of our tough, principled diplomacy.

And the fact of the matter is those benefits are not in dispute. Even the toughest critics of this engagement aren't arguing here on the merits. So, again -- and the other part about this, Toluse, is nobody has changed their mind. I'm disappointed that there are previous critics of the agreement that haven't come around to acknowledging the fact of these benefits, but I understand that they're under some political pressure. And right-wingers in the United States and right-wingers in Iran can't be in a position of complimenting something that President Obama does. I understand that. They have their own political motivations. But what's also true, Toluse, is that the people who have supported this engagement with Iran and the benefits that we have enjoyed since have continued to support it.

So our story, since January, about what we did, why we did it, and what we got out of the deal has been consistent. And there's a good reason for that. Because the benefits are significant. Because the benefits are such that it's hard to quibble with the success of this engagement because the benefits are so significant. And all that was achieved without the firing of a single shot, without the deployment of a single soldier to ensure that we could get it done.

Q One more question about Syria. I'm wondering, has the President seen those images of the five-year-old boy who was pulled out of the rubble? And does he have any reaction to those images? And I think today marks six months since the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities. Does that cessation in the President's mind still hold or has it been completely broken at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I haven't spoken to the President about the image of that young boy in Syria, but it's difficult to spend much time looking at that image without being shaken by it. It's an arresting image and one that does document the terrible daily tragedy of life inside of Syria. It's heartbreaking. It's difficult to imagine what that five-year-old boy has seen in his short life, but it's deeply troubling to anybody with a conscience.

It's why the President and his team have invested so much time and energy to trying to bring an end to the violence inside of Syria. And as heartbreaking as that situation is, there's no military solution. In fact, I think that image, in some ways, is a testament to the fact that continued military action along the lines of the indiscriminate bombings carried out by the Syrian regime and aided and abetted by their allies like Syria -- I'm sorry -- like Russia and Iran is actually making the situation worse. And that's been communicated quite directly at very senior levels by American officials to their Russian counterparts.

And we were pleasantly surprised six months ago when the Cessation of Hostilities first went into effect that it did have a greater-than-expected impact in reducing the violence in Syria. But we have obviously seen that Cessation of Hostilities fray significantly in some key areas of the country. It hasn't frayed everywhere, but in some key areas, including in Aleppo, we've been deeply concerned about that.

And we've made the case to the Russians directly that continuing to support the Syrian regime as they carry out this kind of indiscriminate military activity only deepens the chaos inside of Syria. It only exacerbates the violence in that country. And it exacerbates the kind of tensions that fuel extremists, which is why it's just hard to believe that Russia has a sound strategy for going after extremists when so much of their strategy rests on carrying out and supporting the kinds of activities that only fuel that extremism.

So this has been an inherent contradiction in the Russian approach to Syria from the beginning and one that I pointed out from this podium on many occasions. And we're going to continue to make the case to the Russians that their strategy needs to change.

Michelle.

Q I know you've had a lot to say about the benefits of the Iran nuclear deal and, yeah, the way you've described those benefits hasn't changed. But when we talk about how this was portrayed, do you see that we wouldn't even be having this conversation still if some of the details that have come out over the last few weeks had been put out there as they were put out there back in January? And I'm still not clear on why these details weren't put out then, because it seems like if the administration had said, yes, there were \$400 million in cash on the plane at the same time, here's why it came out at the same time, here's when it was paid -- it wasn't paid before, it was paid exactly after, here's why. And had you used the word "leverage" then, I mean, that's why we're having this conversation. So can you be more clear on why those details weren't put out there in the same way now? Because I think it appears to a lot of people, and not just right-wingers, as you describe, that this detail is only being brought out because of details that came out in the press.

MR. EARNEST: I guess the point that I would make, though, Michelle, is simply that the details that you have referred to, while potentially interesting to some, don't change the facts. They don't change the benefits. They don't change the goals that President Obama discussed when he announced this series of agreements back in January.

Q Surely you would rather not be having this conversation repeatedly. I mean, both -- you seem annoyed by it. When the President was asked about it, he seem annoyed that it was even coming up, almost as if you don't understand why it's coming up. So we're laying out exactly why it's coming up.

MR. EARNEST: I'm happy to spend all the time that you would like talking about the details of the Iran agreement. I think that we're quite proud of all the benefits that we've enjoyed because of the President's tough, principled diplomacy. So the fact that we're talking about it seven months later I'm happy to do. We've got a strong case to make about what it is that we've done.

Q But the question is why -- as I said, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation if the word "leverage" was used and described as it was back then; if the timing and more of the details surrounding the timing was described better. So why not --

MR. EARNEST: I quibble with you on the timing thing, because the President made clear -- the President himself announced this agreement within hours of it being completed and indicated exactly what the terms of these series of agreements would be. So back then, back in mid-January, all of you knew that there were two agreements that were completed roughly around the same time that would secure the release of unjustly detained Americans in Iran in exchange for the release of individuals who were being detained here in the United States, and you knew that that was taking place around the same place, within the same day, as the resolution of a financial settlement that potentially saved American taxpayers billions of dollars.

So I don't think I'm willing to accept the premise of your question about the timing because I think you were working that Sunday in January and were aware that this stuff was happening at the same time.

Q I think the details, though, put more interest on how unusual it was. So --

MR. EARNEST: Let me be clear with you on that -- and I'll be quick here so we can get back to your question. But this is the thing. My colleagues at the State Department have indicated that there's actually not anything particularly unusual about the mechanism for this transaction, that these kinds of transactions between central banks are -- I don't know if they are common, but they're not unusual, at least in terms of the movement of currency.

And again, the reason why -- I know that some of my -- well, some Republicans have made irresponsible and kind of outlandish comments about these, like, 500 Euro notes being part of the transfer. The reason that paper currency was used to make the transfer

is because there's no banking relationship between the United States and Iran. So it's because of our commitment to ensuring the isolation of Iran that the transaction was carried out in this way.

So, again, there are other people who are much better experts on the way these kinds of transactions have taken place in the past, but my understanding is that this is not particularly unusual.

Q To avoid the scrutiny that's come out now twice since January, wouldn't it have been better to lay out the details that you've now since laid out back then, and why didn't you, including the use of the word "leverage"?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, the President spoke publicly on live national television laying out the terms of this agreement. And there are any number of conversations that all of you had on the record and on background with senior administration officials describing what had happened.

Here's the other thing that I would --

Q But we never heard the word "leverage" until a few days ago.

MR. EARNEST: There are so many details that were included in what we're extraordinarily complex agreements. That all of the questions that all of you were raising back on the long holiday weekend in January were questions about how the Iran nuclear program was going to be monitored, what specific steps and how we knew what steps Iran was going to take to roll back key aspects of their nuclear program. All of you were asking about the condition of the U.S. citizens that were being unjustly detained and what exactly were the mechanisms for returning them to the United States. Those were all good questions, all of which were answered. So I --

Q The fact that the money needed to be -- that it was seen as available to be used as leverage to make sure that the prisoners were returned -- why was that never described then until just a few days ago?

MR. EARNEST: Again, Michelle, I can't go back through all of the questions that all of you have asked, but, again, the President was very clear about what exactly had been agreed to. And I did briefings subsequent to the President's announcement and was quite clear about what exactly had been agreed to. And we spent a lot of time talking about the significant benefits that the United States enjoyed as a result of this tough diplomacy.

Q Russia having used Iranian airbases, or at least one Iranian airbase, and now stopping it -- what's the administration's reaction to that? And how does that affect the potential of working with Russia against Al-Nusra down the road?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I did note that there was a statement from a senior Iranian official indicating that the Russian use of Iranian military facilities was not likely to -- or had at least stopped for now. But, look, Michelle, you guys have reported on a variety of occasions that both Russia and Iran are propping up the Assad regime. And for years, at

this point, the President, the Secretary of State, other senior U.S. officials, even me in the setting of this briefing, have made the point that Russia deepening itself, deepening its involvement in the sectarian conflict in Syria is counterproductive because it only deepens the chaos inside of Syria, it sets a much needed political settlement further away. This is a political settlement, a political transition that the Russians themselves acknowledge is necessary to resolve the situation inside of Syria. It also only fuels the extremism that's taken root inside of Syria.

So the revelation that -- and I use that term somewhat derisively -- should not be particularly surprising to those who have been following the situation closely because we very long described our concerns with the actions of the Russians and the Iranians working together to prop up the Assad regime. It's counterproductive. It's counterproductive for the goals of the Russians, it's counterproductive for the goals of the United States, and it's counterproductive for the goals of the world that is feeling the negative consequences of the chaos inside of Syria.

Mike.

Q If we can go back to the flooding in Louisiana. I believe the height of Katrina took place a week from today 11 years ago. So Louisiana is deeply fraught when it comes to Presidents and disasters. I'm wondering if the President and his team talked at all about any special considerations for how he and the administration should approach the flooding in Baton Rouge given the history in Louisiana with flooding, and whether any decisions were made differently or whether, going forward, there's any special attention that the President believes the United States government owes to that state given the history. And any differences that you see between -- similarities or differences between this incident and the response to Katrina.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the first thing that is true -- and this is something that Louisiana officials in both parties have observed -- is that the federal response to this flooding has been much more effective and much more impactful than the initial FEMA response to Hurricane Katrina. And I think that is a testament to the efforts of people like Craig Fugate, President Obama's FEMA Administrator, to professionalize that agency. And Director Fugate has brought his expertise and extensive skills to that job in a way that's transformed the agency and learned from the painful lessons of Katrina. And I think you have seen a federal response that's much more effective as a result.

What's also true is that the relationship between emergency response officials in Louisiana and federal officials is quite strong, and in some ways, that is a vestige of Hurricane Katrina, but certainly one that the people of Louisiana benefit from. I can also tell you that that's the lesson I think most people take away from Katrina -- is a focus on the results and to focus on what steps the federal government can take to support the state and local officials who have the primary responsibility for responding to disastrous situations like this.

And there's all too common temptation to focus on the politics and to focus on the optics. But the survivors of the flooding in Louisiana are not well served by a political discussion. They're well served by a competent, effective, strong, coordinated government response. And the federal government has certainly done our part in the first eight to 10 days after this disaster, but there's a long road ahead, and I know that Director Fugate and Secretary Johnson and certainly President Obama understands that the response and recovery effort is something that's going to extend well into the future -- particularly in the aftermath of an event this widespread.

So that's part of the message that President Obama will take to Louisiana, which is, after the political discussions have died down and after the television cameras have left, the United States government and the American people are going to be standing with the people of Baton Rouge as they rebuild their community, as they rebuild their city, and come back stronger than ever.

Stephanie.

Q In the wake of the recent shootings in -- shooting incidents in Chicago over the weekend, how much of an interest does President Obama take in the shooting in his hometown? Has he been in touch with Mayor Emanuel this month? And does he plan on speaking out about the gun violence there?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any specific conversations between President Obama and Mayor Emanuel about the recent gun violence in Chicago. But I think on the unfortunately many occasions that you've heard President Obama talk about the problem of gun violence in the United States, the President has noted the tendency to focus on mass shooting events, and for good reason. The loss of life that we've seen in places like Baton Rouge and Orlando quickly captures people's attention. But it's important not to overlook the kind of violence that, unfortunately, we see every day and every night in cities like Chicago. And the President often cites the experience of his hometown in making those kinds of comments -- that the steps that we can take to prevent gun violence -- common-sense steps that don't undermine the constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans -- wouldn't just make mass shooting incidents less likely, they might also have a positive impact on our efforts to fight more common spates of gun violence, like the shootings in Chicago that you referred to over the weekend.

Q And we've heard from Colin Powell, how he denies inspiring Hillary Clinton's private email server use. Does President Obama think it's fair for him to say Hillary Clinton's "people" are trying to pin her reliance on a private email server on him?

MR. EARNEST: Look, like the President, I don't have any insight into any sort of conversations that may have taken place between Secretary Clinton and General Powell, so I'm afraid I can't shed much light on that for you.

Mark.

Q Josh, when you say the criticism of President Obama's response to Baton Rouge has been politically motivated, might the same be said of candidate Obama's criticism of President Bush in 2008 when he was critical of President Bush flying over New Orleans after cutting short his vacation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Mark, you've presented a very apt illustration of a focus on optics over response. And I think certainly that infamous photo underscored the risks with that kind of approach. I think what's notable about Hurricane Katrina, Mark, is that there were Democrats and Republicans in Louisiana who were critical of the federal government's response in the immediate aftermath of the storm. And I think the failures of that response have been well-documented. What's notable about this situation, what's different about this situation is that in response to this flood, you've got Democrats and Republicans in Louisiana praising the federal response. And I think that's the most significant difference.

Q But President Bush was criticized by candidate Obama for flying over -- for not being on the ground quicker in New Orleans when he actually was on the ground within five days, which is faster than President Obama's response or visit.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I guess what I would say is -- I can't speak to the comments that President -- or then candidate Obama may have made in 2008. What President Obama has demonstrated as President of the United States is a commitment to focusing on results and focusing on the response and focusing on the competence and professionalism at FEMA. That has been his priority.

And, again, I recognize that there are some who are going to criticize the optics of the President making that the priority. The President is willing to assume that criticism as long as the federal response is up to par. And we've been pleased that, thus far, that's what's happened.

But that didn't happen by accident. That only happens because there are patriotic Americans serving at FEMA who are working around the clock to try and meet the needs of Americans in Baton Rouge who are facing the worst day or week of their lives. And it only happens because you have leading officials in the U.S. government, including the President of the United States, that have made clear that effective emergency management and emergency response is going to be a top priority. And that's why he installed an expert like Craig Fugate to run that agency.

And, look, Director Fugate deserves an enormous amount of credit for retooling that agency, for overhauling it, and strengthening the relationship between FEMA and state and local officials all across the country. And, again, Mr. Fugate is not somebody who gets a lot of TV time other than in disasters. And the fact that he is somebody who is so closely associated with effective management and effective emergency response I think is a testament to his prodigious skill.

Q It sounds like you're saying, "heck of a job, Craig Fugate."

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think it sounds like Lieutenant Governor Billy Nungesser -
- a colorful, noted Obama critic, and the highest-ranking Republican official in Louisiana -
- is saying that FEMA and Administrator Fugate have done an excellent job in supporting
the people of Louisiana in their time of need.

Q On one other issue, in the transfer of detainees last week from Gitmo, did President
Obama play any role in requesting the UAE to accept those detainees?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I can tell you, Mark, is that the diplomatic agreements that
are reached with other countries who agree to take Gitmo detainees is work-intensive. I
think it's pretty obvious that there's not a lot of immediate upside to agreeing to bear
responsibility for these individuals, if for no other reason than just the stigma associated
with them. So I can't speak to any specific conversations that President Obama had with
senior officials in the UAE, but I can tell you that in other discussions with world leaders,
the President has talked about how much the United States appreciates the support and
friendship we've received from other countries who have agreed to bear this responsibility
so that we could make progress in closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Q Is it still his intention to empty out Gitmo before the end of his term?

MR. EARNEST: The President is still aiming to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay by
the end of his term.

Bill.

Q Since you're speaking of optics, was any consideration given to suggesting that the
President perhaps not play golf on the same day that the Republican candidate was going
to Louisiana?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of.

Q Why not?

MR. EARNEST: Again, because the President was focused on the federal response. And
that's why, just days after this flooding started, the President was on the phone with the
Governor of Louisiana to talk to him about what support the U.S. government could
provide. And that's why the President informed him in that phone call that he was
prepared to issue a disaster declaration. And that's why days later, the President sent his
FEMA Administrator, Craig Fugate, down to see the damage firsthand, and just a day or
two after that, the President sent his DHS Secretary down to Louisiana to see the damage
firsthand. And after each of those visits, the President got a phone call from each of them
reporting back to him directly, firsthand, exactly what they had seen.

So the President has been focused on the response and not, frankly, as concerned with the
optics, as all of you appear to be.

Q But you seemed to acknowledge earlier that the optics do have a -- they matter.

MR. EARNEST: Well, they matter in as much as there are plenty of critics of the Obama administration that seize on those optics because they can't, frankly, criticize the response, so they've got to find something to criticize the President about.

Q What will the President see when he goes down there tomorrow? Where is he going?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we'll have more details. This is obviously still coming together. As we noted on Friday -- as I noted in the statement on Friday, the President is seeking to organize this visit in a way that doesn't have an impact on the significant response and recovery efforts that are underway there in Louisiana. So I would anticipate the President will have an opportunity to see some of the damage firsthand. I would anticipate that the President will have the opportunity to speak to officials in Louisiana who have been managing the response effort, including the Governor and Lieutenant Governor. I would expect the President will have an opportunity to meet with and offer some comfort to citizens whose lives have been thrown into chaos as a result of this event. And I'm confident the President will take advantage of the opportunity to thank some of those who were responsible for saving lives at the height of this event.

Doug.

Q Are you equating these two storms -- Katrina and the rainfall in Baton Rouge right now? Because one was of a scale much, much grander than anything we've seen here. One is caused by days and days of steady rain; the other was caused by a hurricane which devastated the entire Southeast United States, affecting millions and millions of people. Yet you said the federal government did a much more effective job with this most recent storm, which is fully understandable, given its scale.

MR. EARNEST: I think what I'm saying is that it's Louisiana officials, both Democrats and Republicans, who are saying that the federal response to these floods in Baton Rouge have been much more effective than the federal response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. So I was citing their experience. And I think it's some of your colleagues who are noting that it's about the same time of year that these two events occurred.

Just as a matter of science, I've seen some reporting on this that actually indicates that there was substantially more rainfall associated with this flooding event than was actually even part of Hurricane Katrina. Now, what was also included in Hurricane Katrina was a storm surge and wind damage that wreaked havoc on a large American city. But I think it's --

Q The broken levees was the primary cause.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, but I think it is -- I don't think it's fair to downplay the significance of this historic flooding event that's affecting not just Baton Rouge but other parts of southern and central Louisiana.

Q And then back to the \$400 million payment. The rest of that money, the \$1.3 billion that's remaining, has been paid -- is that my understanding?

MR. EARNEST: That's my understanding.

Q And what was the form of the payment?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is that this interest payment -- so just to go back, the \$400 million payment was actually the principal. This was Iran's money. Back in 1979, they had deposited money into a U.S. account because they were hoping to buy military equipment. Of course, that military equipment was not provided to the Iranian regime because we'd just seen the government be overthrown there. So this is money, Iranian money that had been held in a U.S. account for 35 years. And so the \$400 million was actually the return of that principal. And the financial dispute was rooted in how much interest we were going to have to pay. And the resolution of that dispute, by getting Iran to accept a \$1.3 billion interest payment, in the eyes of experts, potentially saved U.S. taxpayers billions of dollars.

So that's the argument for why we made this settlement. But as it relates to the mechanics here, what I can tell you is that the \$1.3 billion payment has been made. It was made through a transaction involving central banks, but obviously not the U.S. central bank because there are extensive restrictions on the financial relationship between the United States and Iran. So we had to work with partners, and out of respect for those partners, we're not going to disclose which partner it was. But this is the kind of central bank transaction that is, while probably not routine, not particularly uncommon.

Q And that raises my next question, because if you used central banks to make this most recent transaction, why did you not use them in the first transaction? And why did you not wire the money to a third party which did have a banking relationship with Iran?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the transfer of the \$400 million was actually a central bank to central bank transaction. So that's why I went back at Michelle on the suggestion that somehow this was rather unusual. Again, I don't think it's common given the extraordinary circumstances here, but the mechanism for this transfer was also conducted from central bank to central bank.

There are significant limitations on our ability to engage in financial transactions with Iran because of all of the sanctions that the United States has put in place. Now, some of those sanctions have been rolled back because that was part of the nuclear agreement. So there is more flexibility in executing these kinds of transactions than existed when the \$400 million payment was made. But the fact is, it's difficult to engage in any of these sort of financial transactions because of the remaining sanctions that are in place because of Iran's violation of human rights and support for terrorism and other things.

Q And you're aware that many of your congressional critics, right-wingers say that this form of payment, cash in Euros and Swiss Francs and other denominations, is precisely how Iran pays many of its terrorist proxies?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'd be surprised if they had much insight into how exactly Iran engages in these financial transactions with their proxies. If they do, maybe some of our intel analysts would like to talk to them. But what I can assure you of is that the

financial agreement that we reached saved U.S. taxpayers potentially billions of dollars, and that's exactly why we reached this agreement.

Q Last question. You talked about the right-wingers. Admiral Kirby is no right-winger. He has offered a fundamentally different interpretation of this transaction, that it was connected to the release of these hostages. The President, in his last press conference before departing on his vacation, said the United States does not pay ransom. You've talked about the benefits of this exchange, but you have not talked about the detriments. And many of your critics say the detriment is that there is a bounty hanging over the heads of U.S. citizens who are being held by terrorists now.

MR. EARNEST: Well, anybody who thinks that there is a bounty over U.S. citizens is being foolish in thinking so because the United States does not pay ransom. And the President said as much quite directly. That's been the policy of this administration; that was the policy of previous administrations, Democrats and Republicans. That is the policy that has come under some criticism by some who do think the United States should pay ransom because of the value that we place on human life. The President has reached the conclusion -- again, the same conclusion that was reached by Democratic and Republican predecessors of his -- that to pay a ransom only puts U.S. citizens in more danger. And that's why the United States won't pay a ransom even for Americans that are being unjustly detained overseas.

I would point out that we do actually have a quite strong record of securing the release of Americans who have been unjustly detained overseas -- not just in Iran, but in other places around the world. And that is a process that this administration has overhauled to make even more effective, particularly as it relates to communicating with the families of those who are being held hostage. But this is something that -- this issue and securing the safe rescue and return of U.S. citizens being held against their will overseas is something that the President has made a priority, and we've made significant progress in improving that process.

Q One more question.

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q It's widely interpreted that this is the homestretch for President Obama, between now and Election Day. What does he hope to accomplish over the course of the next three months or so? And given the impasse that he has with congressional Republicans, what alternatives does he have to exercise those options?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, the fact that Congress hasn't done a whole lot during the first eight months of the year doesn't give us a lot of hope that they're going to get a lot done over the next two and a half months or so. And that's been a source of disappointment. In particular, it's been disappointing that while Congress is in the midst of a seven-week break, that there are Americans in some communities across the country that are dealing with the Zika virus being actively spread in their communities. And it's

unfortunate that Congress skipped town for a seven-week recess without being focused on providing the resources that our public health professionals say are necessary to do everything possible to fight that virus.

So when members of Congress get back to work, we're hopeful that they'll make providing Zika-fighting resources available to public health professionals a top priority. They should have done that six months ago when the President and public health professionals first asked for the resources. And hopefully, they'll get to work when they get back. But, look, it's Republicans who have blocked the President's request.

Q And they say you're the ones who have blocked their request. They passed a bill with full funding for Zika treatment.

MR. EARNEST: Well, actually what happened is that there was bipartisan support -- there were some Republicans that did come on board with the Senate bill that did get consideration that did include full funding. There was a compromise measure that some Republicans were able to pass through the House. A different version was passed through the Senate. But both of them were laden with a bunch of politically motivated riders that made clear that they weren't actually interested in passing funding to fight Zika, they were actually trying to make progress on an ideological agenda. And the fact that they would hold hostage Zika funding just so that they could limit funding Planned Parenthood, for example, is, frankly, embarrassing for Republicans who can't do their job.

Let me add one more thing to this. I think the other thing that's been appalling is not just that Republicans went on a seven-week vacation without doing their job, they've actually spent their seven-week vacation bragging about not doing their job. So I don't know if all of you saw these comments from Leader McConnell. This is the highest-ranking Republican in the United States Senate who said, "One of my proudest moments was when I looked Barack Obama in the eye and I said, 'Mr. President, you will not fill the Supreme Court vacancy.'"

It takes a lot of nerve to take a seven-week vacation when you haven't been doing your job. But it takes an extra-special dose of nerve to brag about not doing your job during your seven-week vacation. I think we now have a pretty good illustration of why congressional Republicans are polling so low.

Q Last question. Do you know if the Zika funding -- is there enough money for funding the threat, which has diminished greatly since the height of that --

MR. EARNEST: Well, there has been money that has been transferred, but that money has been transferred from Ebola accounts because Congress hasn't provided sufficient funding so that we can fight Zika. And it does mean that even if there is a small risk from Ebola, why would we take that chance? Why would we be diverting our attention and resources that we know are needed for Ebola so that we can fight the Zika virus? The only reason that we have to do that is because Congress has utterly failed to do what's responsible and necessary to ensure that our public health professionals have everything that they need to do everything possible to fight the Zika virus.

And so it is a source of significant disappointment that Congress hasn't acted responsibly. The truth is there are plenty of Republican representatives in Congress from states that are at risk from the Zika virus, and hopefully one of them is going to demonstrate some leadership and actually have some influence with the Republican leadership in the United States Congress and actually get this done.

But right now, there's a special onus on these Republican members of Congress from states like Florida and Georgia and Louisiana -- these are states where we know that the Zika virus is likely to spread -- Texas is among them, as well -- and those all have representatives in the Senate and the House who are Republicans. And I think the only way this is going to get done is them figuring out how they're going to be able to persuade the Republican leadership to let this through. And thus far, those Republican representatives from Florida and Georgia and Texas and other places have failed. And it's their citizens that they were elected to represent who are going to have to bear the cost of it.

Anita.

Q In the last few weeks, President Obama is starting fundraising for Hillary Clinton's campaign, and as their practice, the White House press corps is able to come -- at least the pools, they were coming to hear his remarks. Hillary Clinton has not done that with her fundraisers, and I'm wondering if the President has a problem with that. I mean, at some point, they will probably appear together at a fundraiser. I don't think that has happened yet. Does the White House think that she should allow the press corps into hear what she's saying?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you've heard me say many times over the last year or so from the podium, I'm going to let the campaigns make their own decisions about the best way to run their campaigns. None of them need any advice from me, and few of them would take any advice from me, frankly.

Q -- a problem that the White House press corps might be able to come into something and he might be saying something that the Hillary Clinton press corps can't come into the same event?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not sure there's ever been a situation where something like that has happened, and I'm not sure that it will.

Q -- at fundraisers for the next three months?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess -- again, the Clinton campaign will make their own decisions. What I will just observe is the President doesn't have any trouble attracting people to attend his fundraisers. Secretary Clinton doesn't either. So, again, maybe there will be a need at some point in the future for the two of them to appear together, but it's not one that I anticipate at this point.

But I can assure you that if President Obama is making formal public remarks at a fundraiser that we'll find a way to make sure that the pool has access to those remarks.

Q Let me ask you a similar question -- but in general, both candidates running for President are far less transparent than President Obama is right now, or was as a candidate, either time. And I'm just wondering --

MR. EARNEST: I welcome you asking this question anytime in the next --

Q You've made a point of this all the time that it's the most transparent administration. Clearly, if Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton wins, clearly, if they're doing what they're doing now, it will be less transparent. Does that not bother this White House?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I'm just not going to --

Q -- for one candidate.

MR. EARNEST: For a variety of reasons --

Q -- the question right now.

MR. EARNEST: For a variety of reasons, I'm just not going to be in a position to offer campaign advice from the podium here. We're focused on the people's business. And at some point if there are questions about -- well, let me just say it this way. Each of the candidates is allowed to make their own case about what kind of value they place on transparency and what steps they're prepared to take to be transparent. And I certainly -- well, I'm just going to stop there. (Laughter.) I just --

Q I guess I would just say is the President of the United States has an influence with the party's nominee. He could use that influence, is all I'm saying. I don't expect an answer to that. But you have a question before you.

MR. EARNEST: All I'm saying is each of the individual campaigns -- I'm quite limited in what I can say in this context about the individual campaigns. But I'm confident that if you contacted one of my colleagues at the Clinton campaign they would have a very strong, fact-based case to make about how much more transparent they are being than their opponent, particularly with regard to tax returns. But that is a case that I'll let them make. (Laughter.)

What I will do is I will make an affirmative case about what President Obama has done to try to bring more transparency into the administration. And, yes, we have made the case repeatedly, in the face of some pretty withering criticism, about how -- I'm looking at you, Mark -- about how the Obama administration is the most transparent administration in history. It's also the job of all of you, including your colleague, Mark, here, to contest that notion and to press us for more access and to say that that's not enough. But President Obama has clearly made this a priority and he hopes that subsequent Presidents will, as well.

Q Okay. So the second question on a separate topic -- in the last few weeks, including today, emails have been released from a variety of places showing -- these are either Hillary Clinton emails or aides' emails -- showing that the Clinton Foundation executive

director officials sought and in some cases received special access at the State Department. And I'm wondering, if this -- because of the agreement that the White House struck with the Clinton State Department, if you all have problems with that. If it didn't violate the actual lines of the agreement, many people have said it violates the spirit of the agreement. And I'm wondering what your thoughts are.

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I'm actually not going to get into that. There is an agreement that was in place while Secretary Clinton was at the State Department that did go above and beyond standard ethics requirements, including as it relates to the Clinton family foundation. But for emails that were exchanged between State Department officials and individuals at the foundation --

Q It's your State Department, though.

MR. EARNEST: I understand that. But the responsibility for enforcing the ethical guidelines that are included in the memorandum of understanding falls with ethics attorneys at the State Department. This is how it works at every agency. So I'm going to let State Department officials talk about emails from the State Department. I'll let officials at the foundation talk about emails that their officials sent.

Go ahead, Hans.

Q Earlier, you kind of suggested we weren't asking precise enough questions seven months ago on Iran and that's why some of the lack of clarity is here. So for the sake of clarity, could you describe for me and for the record the White House's understanding and the delineation between leverage and ransom?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Hans, I will be very clear about this. I was not trying to imply any sort of lack of effort or expertise on the part of the reporters who were asking questions. The observation that I'm making is that there are a whole lot of details related to this series of agreements. And the truth is the questions that you guys were asking about the safety and security of American citizens who were being released, about how we could verify the commitments that Iran was making with regard to their nuclear program, about the mechanism for releasing these American citizens and what prisoners were released in the United States in exchange for them -- all those were legitimate questions. And all those were answered in detail, including in some cases, on the record in the President's remarks to all of you; in other cases, particularly as it relates to the prisoners who were released, there were statements issued and information provided by the Department of Justice.

So I guess the point that I'm making here, Hans, is not just that there was a failure on the part of the press corps, just the observation that this was extraordinarily complex and there are lots of details that people were justifiably interested in. And I think understanding the details, the kinds of details that I just outlined I think would have an impact on people's appraisal of the benefits of the approach that we have pursued.

The point that I'm making is the kinds of details that we're talking about now, while might be interesting fodder for a read in a spy novel on the beach, don't change our assessment about what exactly was concluded and how the United States benefitted from the conclusion of this series of agreements.

Q I'll concede this is all very complex. But my simple question is, what's the difference between a ransom and leverage?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the point is simply this: The United States was pursuing three different agreements, trying to resolve three different issues with the Iranians. And the nuclear agreement was one that Secretary Kerry and others -- Ambassador Wendy Sherman among them -- spent years, many sleepless nights, trying to negotiate with the Iranians. And we completed that agreement. And that actually went into effect, Implementation Day was actually the day before the release of the American citizens, and the day before the completion of the financial settlement.

What we have made clear is that the American citizens in Iran who were unjustly detained were released in exchange for the United States releasing some prisoners who were held here. These were individuals who were convicted of crimes like trying to circumvent sanctions that were in place against Iran --

Q -- the \$400 million was the leverage.

MR. EARNEST: The \$400 million was a separate settlement.

Q Where does the timing in the leverage come in? Because the State Department has used the word, "leverage." The President has used the word, "ransom." And I'm just trying to square.

MR. EARNEST: And I guess what I'm saying is that what we made clear to the Iranians is that we expected them to navigate the complexities of all of this. We were doing our part to release the seven prisoners. There are also 14 other individuals who had red notices against them dropped. They were part of this agreement to secure the release of the unjustly detained Americans.

But this is a complicated arrangement, and we expected them to keep their commitments.

Q -- ask another simple question. Is there a difference between a ransom and leverage?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, Hans, I guess I quibble with this because --

Q Every time -- we've been sort of dinged for not asking precise questions. We're trying to ask them, and then we don't get direct answers. I mean, is this -- the President said no ransoms. The State Department said leverage was paid. So just how do we bring those two together? I mean, if there's no distinction, there's no distinction. But we're giving you a chance right now to say is there a distinction between ransom and leverage, and your quibbling with the question, which seems like a pretty basic question.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again -- well, first of all, I'm not dinging the press corps, and I certainly didn't mean to ding you or anybody else for not asking precise questions. As I mentioned earlier, the fact is this is extraordinarily complex.

The notion of a ransom I think I often perceived as paying money in exchange of the release of unjustly detained individuals. That's not what occurred here. What occurred here was a mutual prisoner release. Iran released four American citizens who were being unjustly detained in Iran, and we brought them home. The United States released seven individuals who had been convicted of crimes and were being held here in the United States. You've got to check on the details with the Justice Department. I don't know if all of them had been convicted, but at least several of them were being held here in U.S. prisons because they were either convicted of or accused of a crime. So that is the --

Q I heard the definition of ransom. The definition of leverage is?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's not a word that I'd use, I guess is what I would point out. So you can ask somebody else about that. But we've been quite clear exactly about what led to all of this.

Q Earlier you were quite clear that you were very proud of the entire agreement. Were you proud that leverage was used?

MR. EARNEST: Again, that's a word that I have not used. And the point is we are quite proud of the benefits that have been enjoyed by the American people, and we are quite proud of the way that we have prevented Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, convinced Iran to roll back key aspects of their nuclear program, cooperate with intrusive inspections of their nuclear facilities, secure the release of four unjustly detained Americans, and saved the American taxpayers potentially billions of dollars. And we've done all of that without firing a single bullet or deploying a single troop.

Q If "leverage" isn't the word you're comfortable using, how would you describe the delay in the timing?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what is clear is that the --

Q Just one word. If leverage doesn't work, ransom doesn't work, what works?

MR. EARNEST: What works is that Iran released four American citizens who were being unjustly detained in exchange for seven individuals being released in the United States. That was the exchange. That's the direct exchange that occurred. This was a mutual prisoner release.

Q The mechanisms that were used, your words -- the arrangements -- how would you describe that arrangement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I just did. They released four people that were being unjustly detained in Iran and we brought them home. There were seven individuals that were being held in the United States and we released them. That's the mutual prisoner

release.

I think people have described this as a quid pro quo. That's the quid pro quo. They released four; we released seven.

Q One final -- you're not using the term, "leverage." Do you disavow, do you want to walk back that leverage? Since leverage is not something you're comfortable coming from the White House.

MR. EARNEST: What is clear, Hans, is this -- is that the United States was much more concerned about completing the agreement to bring our four unjustly detained American citizens home than we were in reaching the financial settlement. The Iranians might have had a different set of priorities. They may have valued that money more. You'd have to ask them.

So it's clear what our priority was in this instance when it came to those two transactions that were completed on the same day. But, again, the reason that we quibble with this notion of a ransom is pretty straightforward. The quid pro quo here was the release of four Americans by Iran in exchange for the release of seven prisoners in the United States.

Alexis.

Q Josh, can we just add one question on top of what Hans was asking, and everybody was asking? Going forward, is the President concerned now that there is enough confusion about what you described as very complex that the perception in the United States and around the world is that the United States has a different policy in not paying ransoms and that this confusion might put Americans in harm's way in terms of making them susceptible to being detained, imprisoned, taken hostage in the future?

MR. EARNEST: I would acknowledge and I have acknowledged -- I think we've all acknowledged that the situation is complex, but there should be no confusion. The President has been clear from the beginning of his presidency that the United States does not pay ransoms. And the President said as much a couple of weeks ago. He said it directly in response to a question. He said it live on television. And he said it straight -- you heard it straight from the President's mouth. That is the policy of the United States. That is the policy for which the United States has been criticized on occasion. That is the policy that was in place and followed by previous Presidents in both parties. But it's the policy that's been in place here in the United States.

As it relates to those individuals who were intentionally trying to sow confusion, it's unfortunate that they are seeking to do so, but I understand that they have a political motive for doing so. And I'm referring to political motives of right-wingers in Iran and right-wingers in the United States.

As the President himself, again, about a year or so ago, made the observation that right-wingers in Iran were making common cause with Republicans here in the United States. So this is not a new phenomenon. It's not different that the right-wingers in Iran are

making basically the same argument as Republicans here in the United States. That's not new. But it's also not new that the President has been unambiguous about the policy that we've pursued in this administration not to pay ransom.

Q Can I ask a Louisiana question?

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q Is it too early to suggest that there might be a request for additional federal assistance that the President would need to work with Congress on? Has there been discussion inside the administration because of the high price tag that deals with schools, Education Department, Agriculture, obviously homes -- I was just wondering if it's too early to say that that might be a discussion here.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm certainly not aware of any discussions like that that have taken place thus far. But obviously the President is going to have an opportunity to go hear firsthand from officials in Louisiana when he visits there tomorrow. And certainly as we make more progress in the response and recovery it will become clearer what exactly the price tag is and clearer what sort of additional support the people of Louisiana and the state of Louisiana may need.

So the administration is committed to standing with Louisiana and the people of Louisiana in this difficult time. And, again, if the past is any guide, after several days here, the attention will trickle away, but this administration is going to be focused on standing with the people of Louisiana even after the television cameras have left. And that is a commitment that the President will make when he travels there tomorrow.

Q One other follow-up on Doug's question about the President's agenda moving forward. You mentioned Senator McConnell not being helpful on the Supreme Court. But Senator McConnell is in favor of trade. On TPP and the effort that the administration was making during the summer break to try to I guess gin up support for getting TPP ratification, is the President still of a mind that that is possible in a lame duck?

MR. EARNEST: The President certainly continues to believe that the Congress should support the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The President and his team have negotiated a very effective deal, and this is an agreement that has been posted publicly for months that people around the world and the United States Congress have been able to read. And that agreement includes 18,000 tax cuts on American goods that other countries impose. It includes provisions that allow the United States to enforce higher labor standards and higher environmental standards, and even higher human rights standards in a variety of countries. And it also gives the United States and businesses here the opportunity to compete on a more level playing field in countries around the world, including some countries that are home to the fastest-growing economies in the world.

And the President is concerned that if the United States doesn't engage in this way, that we're only leaving a vacuum for China to fill. We know that China is actually in touch with other countries who have signed on to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, trying to negotiate their own trade deals with them. There is a very real risk that the United States gets cut

out of the deal. And the reason for that is simple. China is not looking for a higher standard when it comes to workers' rights or the environment or protecting intellectual property. If anything, they're looking to lower those standards that will only put the United States and our businesses and our economy and our workers at a bigger disadvantage.

So that's the challenge here and that's the case, frankly, that the President will be making to members of Congress. And he certainly will continue to be making that case until it gets done. And the President is certainly hopeful that it will get done before he leaves office.

Q Is there anything on his domestic schedule that will be related just specifically to that argument, to trade?

MR. EARNEST: Nothing on his domestic schedule in terms of travel at this point to talk about, but we'll keep you posted.

Andrew, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. Turkey has reportedly taken artillery strikes against Islamic State and Kurdish targets in Northern Syria. And my first question on the strikes against the Islamic State group -- is Turkey doing this alone? Were you told about it? Is this something that's part of a coordinated effort within Operation Inherent Resolve? And secondly, there have been strikes against the PYD, which is linked to a U.S.-backed group. Is the White House -- does the White House have a problem with Turkey bombing your allies?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Andrew, I can tell you that I don't have any specific military operations to talk to you about. Let me say it this way -- I don't have any specific Turkish military operations to talk to you about. Our policy has been that we certainly stand with our allies, our NATO allies in Turkey as they confront terrorism. And they face terrorism from a variety of sources, including most recently and tragically, just over the weekend, where there was a bombing at a wedding, of all places, where dozens of innocent people were killed.

So the threat that Turkey faces from extremism and from terrorists is very real. And there are a variety of steps that the United States has taken to support our Turkish allies, and we've certainly offered additional support as they deal with specific incidents like the attack that we saw over the weekend. And that will be part of the message that Vice President Biden will convey when he travels to Turkey later this week.

Q Will the Vice President also warn Turkey to stop hitting U.S. allies?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, there are no details of Turkish military operations that I'm going to talk about from here. Obviously there are concerns that the Turks have raised about Kurdish activities, and we've discussed the way in which the United States and other members of our Counter-ISIL coalition have been able to work effectively with the Syrian Arab coalition against ISIL elements inside of Syria.

So this is another extraordinarily complex situation, but we've made clear that everyone who is involved, including Turkey, should make going after ISIL the top priority. And Turkey, to their credit, has made clear their commitment to doing that in a variety of ways, including giving the United States and our coalition partners access to certainly military facilities inside of Turkey that allow us to take strikes efficiently against ISIL targets. So we've made that case directly to the Turks on a variety of occasions and we're certainly going to continue to do that, even as we're mindful of the terror risk for Turkey that emanates from other places, too.

Q And final question. The Turks are reportedly moving Hummers and tanks towards the border. Does the White House think that the Turkish incursion in Northern Syria would be useful?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not going to talk about any Turkish military movements. We've made clear all along that one of our priorities has been getting the Turks to make more consistent progress in securing the Turkey-Syria border. And they made a lot of progress on that front over the last six or nine months, and we've been gratified to see that.

But there certainly is more that they could do, and we would welcome them doing that. But Turkey is a NATO ally and making a valuable contribution to our Counter-ISIL coalition, and we're going to continue to coordinate with them closely as they do that. And that will certainly be an important part of Vice President Biden's visit to that country later this week.

Thanks a lot, everybody.

END

2:20 P.M. EDT