

Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Minneapolis, MN, 6/1/12

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

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Aboard Air Force One
En Route Minneapolis, Minnesota

10:35 A.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: We're glad that all of you made it this morning for the trip for this busy day ahead in our nation's heartland. I hope you're looking forward to it as much as I am. I have a couple of announcements before we get started -- one that I hope will anticipate a few questions that you may have already this morning.

The first thing is as you may have seen, the President spent some time with Congressman Rothman at the White House today. Congressman Rothman is a longtime friend and longtime supporter of President Obama. The two of them have worked together on a variety of the President's priorities. These are priorities that I know Congressman Rothman shares, including things like cutting taxes for small businesses who want to grow their jobs -- who want to grow their businesses and create jobs, standing up for middle-class families and cutting taxes for middle-class families, protecting Social Security and Medicare.

These are priorities that the President and Congressman Rothman share. They've worked on them together extensively in Washington, and the President was pleased to have the opportunity to spend a little time with him at the White House today.

The second thing, on Thursday, June 14th, the President will visit the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey's World Trade Center site, where he'll receive a briefing on construction progress. The visit will be a preview of the One World Trade Center topping-off ceremony, which will symbolize the near-completion of the iconic building's framework. So, again, that's June 14th.

And then, lastly, a little bit about the President's activities today. The President is traveling to Minnesota today to continue talking about his "To-Do" list for Congress, which is composed of bipartisan policies that if passed would help the economy and offer much needed support to middle-class families. The item the President will highlight

today is a proposal to put our veterans back to work, protecting and preserving our country. He'll also discuss the success of the Joining Forces initiative to encourage private sector companies to hire veterans, something that Honeywell -- the company that we're visiting today -- has done with great success.

And finally, to further this goal, the President has directed the Department of Defense to form a task force that will help veterans with solid skills from their military service get the credentials they need to get work in the private sector. There are highly technical manufacturing jobs that are available and military veterans who fought for our country overseas shouldn't have to fight for those good jobs when they get back home.

So you'll hear the President talk about this a little bit. He's going to do a tour of the Honeywell facility and then will deliver some remarks.

So, with that, I'll take your questions.

Q Josh, but anemic job numbers today. Does the President think that his "To-Do" list is a powerful enough weapon to turn those numbers around?

MR. EARNEST: As you know, Jim, we're digging out of a very deep hole, but the numbers today indicate that the country has benefited from 27 consecutive months of private sector job growth -- this is about 4.3 million jobs. But the numbers also make it apparent that we're not quickly creating those jobs at a rapid enough pace.

So what the President believes -- well, and there are some important reasons for that. We've certainly faced some pretty significant headwinds -- like we're apparently facing right now on the plane -- (laughter) -- some significant headwinds related to gas prices. Gas prices have come down recently, but certainly over the spring that took a pretty big bite out of the budgets of many families across the country and some businesses certainly, as well. We're also seeing continued instability in the eurozone region, which is having an impact on the American economy.

Those are external factors. But there are some things that Congress can do to mitigate those factors and further strengthen our economy and support middle-class families. So the President, back in September, laid out an American Jobs Act that included proposals that would put construction workers back to work rebuilding our roads and runways and modernizing our schools. It included a proposal to put teachers and firefighters and police officers back to work.

We saw in those jobs numbers that there were significant losses in the education sector and in the local government sector. Many of those are teachers and firefighters and police officers.

And then we've seen some items on the "To-Do" list that would also do some very important things for economy. The refinancing proposal would offer a benefit to responsible homeowners, many of them from middle-class families who -- because red tape exists, is blocking their path -- are prevented from benefiting from the historically low mortgage interest rates. So there are a number of proposals.

And certainly the item on the "To-Do" list today that would put veterans back to work, preserving and protecting our country -- these are the kinds of things that would help the economy.

Q Josh, the numbers today obviously were very disappointing. Is the President concerned that this loss of momentum in the U.S. economy raises the risk that it could suffer another recession?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as we've said many times, Alister, even I've said standing in this one place in reaction to jobs numbers that exceeded expectations and those job numbers that did not meet expectations, what we're looking at is the longer-term trend. And the longer-term trends still indicate that we have an economy that's adding jobs. As I mentioned, they've been doing that for 27 consecutive months. But as I also mentioned, it's readily apparent that we're not adding those jobs at a rapid enough pace.

And so the President believes that there are some very important things that Congress can do, things that have bipartisan support, things that independent analysts would acknowledge would both create jobs and strengthen our economy, the kinds of things that would offer support to middle-class families who are really bearing the brunt of the financial instability that our country is going through right now. And it's the President's view that just because it's an election year, Congress is not off the hook in terms of putting in place the kinds of policies that would create jobs.

Q If he can't move Congress, does he have a plan B?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Congress has a responsibility here. I mean, we shouldn't overlook the fact that members of Congress are in a position where everyone acknowledges, so people on both sides of the partisan aisle acknowledge that there's more that we need to do to strengthen our economy. There's a very deep hole that we're digging out of. Middle-class families need support. They need help. And there are a number of things that we can do. The refinancing proposal would add -- for the typical responsible homeowner, middle-class family, would have about an extra \$3,000 to the family budget. That's a pretty significant -- that would have a pretty significant impact on the broader economy.

So just because we're in election year, we're not in a position where members of Congress who are worried about their jobs are off the hook for supporting the kinds of policies that we know would create jobs.

Q -- election year, and opinions of the economy are shaped generally in the coming months before the election. So is the President running out of time to get employment below 8 percent or at least close to 8 percent before the election?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President right now is focused on the broader economy and how that has an impact on the jobs of middle-class families all across the country -- not as it relates to his own job.

So what the President is going to do is he is going to do more of the kinds of things he is doing today, which is traveling across the country and making the case to the American people and to members of Congress about why passing elements of the American Jobs Act are so important, why getting to work on this "To-Do" list is so important.

The President is not asking members of Congress to step that far -- is not asking them to step outside their comfort zone at all. This is part of their specific job description, which is to come together around bipartisan ideas that we know would create jobs and strengthen the overall economy -- things like the refinancing proposal; things like cutting taxes for small businesses that are looking to grow their business and hire workers; things like putting construction workers back to work building our infrastructure, building our roadways and runways; putting construction workers back to work updating schools. These are the kinds of things that we know would have an impact on the economy, the kinds of things that we know would create jobs. There's no excuse for Congress not to act.

Q Josh, surely the administration and the campaign is concerned about those numbers. Steve Rattner, who used to work for the administration, said that absolutely nothing good can be said about this number today. So because we're getting so close to the election and because you've seen the statistics that it's hard to get reelected with unemployment this high, I mean is there a concern that there isn't enough time -- following up on Jessica's question.

MR. EARNEST: Look, what the President is concerned about is making sure that we have in place the kinds of economic policies that we know will create jobs. The President has laid out a number of those ideas. The President has forwarded those ideas to members of Congress. And the President is interested in working with members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, to pass those ideas so the President can sign them into law.

The politics are going to take care of themselves. The President is focused right now on putting in place the kinds of economic policies that we know will offer much-needed support to middle-class families. That's the President's focus.

Q Josh, along these lines, any update for us on the student loan situation? Was the President at all encouraged by the offer made by congressional Republicans yesterday?

MR. EARNEST: Well, to say that we got some mixed signals yesterday is putting it rather mildly. Reportedly, yesterday morning, the Speaker of the House told his Republican colleagues that this is just a phony issue. Several hours later the President got a letter that was signed by the Speaker of the House and some of his colleagues indicating that they may be interested in working on this issue.

The President certainly believes the prospect of increasing -- of doubling the interest rate on middle-class students and their families is not a phony issue. We're talking about adding \$1,000 to the debt load of the average college student if we see these interest rates double a month from today. That's not phony.

I understand that the Speaker of the House may have actually used even more colorful words to describe this issue, which is unfortunate. Hopefully, the Speaker, in the form of that letter, was indicating a genuine willingness to work with the President to solve this problem. It remains a priority of the President's.

Q What's the next step? Why can't you just take the letter on paper and run with it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I can tell is that our policy folks are evaluating proposals that the Republicans have offered, and so we'll evaluate what they've offered and we'll take a look at it. But it's something that the President believes is a high priority for the next four weeks.

Q Does the meeting with Congressman Rothman today mean that the President's endorsing him in his race?

MR. EARNEST: It means that the President has a longstanding relationship with Congressman Rothman, is appreciative of the solid working relationship that they've enjoyed while the President has been in office. It's indicative of the priorities that they share. And the President certainly enjoyed the opportunity he had to visit with him in the Oval Office today.

Q Who will the President or won't the President endorse in this race?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as the head of the party, the President has made it -- has not weighed in to primary contests in which there are two incumbent members of Congress. But the President has had a --

Q -- reference here, isn't he?

MR. EARNEST: The President has certainly shown that he has a long-term relationship with Congressman Rothman and has appreciated the relationship and the ability and opportunity they've had to work together on a number of priorities.

Q Josh, since the President is going to be in the neighborhood, did he give any thought to going to Wisconsin and weighing in on the recall?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you may have seen, Christi, about a week or so ago, the President's reelection campaign put out a statement about the recall election in Wisconsin and indicated that the President stood with Mayor Barrett and thousands of Wisconsin families in support of his campaign. But I don't know that there was any talk about going to Wisconsin today.

Q People think that this might be predictive about how things are going to look for him in the fall in Wisconsin. Does he agree with that? And is there a particular reason he personally doesn't want to show up in Wisconsin before the vote?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't talked to the President personally about this issue, and I know that the members of the President's reelection campaign have discussed this at length, so I'll leave the political analysis from the governor's race and the lines that may or

may not be appropriately drawn to the presidential race to them.

Q Josh, on Syria, Secretary Panetta today said that -- or yesterday -- that any military action would be up to the President and the international community. I'm wondering whether the President, in talking to European leaders, as he has recently, or other allies, has tried to feel them out on the issue of military action. Is he trying to construct any kind of alliance in support of that at this point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you've seen, Jim, the President has been in regular consultation with our allies and partners all around the world on a range of issues including this one. The President remains very concerned about the situation in Syria, about the horrific violence that's being perpetrated by the Assad regime against the Syrian people. So the President has been in consultation with our allies and partners about that.

I don't have any details to read out from those meetings. What I can tell you is that the President does believe that a political transition needs to happen immediately. That's the only way that this situation will be resolved in Syria, is for the -- is for Assad to leave power. That remains the firm resolve of the international community. And the President is hopeful that we can find a diplomatic solution to reach that goal. But what's clear about what needs to happen right now is the violence needs to end and the political transition needs to begin.

Q Josh, on the Stuxnet story in the Times today, can you confirm the United States collaborating with the Israelis to launch a cyber attack on Iran?

MR. EARNEST: I've read the story that you're referring to, Alister, and I'm not able to comment on any of the specifics or details that are included in that story. I can tell you more, though, about what this President's approach to Iran has been in terms of dealing with the threat.

When this President took office, the nation of Iran was unified behind their goal, their stated goal of pursuing a nuclear program. The international community was fractured about how to deal with that challenge. Since the President took office, he has marshaled international opinion where we now see an international consensus about holding Iran accountable for living up to their international obligations. And we've seen many signs, many indications coming from Iran that there's a lot of discord and disunity in Iran about the wisdom of their approach.

So the circumstances have changed pretty significantly thanks in no small part to the President's leadership on this issue. We're going to continue to hold the Iranian regime accountable. There are -- the pressure on them is only increasing. We're going to see some additional sanctions go into place, take effect later this summer that will see further ramping up of pressure on them. And hopefully, it will have the effect of the Iranians coming clean about the true nature of their program, confirming for the international community that their program that they're pursuing is only for peaceful means, and that

they'll live up to their international obligations. And we'll see -- there's a meeting here among the P5-plus-1 and representatives of the Iranian government in Moscow in June, and we should learn more then.

Q So, Josh, you won't comment on the actual content in the Times story, but it cites remarks that the President and the Vice President made inside the Situation Room. It seems very obvious that this is an authorized leak. So --

MR. EARNEST: Why would you say that?

Q -- in the Situation Room. Obviously it's not a national security concern to talk about it. So for what reason won't you talk to us about it?

MR. EARNEST: I disagree with you in the strongest possible terms about your characterization of that handling of classified data. There is a reason that information is classified. It's classified for a reason, because publicizing that information would pose a significant threat to national security. So I disagree entirely with the premise of the question as you posed it.

Q So are you saying that there was -- are you denying there was an authorized leak?

MR. EARNEST: I'm saying that I'm not in a position to talk to you about any of the details that were included in the story. But I am telling you that this administration -- well, that it's our view, as it is the view of everybody who handles classified information, that information is classified for a reason; that it is kept secret, it is intended not to be publicized because publicizing it would pose a threat to our national security.

Q So let me ask you this. Given that, does the President intend to open an investigation into the apparent leak of this secure information?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any information for you on that right now.

Q Josh, given that, too, though, did the administration or the White House seek to consult with The New York Times not to publish that story?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any details for you in terms of the way that that story was handled.

Q -- on Syria, some human rights groups believe that a Russian-flagged ship docked in the Syrian port of Tartus was delivering weapons to Syria. Putin has denied this, and the administration is saying you're investigating it. How are you investigating it? If that's found to be true, is Russia in part responsible for these massacres?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you pointed out, Jessica, this is something that apparently is still being investigated. I don't have any information on this specific instance for you other than to say that as you've seen us read out, this administration at a range of levels is in regular consultation with the Russian government about the situation in Syria. We are continuing to urge the Russians to exercise the influence that they have to end the violence that's being perpetrated by the Assad regime in Syria.

After all, it is in the interest -- it's clear that the Russian government has a significant investment in Syria, and they have -- in their own self-interest, ensuring that sectarian violence doesn't spread beyond Syrian borders, that this situation doesn't get worse, and that the violence comes to an end immediately. This is not a situation where we have differing points of view or different interests here. So that's why we are continuing to engage with the Russians to try and reach a solution.

Q Does the President, like Secretary Clinton, believe -- or reject the claims by the Russians that they're doing everything they can to stop the strife there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what I can say is that we continue to be in touch with the Russians on a regular basis, and we are encouraging them to do more; to use their influence in Syria to persuade the Assad regime to end the horrific violence that they've perpetrated on innocent Syrians, and to support and bring about the other members of the international community, both in the region and around the world, to find a prompt -- or to put in place a prompt democratic transition -- political transition.

Q Human rights groups want evidence of the massacres to be turned over to the International Criminal Court. Does the administration support that move?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the International Criminal Court is something that requires U.N. Security Council action. I can tell you that this administration remains committed to accountability and ensuring that there is accountability for what's happened there. But what we're focused on right now is trying to get an immediate end to the terrible violence that's being perpetrated by the Assad regime.

Q Can you confirm that the President apologized in a letter to the Polish President about his use of the phrase "Polish death camps" and what was said in that letter?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as you know, Kate, I believe it was the President of Poland sent a letter to President Obama. I can confirm to you that President Obama did send a letter back. We typically are not in the habit of releasing correspondence between the President and other world leaders. But I can tell you that the way that you characterized the content of the letter in your question is not quite accurate.

Q So it wasn't an apology?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is that the letter was in line with other public statements that you've seen from this administration. But I don't have any specific words from that letter to read to you.

Q -- that it was his statement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you've seen the things that we've said.

Q Anything on calls to European leaders since Wednesday, and anything this week -- planned for this weekend? And also, is the First Lady and the two daughters staying tonight in Chicago with the President, or is he just there by himself at their house?

MR. EARNEST: That was a lot all in one -- (laughter.) I don't have any additional calls to read out to you in terms of consultation with world leaders. The President did hold that secure video-teleconference with leaders of Germany, France and Italy earlier this week. As you know, Under Secretary of the Treasury Lael Brainard has been traveling in Europe this week. She has been in Greece, Spain and Germany, I believe. Under Secretary Brainard is an expert on these issues, frankly. She is somebody who has great credibility with her counterparts in Europe. She's playing a very important role in offering to the Europeans the kind of advice, based on her own experience here in this country in dealing with some of these financial challenges.

But ultimately, despite the important advice that the United States can offer, it's the Europeans -- this is a European challenge. The Europeans have the resources that they need to solve this problem. It requires -- these are not easy problems to solve; these are difficult challenges, but the Europeans do have the resources that they need to confront them and to deal with them. We hope they will.

Q In that same call, was the majority of it on the eurozone debt, or what -- because the readout was kind of vague and said Syria was part of it. Can you give any insight into what actually happened on that call?

MR. EARNEST: It is my understanding that the bulk of the call was devoted to -- was to the eurozone challenges there. I don't have any more details to read out on that.

Q What about tonight?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is that the First Family will not be in Chicago tonight. The President, though, is looking forward to spending the night in his own house for the first time in quite a while. He told me specifically that he's looking forward to sleeping in his own bed and might even make himself breakfast in the morning. So I think he's looking forward to the -- to spend the night at home.

Q When is the last time he --

MR. EARNEST: I know the President spent a little bit of time at home on a previous trip to Chicago back in January, though he did not spend the night there. We returned to Washington that night. I'm not quite sure the last time that he spent the night at his house.

Q Does the President have any reaction to David Axelrod being shouted down by Romney supporters in Boston yesterday?

MR. EARNEST: To be honest with you, Dave, I have not had a chance to talk to him about that at all.

Q Can I ask you two domestic questions? Last night Bill Clinton said that Mitt Romney's record at Bain was sterling and he's qualified to be President. How does that square with the President and the campaign's argument broadly that the record at Bain does not qualify him to be governor and doesn't qualify him to be President?

MR. EARNEST: I will acknowledge, Jessica, that I did not see the entire interview, but I saw some of the reports. And I also understand that there's one other thing that President Clinton said in that interview that has not been as widely reported, which is that he said that this was a company -- when he was characterizing the business activities at Bain, that they would "invest in the company, run up the debt, and force people to lose their retirement and fire them."

So it's not apparent to me that President Clinton made news in this interview. It seems that he was drawing the same kind of conclusions and making the same argument that the President's reelection campaign has been making, which is related to what kinds of values and experience do we want in the Oval Office. There is one candidate who's citing his business experience -- what I just read to you that President Clinton characterized -- saying that he'll take those kinds of values and that kind of experience into the Oval Office.

The President is offering -- well, and I should also point out that he -- that by embracing the approach that's offered up by House Republicans, it's apparent he's serious about doubling down on the kinds of policies that would benefit those at the top of the income scale, that would raise taxes on middle-class families, and would end Medicare as we know it.

That is a much different approach than the one that's being offered by the President. He believes that we need a balanced approach to deal with our fiscal challenges, but that we can't sacrifice our investments in research and development, in clean energy and education, and that in terms of dealing with our tax situation, that we need to ask those at the top of the income scale to pay their fair share and we need to cut taxes for middle-class families and for small businesses that are looking to create jobs.

Q The President thinks he's qualified to be President, just that his business experience didn't prepare him to be President -- is that the distinction you make?

MR. EARNEST: The distinction that I'm making is that the goal of business that Mr. Romney ran was to maximize profits for his investors. And he's saying that he wants to put in place -- he's drawn from those lessons and those experiences, and based on his support of the Republican budget, wants to double down on the kinds of policies that would, in this case, maximize the benefit for those at the top of the income scale.

It's no coincidence those are exactly the same kinds of policies that got us into this financial turmoil in the first place. The President has a very different approach, and we look forward to having a debate over the course of the next five months about whether the American people are going to back the President's approach, which is to invest in research and development, invest in education, cut taxes for middle-class families, cut taxes for small businesses that are looking to create jobs and grow their business, and asking those at the top of the income scale to pay more and to do their fair share.

Q On the John Edwards trial, this is a person that the President campaigned with, knew, and his Justice Department helped prosecute indirectly. Does he have any thoughts on the aftermath of this verdict? And is he expecting the Justice Department to push for a new prosecution?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to the President about the Edwards trial since the verdict came down. And I don't have any comment about prosecutorial decisions that may be made by the Department of Justice, so I'd just send you over there.

Q Josh, does the President have any special plans in Chicago tonight or tomorrow morning? Is going to get together with friends or go to any of his old haunts?

MR. EARNEST: I would anticipate that he'll see some friends when he's here, but I don't have any details for you at this point. So we'll do the best we can and try to keep you updated on what he's up to.

Q And do you have any idea (inaudible)?

MR. EARNEST: I don't believe that there's a plan to do that currently.

Q Do you have the week ahead?

MR. EARNEST: I do. Not a moment too soon.

On Monday, the President will travel to New York City where he will attend campaign events before returning to Washington, D.C. at night.

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

On Wednesday, the President will travel to San Francisco, California and Los Angeles, California to attend campaign events. He'll spend the night in Los Angeles.

On Thursday, the President will travel to the home of the Runnin' Rebels, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, for an official event. The President will return to Washington, D.C. that evening.

On Friday, the President will welcome the President of the Philippines to the White House for a bilateral meeting. The Philippines is a longstanding friend and ally of the United States, and the President looks forward to discussing the close strategic, economic and people-to-people ties between our two countries, and our cooperation in the Asia Pacific region. The two leaders will also discuss ways to deepen our bilateral cooperation.

Also, on Friday, the President will welcome the Super Bowl XLVI Champions, New York football Giants, to the White House to honor the team and celebrate their Super Bowl victory.

Q What is that --

MR. EARNEST: The Super Bowl Champion New York Giants.

Q New York Giants.

MR. EARNEST: The New York football Giants --

All right. We'll see you on the ground.

END

11:05 A.M. EDT