

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 2/5/2016

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

****Please see below for corrections, marked with an asterisk.**

12:48 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: So with the --

Q I've got enough. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: With that out of the way --

Q Week in review?

MR. EARNEST: Exactly, week ahead. That would be okay with me, too. Maybe we'll go quickly here and we'll see if there are some other questions we can get through.

But, Darlene, do you want to start us off in phase two here?

Q Sure. A follow-up on the oil tax question. If something like that were to ever get through this current Congress, wouldn't asking companies to pay \$10 more per barrel of oil, wouldn't that somehow dent some of the progress the President was just out here talking about on the economy? Wouldn't consumers end up having to pay that? Wouldn't it be passed off to them eventually?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that it does seem likely that oil companies would pass on at least some of that expense. But I think part of the President's point is that we're seeing that energy costs are lower than they've been in quite some time.

So this is precisely the time when we should capitalize on that opportunity. The truth is, the argument is stronger when energy prices are at an all-time high. But now we're in a situation where energy prices are a little bit lower. This is a smart time for us to start considering how we can make fiscally responsible investments in new technology, in more

modern infrastructure, in transportation systems that run on renewable energy, investments in research and development that would allow us to strengthen the economy but also to transition to the low-carbon energy economy of the future.

Q Switching to another topic, are you aware that the Chairman of the House and Senate Budget Committees have said that they are not going to hold a hearing on the President's budget proposal when he sends it up there next week?

MR. EARNEST: I did see that announcement. It reminded me of the document that I've referred to in this briefing a couple of times -- or in this briefing room at least a couple of times. The day after the election, Leader McConnell and then-Speaker of the House John Boehner wrote an op-ed that appeared in the Wall Street Journal, and the headline was "Now We Can Get Congress Moving Again."

This was their commitment to try to bring about some semblance of regular order to the legislative process. They've done that with mixed results. And I guess the future is pretty dim if you have Republicans in Congress unwilling to even talk about the budget with the White House. We do see that Republicans are pretty eager to leap to the defense of the oil industry, but they aren't really willing to have a serious, detailed conversation about our country's budget priorities.

It says a lot of things, I think. It certainly does raise some questions about how serious Republicans actually are about governing the country. It also raises some questions about how confident they are in the kinds of arguments that they could make about the budget. Maybe they're taking the Donald Trump approach to debates about the budget -- they're just not going to show up.

Q To go back to the oil tax for a second, is that something that you are hoping to get in this final year? I mean, what was the purpose of putting it out there, knowing what the reaction would be from the Republican side?

MR. EARNEST: Look, the purpose of a policy proposal like this -- and this is what will be included in the President's budget next week -- is you lay out your agenda, you lay out where your priorities are, and you lay out what you think is the best path forward for the country. So, again, I think this is the reason that you have budget hearings in the first place. The budget proposal that we'll put forward will reflect what the President believes Congress should enact to move the country forward. But our expectation is not that Congress is just going to pass every single line item that's included in our budget. We should have a debate. And because Republicans are in charge of the Congress and the Democrats in charge of the White House, we're ultimately going to have to have a compromise.

So we weren't particularly surprised that when we announced our oil fee, that Republicans leap to the defense of the oil industry. I think that's an indication that the oil industry's millions of dollars in lobbying in campaign contributions are money well spent. They have people who are really looking out for them in the United States Congress. They're all Republicans.

But the President is the one that's looking out for middle-class families, and we're going to continue to put forward ideas that we believe are in the best interest of our economy and middle-class families. And many of those ideas are included in -- will be included in the budget, and it's unfortunate that Republicans don't even want to have a conversation about it.

Q Finally, it's being released on Tuesday. Tuesday is the day of the New Hampshire primary. Was there not another day the budget could be released? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, to be blunt, there was a conversation about releasing it on Monday, but typically there is a lot of work that is done a day in advance of the budget and we didn't want all of you to have to work during the Super Bowl.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: We're looking out for your best interests, even when it doesn't seem like we are. (Laughter.)

Ayesha.

Q Moving on to Syria, how concerned are you that Russian and Assad forces are poised to take Aleppo? I mean, at this point, tens of thousands of Syrians are fleeing the city. And it looks like the city could soon fall under a full government siege. So is that a concern for the administration?

MR. EARNEST: It does look like a terrible humanitarian situation inside of Syria is poised to get worse, and that is something that we continue to be quite concerned about. And we've been concerned for some time that the Assad government has been targeting innocent civilians in areas that are held by the opposition -- by opposition forces. And this is a good example of that. Those operations are leading to the loss of thousands of innocent lives. They're leading to violence that has caused the displacement of millions of Syrians from their homes and their communities. It's created a refugee migration problem not just in the region, but broadly around the world.

And the continued support by the Russians of the Assad regime only makes it possible for the Assad regime to expand that violence, and it sets back our efforts to try to reach the kind of political transition that the Russians themselves acknowledge is necessary. So, it's tragic. But it certainly is not going to prevent the United States from continuing to push forward the political transition process to try to get Assad out of power so that we can begin to address the political chaos that's the root of so many problems in that country.

Q On another topic. Some of my colleagues have a story out today about mutual fund investment in gun companies. And it revealed that President Obama -- even President Obama has a stake in gun makers through -- indirectly -- through these, I believe, a pension fund, albeit it is a very small stake. How does the President feel about the fact that all of these mutual funds and other investments are being made into gun companies because they have been so profitable during his administration? Is this something that he

has given any thought about? And especially that it's difficult for even people who want more gun control or who may be opposed to investment in gun companies to avoid it because so many mutual funds are involved with these companies.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not aware -- I haven't seen that report, and I'm not aware with the intimate details of the President's investments that sounds like include a pension fund that may be at least partially invested in a gun manufacturer. I know there has been a grassroots attempt in a variety of places, including on some college campuses, to encourage mutual funds and other institutional investors from investing in gun manufacturers. And the President has not hid from a willingness to criticize gun manufacturers that he believes, in some cases, are acting unscrupulously.

But our focus has been, frankly, on common-sense things that can be done. And we would welcome more support from gun manufacturers for some of the common-sense measures that we have advocated. Things like closing the gun show loophole. Things like closing the no-fly, no-buy loophole that allows individuals who are on the terror watch list to go ahead and walk into any gun store in America and purchase a gun. So there are some common-sense things that we can do, and I don't know if we've taken a specific position on sort of these grassroots efforts, but I will just say, more generally, that the President does believe that we're going to need to see more passion behind the grassroots movement to bring about the change in gun policies that the President would like to see. And that's sort of where we are on it.

Justin.

Q I wanted to go back to something the President just said. Do you know if he misspoke when he said that the oil tax fee would be on both imported and exported barrels? It's different from what was said on the call yesterday.

MR. EARNEST: Why don't I go and check that fact. I noticed that he said that, too. So why don't we go and make sure we can get you some clarity about how the policy would be applied.

Q My second question kind of follows off of that, so maybe you'll take that one as well. But if the U.S. levies a tax on imports but not on exported barrels of oil, is there a possibility that that's a violation of WTO rules or NAFTA or any of the other --

MR. EARNEST: Why don't I take both those questions and see if I can get you a direct answer to that question.

Q There were a couple other things. I wanted to ask you about the explosion on the plane in Somalia. I don't think you guys have talked about that yet. I'm wondering if you can confirm that the U.S. government has assessed that the bomber was related in some way to al-Shabaab, if the U.S. is doing anything to aid the investigation, and if we've stepped up or taken any precautions in the aftermath of the attack.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an updated assessment to share with you. I know that there has been some work done through a variety of channels to try to learn more about this particular incident. We have seen ISIL figures -- or ISIL-affiliated organizations try to carry out attacks against the commercial aviation. So we're mindful of this risk. But at this point, I don't have a firm assessment to offer.

Q And we're not taking any new security steps?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, no. But obviously as we learn more about what exactly happened on that particular flight, it could lead to additional steps. We're always updating our posture with measures that sometimes are readily noticeable to the public and sometimes aren't.

So if there's a public announcement about a change in security posture at airports that's necessary, that would be an announcement that would come from DHS and TSA. But I'm not aware of any announcements that they're planning in the short term as a direct response to this particular incident.

Q And the last one. The CDC set off the firestorm this week by releasing a document that said women of child-bearing age shouldn't consume alcohol unless they were taking birth control. I'm wondering -- this has obviously generated a lot of controversy -- if you guys think the CDC kind of misstepped by releasing that document.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let the CDC sort of describe the science behind this. I think that their general effort was to try to communicate with the public about the significant risks that are associated with consuming alcohol early in a pregnancy. But for the most effective ways to prevent that, I'd defer to the expertise of the scientists at the CDC.

Q So does the White House then agree that women of child-bearing age who aren't on birth control shouldn't consume alcohol?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, this is a scientific conclusion -- or at least guidance -- that was issued by the CDC. And people should certainly consider that view and that guidance. But ultimately people are going to make up their own mind.

Mark.

Q Yesterday, we barely needed an egg timer to wait for the Republican leadership to say that the \$10 oil fee was DOA. The President said they always say that. But does that mean the administration is standing by the proposal?

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely, absolutely. And we'll --

Q -- it will overcome the leadership position on that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's going to be hard to do if they won't even meet with the President's Budget Director, that's for sure -- because this is a proposal that's included in our budget. But if Republicans are scared of that debate, I guess that is something that you'll have to ask them about. This is a position that we'll continue to advocate for. It's

clearly in the best interests of our economy, both in the short term and over the long term when you consider the need to transition to the low-carbon economy of the future and the need to do that in a fiscally responsible way. That's exactly what we're laying out.

But I guess the other thing is this: We would welcome additional ideas from Republicans. If they say that they have a better, more fiscally responsible way to make the kind of investment that's needed in modernizing our infrastructure, then we're happy to consider their ideas, too. But this is an idea that we think is a good one that we're putting on the table. But, no, I don't think there's anybody here that was surprised about the fact, again, as I mentioned, that the Republican Party -- Republicans in Congress are eager to leap to the defense of the oil industry. If only they shared that passion for defending the middle class, our jobs numbers would look even better than they already do.

Q Well, they say they are because they say it will raise the price of gasoline by a quarter a gallon.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I guess you'd have to ask the oil industry if they'd be prepared to pass that cost on to their customers. I wouldn't be surprised if they say yes. They are the ones that can render judgment about that. I think there are a couple of other --

Q Would you be surprised if they said yes?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry? I'd be surprised if they said that they would pass on the --

Q Well, why do you --

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry, I would not be surprised if they said that they would pass on that.

But what this debate also uncovers is that there are currently significant costs that are incurred by middle-class families, by businesses, and by our economy based on the infrastructure that we currently have; that not updating our infrastructure has significant costs.

I know that this is something that Secretary Foxx talked about yesterday. American businesses lose almost \$30 billion a year because they don't benefit from a modern infrastructure; that shipments are delayed; that products don't move as efficiently through our transportation system; or that the costs associated with moving those products through the transportation system is higher because the system is not as efficient as it could be. And that is a cost that could be eliminated or at least significantly reduced if we were making a smarter investment in our infrastructure.

So I guess the question is: Where are we going to pay this cost? Our view is that by investing in our infrastructure, we can lower these hidden taxes, but also create jobs and improve our economic prospects over the long term by having a modern infrastructure in this country.

Ron.

Q The President mentioned wages are rising. But was there much more evidence -- and various proposals -- but was there much evidence in the report that the income inequality gap is narrowing? Is there more -- I don't know whether it's true or not that there's more progress at the bottom than at the top, or if it's just spread out across the economy.

MR. EARNEST: I didn't look that deeply in the numbers, but I'm sure we can have an economist touch base with you about that. I think what the President was citing -- that over the last six months, we've seen wages grow at a rate of about *2.5 [2.9] percent, which is the fastest that they have grown in recent years. That's a positive indication that we're seeing wage growth starting to accelerate.

And what we want to do is to try to continue to maintain and even build on that momentum, given the context of the political debate. Trying to put upward pressure on wages has been a core component of the President's economic strategy, and it's satisfying to see that we're starting to make some important progress. But many of the proposals that the President discussed in answering Michelle's question would have the positive impact of continuing to put upward pressure on wages.

Q But I didn't hear anything about people at the very bottom -- the poverty rate, which has been persistently high, as well. It just seems to be -- the good news seems to be for the economy broadly, but not for the people at the very bottom.

MR. EARNEST: I think the increase in the participation rate is an indication that people up and down the income scale are entering the workforce. And the good news is that last month, 158,000 private sector jobs were created. So they're finding jobs. Increased wages is certainly something that's going to help those who are at the bottom, but there's more that we can do.

The President talked specifically about raising the minimum wage. Right now, if you're working -- even if you have a job and you're working full time and you're trying to raise a family of four, you are raising that family below the poverty line if all you're being paid is the minimum wage. That doesn't sort of reflect the values in this country, where hard work should lead to a good paycheck. So that's certainly one thing we could do to address those at the bottom. This is not something that Republicans by and large support.

The President also talked about some longer-term things -- things like early childhood education, opening the doors to a college education to middle-class families and those families that are trying to get into the middle class. I wouldn't expect that that would have an impact on next month's jobs numbers or even next year's jobs numbers. But if we want to make sure that the next generation of Americans has access to even more opportunity, there are some common-sense things that we can do.

Q Just to follow up on the Aleppo question, as well -- there's a report that the Saudis are going to mobilize a ground force of several thousand to intervene in Syria. Is that true?

MR. EARNEST: Well, for exactly what the Saudis meant and what they're prepared to offer up, you should check with them. What they are responding to, however, is a specific request that Secretary Carter made of countries who are participating in our counter-ISIL campaign to ramp up their commitment.

And so we certainly welcome the announcement from our partners in Saudi Arabia that they'd be prepared to ramp up their commitment militarily to this effort. It's unclear to me about whether or not this would be a significant contingent of ground troops or if they have in mind a deployment of Special Operations forces like the commitment that the United States recently made. So for the texture around that, I'd refer you to the Saudis.

But I think this is a positive indication that our requests for a greater commitment are being answered in the affirmative by our partners in the counter-ISIL coalition.

Q Are there other commitments you can point out beyond that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have new commitments to announce, but I do know that -- I believe as early as next week -- I'm just looking at this -- yes, next week, Secretary Carter will be traveling to Brussels where he will be meeting with about two dozen of his counterparts from nations who are part of our counter-ISIL coalition. The Saudis will be a part of that discussion. It will be an opportunity for Secretary Carter to re-up his request for additional commitments. I don't know at this point whether or not we'll have announcements out of that meeting, but that certainly would be a place to look for one.

Q Is it fair to say that given that Aleppo seems to be about to fall and that the political process of negotiations seems to be stalled that it's becoming increasingly clear that there needs to be a bigger military response on the ground from the allies -- from the U.S.-led coalition in order to really not lose the day there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say a couple things about that. I think our principal concern about Aleppo right now is there's the possibility that government forces backed by the Russians would encircle that city and essentially lay siege to that city. And that would obviously exacerbate a terrible humanitarian situation there. So that is something that we're definitely concerned about.

We've been talking for a long time, for certainly more than four or five months now, about how the Russian military strategy inside of Syria undermines the goals of their political strategy. There's no denying that the efforts of the Russian military to buck up and strengthen the Assad regime's grip on power only gives the Assad regime less of an incentive to come to the negotiating table and act constructively in conversations there.

So this is a sticking point. And it is one that does impede us making progress. Now, at the same time, the Russians do have -- because of their support for the Assad regime, they do have some leverage with the Assad regime. And we're hopeful that they can use that influence to get the Syrian government to be more constructive at the negotiating table.

Look, we also need to do some work with the opposition forces to get them to engage in this process, too. They obviously have concerns about engaging in this process at the negotiating table when, back home, they're seeing their fighters subjected to intense shelling and other violence, and they see that the territory that they hold is also the scene of innocent civilians being slaughtered. So their concerns about this process are entirely understandable, but everybody needs to come to the realization that we clearly have, which is that there's not a military solution that can be imposed on Syria. We need to solve these political problems, and we need to get started on that -- or at least continue to build on the progress that we've made in the last few months so we can move this process along.

Richard.

Q Thank you, Josh. Correct me if I'm wrong. Did the President -- when the President talked about economic slowdown and stagnation outside of the U.S., he talked about headwinds. At what point does the strong dollar the weaker demand -- at what point will the White House be worried that it's going to affect the export and, by extension, the economy?

MR. EARNEST: Let me start by saying there's not much I can say about the value of the dollar. The only government official that talks about that is the Treasury Secretary, and even he is cautious in making those kinds of pronouncements. We value the independence of the Fed in setting monetary policies. So I'd be interested in what the Fed has to say about your questions, so you should go ask them.

What I can just say in general is something that the President's top economist, Jason Furman, has been observing for quite a while now, which is that the biggest risk to the U.S. economy right now is economic weakness and instability around the world. That we are encountering some headwinds in our economy because we're not seeing other economies grow as quickly as we would like them to see. And so the question I think really for the United States is, what's our response to that going to be? And I think the President's view is there are there are a couple of things that we can do about that.

The first is, we can actually deepen our connections with those economies that are growing pretty robustly right now. And we do see that many of the economies that are included in the Trans-Pacific Partnership are economies that are quite dynamic. So let's deepen those connections and actually level the playing field, and give American businesses more of an opportunity to compete in that region of the world. That certainly is one way that we can start to compensate for some of the weakness and volatility that we're seeing in other markets. That's not the entire solution, but that surely should be part of it.

The other thing that we can do is actually take a look at some of the ways that we can prepare the U.S. workforce to be even more competitive and even more productive. So that's why longer-term investments in things like job training and a college education, and in research and development, advanced manufacturing -- those kinds of investments have never been more important. That we can make -- that even in an economy where we

are seeing other -- even in a global economy where many of our customers of American businesses are struggling, offering them better products and more advanced products and being even more competitive is a way to further solidify the position of the United States in the global economy.

So that means making investments now that will pay a long-term benefit in a better-educated, better-skilled workforce and in certain sectors of the economy like technology and advanced manufacturing, where we can strengthen the kind of competitive advantage that we already enjoy, and that has led to the -- or at least contributed importantly to the kind of economic success that we've seen in recovering from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Q And I have a question on Syria. We talked about Aleppo, but we hear about different cities and populations being isolated and starving to death. You often underline the fact that the U.S. is the most important humanitarian donor. Is it an option to airdrop humanitarian aid to these populations or are we just giving this to refugees outside of the country and, in the end, abandoning the other ones inside?

MR. EARNEST: We talked about this a little bit yesterday, and let me say a couple things about it. The first is, the United States is the largest donor of bilateral assistance -- bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to Syrians fleeing violence. And that means making contributions to countries in the region that are already bearing a significant burden of caring for these refugees -- countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and others. The other thing that we have done is also provided significant resources to the aid organizations that are able to operate in Syria. It's a very dangerous environment there. There aren't many that have the capacity to do that, but there are some, and we are seeking to support them by providing them resources.

The other thing that we've been very focused on doing is trying to negotiate ceasefires so that these aid organizations can operate safely on the ground to go and try to bring badly needed food and water and medical supplies to innocent civilians who are just caught in the crossfire. So there has been an aggressive diplomatic track to try to enact humanitarian ceasefires that would allow for some of this assistance to be provided.

When it comes to humanitarian airdrops, that is something that we've done in isolated situations in the past. Yesterday, I cited the example of providing some humanitarian supplies to Yazidi religious minorities that had been isolated on Sinjar Mountain. What tends to be true of those kinds of humanitarian airdrops is, I think for obvious reasons, the amount of supplies that you can include in a humanitarian airdrop is pretty limited. It means that the longer-term impact of those supplies is limited, and the number of people that you can bring relief to is limited. But that was okay in the situation in Sinjar Mountain because we knew -- we had a good sense of the population of people that were up there, and it came on the heels of, or right around the same time as a coordinated military action to free them from that siege. So the humanitarian supplies just needed to get them through a couple of days until we could get them off the mountain.

The kind of situation that we see inside of Syria right now is different than that. We're talking about much larger populations of people, and typically we're talking about people that have been isolated and under siege for a long time. So they have pretty grave needs.

So I wouldn't rule out humanitarian airdrops in the future, but our focus right now is on trying to get the kind of ceasefire that would allow aid organizations to provide that relief and that assistance on the ground. But you can move a lot more through a convoy of trucks than you can through pallets that are dropped out of a military transport aircraft.

Q -- implying negotiating with the Assad regime.

MR. EARNEST: Well, it does. It does imply getting the Assad regime and the Russians to abide by a ceasefire agreement that would allow for the basic humanitarian needs of innocent people to be addressed, but also would advance the political negotiations. If we're trying to reach a political solution, let's stop the firing and try to broker our differences here. And that's been part of our strategy, and we've made a little progress in this regard, but there's a lot more that we can do and we want to try to build on the progress that we've seen thus far.

Margaret.

Q Josh, on Aleppo, you said a terrible humanitarian situation is poised to get worse. You'd also acknowledge that the loss of Aleppo would be a significant blow for the moderate rebels and those supported by the U.S.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, this is obviously one of the largest cities in Syria, and so it would be a setback to the opposition. But what we want to prevent is we want to prevent the kind of humanitarian disaster that could result from this situation, but we also want to try to prevent a further setback to the political process. That the more confident that the Assad regime gets in terms of their hold on power, the less of an incentive they have to even engage constructively in the political process.

And, look, even the Russians -- this is something that President Putin said directly to President Obama. He acknowledged that a political transition inside of Syria was necessary to ultimately solve these problems. And given the significant investment that Russia has made in Syria, particularly when you consider their military installation, they have their own incentive to try to bring this violence to an end. And they recognize that they've made a significant gamble by immersing themselves so deeply in the sectarian conflict. But at some point, they just have to reconcile the contradictions that are inherent in their strategy.

Q I'm interested in what you said about Saudi's offer, if it is that, about a ground force specifically. When you were saying you'd welcome Saudi stepped-up aid, specifically ground forces, is that something that you -- the United States, supports?

MR. EARNEST: The United States -- Secretary Carter made a request of a number of his counterparts who are part of our counter-ISIL coalition, including the Saudis, asking them to consider ways they could enhance and even increase their contributions to our

counter-ISIL efforts. All those requests have included additional military support. That's why the Secretary of Defense was making the ask.

Q But ground forces?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, in terms of what kind of commitment the Saudis have in mind, I would refer you to them. I can't speak for them about whether or not they were talking about a detachment of Saudi ground combat troops, or if they had in mind a commitment of Saudi special operations forces. They have a pretty advanced military in Saudi Arabia, and they have special operations forces that do have unique capabilities that could advance the goals of our counter-ISIL campaign.

But in terms of the specifics, about what they're prepared to commit to this effort, you should check with them. I don't want to speak for them. But this will certainly be part of the discussion that Secretary Carter has with his counterparts in Brussels. And hopefully other countries will see the significant commitment that the United States has made.

They'll see this new commitment that the Saudis have made, and that they, too, will -- that other countries will also ramp up their commitment to this effort.

Q On Wall Street, I want to ask you, when the President was talking about softness in the global economy, looking forward, the jobless rate is a lagging indicator of what's happening and what will be happening. Wall Street is warning increasingly of a recession in 2016. Is the White House ruling that out?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President's economists can give you a better assessment of this, and we can arrange for a conversation with you.

I think in general what we would say is that we're mindful of the risks. The U.S. economy is not impervious to the weakness that we see in other economies that are closely intertwined in ours. The reaction of some people is to say, well, maybe we should sever those ties, or we should take a step back from the international economy. The President's view is that the more that we can protect the ability of American businesses to do business overseas, the more customers they're going to have.

And so that means if we start to encounter some headwinds from China or some European economies, that creating additional opportunities in places like Vietnam and Singapore all of a sudden become pretty appealing. So that certainly needs to be a part of our strategy, and that's part of the President's approach.

The other thing that we can do is invest in those areas where we already know that we have a competitive advantage, that investments in new technology and research and development -- even in the medical field, or advanced manufacturing -- these are all areas where the United States leads the world. We're at the cutting edge of these industries, and we know that these industries generate economic activity inside the United States. They also create good jobs.

So let's make sure that we're investing in those industries. Let's also make sure that we're investing in our workforce so that American workers are positioned to capitalize on those opportunities that are available.

Q Did the President think that Democrats are also talking down the economy, something he said is not helpful, particularly the Democrats running for office who talk about some of the problems -- the lack of wage growth and long-term unemployment? Was he including them, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders in that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't think he was, primarily because I think what both of those candidates have said generally is that our economy has made a lot of important progress over the last seven years, and they want to try to build on it. And they said the same thing that the President just did, I think, in response to Michelle's question, which is that there's more work that we need to do here.

So the President is not suggesting that somehow we don't need to worry about the economy or that we don't need to take additional steps to support the private sector and to support the American workforce. What he's most concerned about is making sure that we capitalize on the progress that we've made as opposed to what the Republicans are advocating, which is actually taking us back to the policies that led to the Great Recession in the first place.

Q And, if you'll indulge me, is the President keeping his Super Bowl picks for his conversation with my colleague Gayle King?

MR. EARNEST: She will be best positioned to try to draw that out of him. I don't know how much success that we'll have, but maybe Gayle considers that a challenge. We'll see.

Carol.

Q Do you have any more details on the larger speech on oil and energy the President said he was going to deliver?

MR. EARNEST: I don't at this point. There's not anything like that that's on the books right now, but this is something that obviously has been on the President's mind and something that we've been talking about. But we'll keep you updated on when something like that comes together.

Q He just said that? He's not --

MR. EARNEST: I think what the President was saying is that this is something he's been thinking about a lot, and does want to look for an opportunity where he can give a more fulsome response to the good question that Kevin asked.

Mary.

Q Back to Margaret's question about Democrats also commenting on the economy on the trail. I mean, they've been hammering against the economy pretty strongly. Hillary Clinton again last night said the economy has not been working for most Americans. Is

she wrong?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I think -- I only watched part of the debate last night; I didn't see the whole thing. I think that there are parts of it that I did see. She went to great lengths to say that the progress that we've made over the last seven years has been important, has led to the kind of economy in the United States that makes our economy the envy of the world. It is, as the President said, the strongest and most durable economy in the world. And that's thanks to some of the policies that the President put in place, but those policies were put in place to support American businesses and American workers that have led our economy recovery.

And the question is, are we going to keep in place those policies, further support American businesses and American workers and even look for opportunities to double down on those policies that have allowed us to make so much progress? Or are we actually going to take those policies away and take us back to an era that actually led to the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression?

I feel confident in saying that both Secretary Clinton and Senator Sanders would agree with that description of the President's strategy and their support for it, and how that stands in stark contrast to what's being advocated by Republicans.

Q And one question on immigration. In recent months, there have been several cases of local ICE officers moving forward on deportations that don't meet the President's priorities -- a DACA recipient, for instance, being deported. Is the administration confident that DHS and its agencies are following the President's deportation policies?

MR. EARNEST: I can't speak to any specific enforcement action from here. Obviously those enforcement actions are made -- or decisions about enforcement actions are made by law enforcement officers, and that's not something that we can or should or even try to dictate from the White House.

What the Secretary of Homeland Security, though, can do is lay out in general some priorities for how he believes our limited law enforcement resources can be used to protect the American public. And the priorities that the President -- or that the Secretary has laid out are entirely consistent with the kinds of priorities that the President has in mind.

But as it relates to specific cases, I'd refer you to DHS. I just don't want to interfere with their law enforcement efforts.

Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. Can you tell us more about the President's meeting with Senator Casey today, how that came about and what was specifically on the agenda?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a lot more about the meeting. The President -- I think one of the reasons the President may have been in a good mood today is that he saw that Senator Casey was on his schedule. The President got to know Senator Casey pretty well,

not just when they served together in the Senate, but when they campaigned together in the state of Pennsylvania. And the President shows a lot of loyalty to Senator Casey, who stuck his neck out and took a significant political risk by endorsing then-Senator Obama in the 2008 presidential primary. That was at a time when President Obama was not at all leading in the polls in the Democratic primary in Pennsylvania, but yet Senator Casey stuck by the President's side and campaigned across that state for his campaign.

So I don't have a lot of details to share with you about their conversation. But if there's anything else that we can share, I'll let you know.

Q Well, now the Senator is a strong supporter of Hillary Clinton, so is the President going to return the favor?

MR. EARNEST: (Laughter.) We'll see.

Q And just one more on another meeting that wasn't on the President's schedule. It was reported that he met with Senator Grassley and Congressman Goodlatte on criminal justice reform. Do you have any other details or readout from that conversation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a lot of details from the specific conversation, but I can tell you what the President -- the message that the President delivered. We have been trying now for I guess more than a year at this point to nurture the bipartisan agreement on Capitol Hill about the benefits of criminal justice reform. If you enact criminal justice reform in the right way, you can accomplish a lot of goals that I think Democrats and Republicans share. You can make our criminal justice system more fair. You can actually save taxpayers costs in terms of the amount of money that we pay to lock up low-level drug offenders. You can also make our communities more safe. If you reform our criminal justice system in a smart way, you can actually reduce recidivism rates and reduce crime.

So that's the goal that the President has in mind, and I think this is the goal that Senator Grassley and Chairman Goodlatte have in mind. And so that conversation primarily was geared toward trying to continue to nurture the bipartisan pursuit of this kind of legislation. As is consistent with any sort of bipartisan legislation, there is going to be some compromising involved. And it probably won't yield a perfect piece of legislation, but I do think we can produce a bill that moves in the direction of the priorities that I laid out. And the President wanted to have a conversation with Senator Grassley and Chairman Goodlatte to encourage them to continue to move in the direction. And frankly, these are the two individuals who have played such an instrumental role on Capitol Hill in making as much bipartisan progress as we have thus far.

So I think the President also wanted to not just encourage them, but also to thank them for their hard work on this important issue. And that's notable because we disagree on a whole bunch of other things with Senator Grassley and Chairman Goodlatte. But to their credit, they're taking to heart the responsibility that they have to not just try to find areas

where they disagree with the President, but actually try to find areas where Democrats and Republicans might be able to agree and might be able to make progress for the country. That's a good thing, and we hope they'll keep doing it.

Michelle.

Q The Saudis are saying that they are ready and willing to send ground troops to fight ISIS, if asked. Whether those troops are infantry forces or whatever, or special ops, is it safe to say that you would welcome that as soon as possible? And is the U.S. going to ask for that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly have asked the Saudis for an increased contribution to our efforts, and I think this is a response to that specific ask. Those commitments will be discussed in greater detail by Secretary Carter with his counterparts in Brussels next week. He's sitting down with two dozen of his counterparts from nations who are part of our counter-ISIL coalition. And then the other thing that we have gone to great lengths to do is to make sure that the contributions that are made by different partners in our counter-ISIL coalition are integrated with the efforts of everybody else. And so that does mean that the Saudis can't just next week send in troops into Syria. We're going to want to make sure that their commitment is integrated into the overall effort, and integrated with the contributions that are made by other countries.

So I don't envision a prolonged delay here. But we do want to make sure that our resources and the resources that are being committed by our partners are being leveraged to maximize the kind of outcome that we'd like to see.

Q Would you say at this point that ISIS can't be defeated without ground troops?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think that we have acknowledged in the past a couple of things. One is that while we cannot impose a military solution on the problems in Syria and Iraq we can have a significant impact using some of our military strength; that the airstrikes, for example, that the United States and our coalition partners have carried out have resulted in ISIL fighters being taken off the battlefield, they've resulted in ISIL leaders being taken off the battlefield, and they have enhanced the effectiveness of ground forces that are fighting ISIL on the ground.

What we have said is that that ground component is critical to our military success; that airstrikes are important, but when backed up -- or when airstrikes are being used to back up ground operations, that kind of coordination is the best way to leverage our contributions to achieve our military goals.

Q Could you say if Saudi Arabia and the other Arab countries that it's talking about working with them on training and sending troops -- had they made this offer a year ago, or shortly thereafter, things would be much different in the ground than they are today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's hard to make that kind of assessment, because the thing that we've also said is -- at least this is particularly true when you're talking about Iraq, but it's true in Syria, as well -- ultimately, what we need is fighters on the ground who are

fighting for their own country.

And obviously the Iraqi government -- the Iraq security forces that are operating under the command and control of the Iraqi central government have much greater capacity to do that than opposition fighters in Syria for a whole host of reasons. But that's why we've always said that ground campaigns inside of Iraq will be carried out by forces that are under the command and control of the Iraqi central government. The United States and our coalition partners will be there to support them in a variety of ways. We can provide them equipment; we can provide them some training; we can provide them some assistance and we can carry out airstrikes in support of their efforts on the ground. But ultimately, our strategy is predicated on Iraqis fighting on Iraqi soil for their country's security.

We need to see something similar inside of Syria. It's harder because we're obviously not working with the Syrian central government. The Syrian government has lost legitimacy to lead. So what we're seeking to do is to build relationships with and support the efforts of opposition fighters on the ground. And, ostensibly, a greater commitment from Saudi Arabia would be integrated into that effort to support and enhance the performance of Syrian opposition fighters.

Q And I ask this quickly only because today, Lisa Monaco did that op-ed, talking about the response to Zika. She contrasted it with Ebola, saying that really, with Zika, it's mainly transmitted through a mosquito bite. She talked about the differences. But on the same day, we see that scientists say that the active virus is detectable in both saliva and urine. So do you see that as potentially changing this game?

And with Ebola, part of the problem with how extreme the problem got was that there was kind of a slow response worldwide; like, the urgency wasn't there in the beginning. So if things are going to change based on where the virus is detectable, do you think that the urgency is there that should be now? And I'm not just talking about the U.S. response but the world response.

MR. EARNEST: I do think that the world has learned from our experience with Ebola. And I think we've learned a couple of things -- that taking aggressive action early is important. Building up the health care infrastructure in the countries where the disease is present is critical to our success.

The good news here is that the health care infrastructure in many of the countries in the Western Hemisphere where we're seeing the virus is better than the kind of health care infrastructure that we saw in some of the countries in West Africa where the Ebola virus was present.

But one thing that is necessary about the Zika virus is we need to learn more about it. And there's not been as much research in science performed on the Zika virus as there has been about Ebola. Now, there's a good reason for that, which is that Ebola is a terrible, fatal disease for just about everybody that contracts it. The risk from Zika is much, much different.

I've done this before, but let me just reiterate quickly here.

Q You don't have to.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I feel like I do. (Laughter.) I'll keep it short. But look, the risks of Zika are different than Ebola. Most people who get Zika -- who contract the Zika virus don't show any symptoms at all. Those who do show symptoms have symptoms that last about a week, and they're things like a relatively low fever and some swelling.

The concern that we have with Zika is that it is potentially linked to a particular birth defect -- that when pregnant women contract Zika, there appears to be a correlation with their children being born with this birth defect. So that is what has attracted the world's attention, and that is what we're trying to counter. But that's what makes it materially different than the Ebola situation that we saw a couple years ago.

Sarah.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks, Josh. Yesterday when the President announced the oil fee, one of my colleagues on the climate beat tweeted "POTUS is in climate #YOLO mode." And I ask about that because she was retweeted by the White House -- one of the White House's environmental strategists. And I know that RTs do not always equal endorsements, but is the President in "climate #YOLO mode"? And to what extent is the budget proposal kind of a YOLO thing versus a really serious set of policy proposals?

MR. EARNEST: I think those two things aren't necessarily contradictory. I think that you can expect to see a budget that has some pretty bold, ambitious ideas included in it. And this is one of them. But the President is quite serious about them; that we often say that budgets are an opportunity to be quite specific about where your priorities lay. And that certainly will be included in the President's budget proposal.

Again, I think the Republican response also made clear what Republican priorities are. Based on the voracious response we saw to this, I think it's pretty clear that their priority lies with defending the oil industry. The President's priority lies with defending the middle class and trying to expand economic opportunity for the middle class. And that will be enshrined in the budget proposal that we'll roll out on Tuesday.

Gardiner.

Q I just want to follow up on Sarah's question. Help me understand sort of the political thinking here, because it does seem to me that your budget increasingly -- you are becoming increasingly disconnected with sort of legislative reality. And you were concerned in the past about making proposals that you felt had a chance on Capitol Hill. Now it seems that you are making proposals that you know have no chance. Is that because you simply want to lay out some markers for this party and this country about what should happen? Or is that sort of a political strategy to sort of put pressure on Republicans to oppose things that you think make sense? Or is it all of the above?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that's a good question, Gardiner, because there have been previous budget proposals where either I or one of my predecessors stood up here and said that our budget proposals reflected a genuine effort to compromise, and it factored in priorities that Republicans themselves had identified. But the fact is we often saw that Republicans turned up their nose at that. So I guess my point is that those kinds of budget proposals that we acknowledged on the front end were a genuine effort to compromise didn't result in great congressional action and it certainly didn't result in a more productive conversation with Republicans.

So I do think that you can expect to see some pretty bold ideas. And I wouldn't expect Republicans to endorse every single component of those ideas, but there will be many things in there that Republicans should be able to support.

And we've talked about the pretty ambitious agenda that we have for this year that is populated primarily by ideas that Republicans themselves say that they support. Criminal justice is certainly one of them. The Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement that we were talking about a little earlier is certainly one of them. There are ideas around the Earned Income Tax Credit and expanding it that Paul Ryan has spoken favorably of in the past. Frankly, I don't know if that proposal is included in the budget, but we'll have a chance to talk about that more on Tuesday.

One of the other things that's included in the budget that gets a lot of attention right now is this idea that Medicare should be able to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies on drug prices. There is at least one leading Republican presidential candidate who thinks that's a good idea. And that's something that's included in our budget for at least the last couple of years, and it will be included this time.

So I'm not suggesting, as I mentioned earlier, that we're going to lay out a budget proposal that will be supported -- in which every line item will be supported by Republicans. But it is an opportunity for the President to make clear what his priorities are. And some of those are priorities that Republicans say they support. But, unfortunately, we see Republicans unwilling to even have a simple conversation with the President's Budget Director about them. And I think it certainly raises questions about how serious Republicans actually are about using their newfound majority in Congress to run the country. They seem to be using their majority in Congress to run campaigns. I don't think that's what voters intended when they elected their representatives into these positions.

Q The President has said that he clearly wants to continue pushing on a lot of these priorities after his presidency. Is this budget in some ways, this transition from President Obama -- the beginning of that transition from President Obama to citizen Obama, where you are laying out some of these markers that he intends to continue pushing on, even after you've run through the tape of this administration?

MR. EARNEST: I don't think there's a -- I wouldn't draw the linkage that directly -- I think because, frankly, one of the benefits of being citizen Obama is that you're unconstrained by the kind of responsibilities that you had in your previous position. So,

that said, the budget that we'll roll out next week will codify the highest priorities that the President has for the country and for the middle class. And I would certainly anticipate that when the President talks about public issues after he has left this office that he'll continue to advocate for those kinds of priorities.

Goyal.

Q Thanks very much, Josh. I have two questions. One is, 18 months ago, as far as Prime Minister Modi's government in India is concerned, there was great bickering as far as personal relations with President Obama is concerned -- because President Obama was a special guest last year on January 26th. So much has happened under this new government in India, under Prime Minister Modi and President Obama, and now they have a hotline -- they can pick up the phone and call each other. So what is the future -- where is the future between the U.S. and India relations are concerned on many fronts? Which I believe Prime Minister Modi will be here next month for a nuclear security talk and all that.

MR. EARNEST: I know that Prime Minister Modi was invited to participate in the National Security Summit. I don't know if he has announced that he is planning to attend. So his office could confirm that for you.

Look, I think the best thing to point you to is the last opportunity that President Obama had to meet with Prime Minister Modi was in Paris, in the context of the climate talks. And there was a sense at the time that the Indian government might be the chief impediment to the successful completion of an ambitious climate agreement, and that ambitious climate agreement was completed less than two weeks after that meeting. I think that should be a pretty good indication to you that while obviously Prime Minister Modi takes very seriously the responsibility that he has to advocate for the citizens of his country, he can advance the interests of the people of India by working effectively with President Obama.

And that's a good thing. It's a good thing for our two countries. It's a good thing for the citizens of our two countries. And I would expect the President will continue to look for ways to strengthen the relationship not just between the two leaders, but between our two countries during his final year in office.

Q Second, as far as immigration is concerned, according to a recent report, there are about 11 million undocumented immigrants here. But also the report said that there were some expert immigration lawyers that most of those who are here in this country, they are paying taxes and also they are contributing to the economy. So they are still relying on President Obama in this election year that there might be a light at the end of the dark tunnel and they think that President Obama is the only President who can bring light in their life. What do you think of the future?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, there's no denying that President Obama has been a leading advocate of immigration reform, the kind of common-sense immigration reform that would bring undocumented immigrants out of the shadows, that would require them to

undergo a background check, to pay taxes. And we know this would have a positive impact not just on the lives of those immigrants, many of whom are American in every way but their papers, but it also would have a positive impact on our economy, because you obviously have a larger pool of people paying taxes, and it's harder for unscrupulous employers to try to take advantage of the undocumented status of some workers to pay them lower wages.

So we could put upward pressure on wages, and we can collect more taxes. That's good for the economy, it's good for the country, and it certainly would make a difference in the lives of so many of these immigrants.

Q As far as this campaign are concerned, what message do you think we are sending to these people that one Indian American Sikh with turban, he was asked to leave the rally because of his look -- I don't like your look and you have to leave my rally. And so President Obama has been recently speaking, including in Baltimore and also yesterday and all that this is not America, that we have original Founding Fathers -- that attack on one religion is attack on all the religions, among others, and he had a very clear message. So what do you think the message from the President to the Indian American community, especially the Sikhs, because of their look in turban?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, well, Goyal, I think you summarized it pretty well there, actually. I think the President's comments in Baltimore and yesterday at the prayer breakfast were a pretty clear indication that it is a core American value that people should not be targeted or marginalized or ridiculed because of the way they choose to worship God, and that right to do so, unimpeded by anybody -- let alone somebody who aspires to the highest political office in the United States, as a direct contradiction of a core American value. And the President I think spoke out quite forcefully about his commitment to defending that value for everybody.

John, I'll give you the last one and then we'll do the week ahead. I'm sorry, Kevin. John, you go, and then we'll do Kevin, and then we'll do the week ahead.

Q Just so I'm clear, had the White House actually sought a meeting between Republican leaders and the White House Budget Director?

MR. EARNEST: What typically happens, John, is that when the President puts forward his budget, the respective leaders of the Budget Committee in both the House and the Senate would invite the President's Budget Director to come testify about the budget. And based on the research that we've done, that's happened every year for the last 16 years. Our assumption is that it goes back much longer than that, but we can continue to do that research. And even before the President put out his budget, the leaders of those committees, who happen to be Republicans, said that they were refusing to hold those hearings and were refusing to invite the Budget Director to even come talk to them. Again, that sounds to me like the Donald Trump approach to governing, and I don't think a lot of people are going to support it.

Q Lastly, did the administration treat this final budget you're proposing any differently given that it's his final year in office, Republicans control both the House and the Senate, it's an election year, and perhaps you want to, indeed, as you say, get things done in his final year?

MR. EARNEST: Our goal in laying out this budget proposal was try to summarize the President's priorities for the country and the priorities for the middle class. And that's what will be included in the budget agreement. And I recognize that that means that not every element of the budget proposal will be supported by Republicans, but there should be plenty in here for Republicans to like. And that's why it's so unfortunate that Republicans are not even willing to have a conversation about it with the President's Budget Director.

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

Q Thanks, Josh. Just a little bit of housekeeping on Gitmo. Any announcements to be made in the next week on other detainees being moved to other locations?

MR. EARNEST: Nothing that I'm prepared to preview from here. The Department of *Justice [Defense] does continue to work on the much-discussed plan that we'll present to Congress. I don't have an updated timing for you on that, but I know that they're working on it even today, and that when that plan is presented to Congress we'll make sure you all get a copy, as well.

Q Appreciate that. The national polls now seem to suggest that Senator Sanders and Senator Clinton, nationally, are almost neck and neck. Does this sort of debunk the idea among some Democrats that he's unelectable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think one lesson that I certainly learned in the context of the 2008 race is that national polls can make for good fodder for a conversation around the water cooler, but what really matters for the strategy of these campaigns are the polls in individual states that are coming up. And these are state-by-state contests, and the smart campaigns are the campaigns that are not focused on the national polls but actually focused on the work that they need to do in the upcoming states.

So, again, the national polls can be the subject of an interesting discussion sometimes, but they're not particularly relevant to the strategies that are made by the smart campaigns, at least.

Q All right. And since the President won't, we'll give you your shot -- Super Bowl 50, who do you got? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, that is a good question. I know that you have a vested rooting interest in the Broncos. But I think the truth is the Carolina Panthers had a great year and they've only lost one game. So I think I would give a narrow edge to the Panthers. But we'll see. Maybe the Broncos will pull it out and prove me wrong.

Q But you're rooting for Peyton Manning to go out on top?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, there's no doubt that he's had a remarkable career. I don't know if this is going to be his last game or not, but he's traditionally performed well when he's in the spotlight. So Carolina has got a great defense, but I think they can -- my expectation is that Peyton Manning will perform very well.

Let's do the week ahead and then we'll let you get started on your weekend.

On Monday, the President will host President Mattarella of Italy at the White House. Italy is a valued NATO ally and a close partner of a broad range of global challenges. During their meeting, the leaders will discuss our shared efforts to counter ISIL in the global refugee crisis. They will also exchange views on economic developments in Europe, the importance of concluding the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and other issues of mutual interest.

On Tuesday, the President will attend meetings here at the White House. And that is, of course, the day that the budget will be released.

On Wednesday, nine years after he announced his candidacy for President, the President will travel to the place where his political career began by traveling to Springfield, Illinois. Now in the final year of his second term, the President looks forward to addressing the Illinois General Assembly about what we can do together to build a better politics, one that reflects our better selves.

In the evening, the President will travel to the San Jose, California area where he will spend the night. On Thursday the President will attend a DSCC and a DNC event in the Bay Area. And later that day, the President will travel to the Los Angeles area to tape an appearance on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" and attend a couple of other DNC events in the LA area, and then spend the night there. Thursday, will be a busy day.

On Friday, the President will travel to Palm Springs, California, where he will spend the night. That is, of course, in advance of the ASEAN summit that he'll be hosting on Monday, February 15th, and Tuesday, February 16th.

The summit with leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations at Sunnylands, in Rancho Mirage, California, will continue important conversations about the Asia Pacific region. Following the conclusion of the summit on Tuesday, the President will return to Washington. We'll have some more information for you about the agenda at the ASEAN summit early next week I hope.

The one other scheduling matter that I'll let those of you -- I want to make sure that those of you who cover the White House closely are clued in on, as Margaret alluded to, both President Obama and the First Lady will be sitting down for conversation with Gayle King from CBS that will air during the Super Bowl pregame show. And then the President will also be sticking around for a taped conversation on Sunday that will air during the CBS early show on Monday morning --

Q "CBS This Morning".

MR. EARNEST: "CBS This Morning." Boy, I'm going to get some emails about that. (Laughter.) So, as a regular view of "CBS This Morning," I'd encourage you to check it out. But anyway, that conversation will be taped on Sunday but will air first thing on Monday morning. So definitely tune in for that. Okay?

Q Josh, are those fundraisers open or closed next week?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know what the press access is for each event, but we'll delve into that and we'll make sure it's consistent with what we've done in the past. But we'll follow up with you on that.

Thanks, everybody. Have a great weekend.

END

2:00 P.M. EST