

Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jay Carney and Assistant to the President and Chief Technology Officer Todd Park en route Austin, TX

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May 9, 2013

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 09, 2013

Aboard Air Force One
En Route Austin, Texas

**Please see below for a follow up – marked with asterisks – to a question posed during the gaggle.

11:00 A.M. EDT

MR. CARNEY: Good morning, everyone. Thanks for being with us. I have with me today, back by popular demand, Todd Park, Assistant to the President, Chief Technology Officer. But before I turn it over to him, who is going to speak a little bit about what we're doing today, I wanted to remind you that the President today is traveling to Austin, Texas to kick off a series of middle-class jobs and opportunity tours.

In his State of the Union address, the President laid out his belief that the middle class is the engine of economic growth. To reignite that engine there are three areas we need to invest in: jobs, skills and opportunity. We need to build on the progress we've made over the last four years, and that means investing in things that are already creating good-paying, stable jobs that can support a middle-class family.

Starting this week, President Obama will visit communities across the country to learn what has helped them become successful and to use these models of growth to encourage Congress to act. The President will make several stops today in the Austin area. During this trip, the President will announce two important executive actions that will strengthen the economy. These steps are not a substitute for the bold congressional action we need to create jobs and grow the economy, but they will make a difference.

First, the President is following through on a promise he made during the State of the Union address by launching competitions to create three new manufacturing innovation institutes with a federal commitment of \$200 million across five federal agencies: Defense, Energy, Commerce, NASA and the National Science Foundation.

To build off the initial success of a pilot institute headquartered in Youngstown, Ohio, the President announced in the State of the Union that his administration would move forward and launch three new manufacturing innovations institutes this year. The President will continue to call on Congress to act on his proposal for a one-time, \$1 billion investment to create a network of an additional 15 manufacturing innovation institutes across the country.

This initiative has bipartisan support in the Senate. In fact, the Senate passed an amendment as part of the budget resolution. It's time to get this done.

The President will tour Applied Materials, the kind of company that would thrive -- that could thrive on the investment that comes along with these manufacturing institutes. He recognizes these hubs can encourage firms like Applied Materials to invest, innovate, and create more high-quality jobs in the United States.

The President will also issue an executive order requiring that newly released government data be made freely available in open machine-readable formats while appropriately safeguarding privacy, confidentiality and security.

And it's in relation to that executive order that I brought Todd here to speak with you briefly and to answer any questions you might have about it. It's pretty exciting stuff.

Todd.

MR. PARK: Thank you, Jay.

Hello, everybody. So as Jay said, the President is also issuing today a historic executive order that will make information generated and stored by the federal government more open and accessible to innovators and the public to fuel entrepreneurship and economic growth while increasing government transparency and efficiency.

So specifically, the executive order and an accompanying open data policy requires that, going forward, new and modernized federal information resources will be made available in open, machine-readable formats while appropriately safeguarding privacy, confidentiality and security.

This move will make troves of previously inaccessible or unmanageable data easily available to entrepreneurs, researchers and others who can use that data to generate new products and services, build businesses and create jobs.

Open government data already powers a lot of innovations we take for granted. So, for example, weather data from the National Weather Service powers everything from weather newscasts to weather apps on your phone, to new kinds of insurance products. The federal government has made the Global Positioning System available for public use for decades, and I think as all of us know, GPS powers everything from apps on your phone to navigation systems to precision crop farming.

In fact, just these two types of open government data, weather and GPS, alone have added tens of billions of dollars in annual value to the American economy, as basically the government has given taxpayers back the data that they pay for and our entrepreneurs across the country have tapped into that data and produced all these innovations that have improved our lives, grown the economy, and created great middle-class jobs.

So the President's executive order and open data policy today will turbocharge that and accelerate that and make all kinds of new information resources available in fields like health and medicine, science, education, energy, public safety, and much more. And we can't wait to see what amazing technological innovators will do with this data to improve all of our lives, grow the economy, and create jobs. And a lot of those tech companies will be right in Austin where we're headed, and we can't wait to see what they're going to do.

MR. CARNEY: Anybody have any questions for Todd? Mark my words this is going to be very important stuff down the road. This is a huge deal.

Thank you, Todd.

MR. PARK: Thank you so much, everybody.

MR. CARNEY: So that's our topper. I'm here for your questions on other subjects.

Q The President of Afghanistan said today that the United States wants to keep nine bases there after the U.S. withdrawal in 2014. Is that true? Can you confirm what he said?

MR. CARNEY: As the President has already made clear, Darlene, the United States does not seek permanent military bases in Afghanistan, and any U.S. presence after 2014 would only be at the invitation of the Afghanistan government and aimed at training Afghanistan forces and targeting the remnants of al Qaeda.

As we have said, we envision that the bilateral security agreement will address access to and use of Afghanistan facilities by U.S. forces. But we seek no permanent military bases in Afghanistan. We've been very clear about that.

Q Will they be temporary perhaps?

MR. CARNEY: Again, we seek no permanent bases. Any continued presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014 would be subject to an agreement between the Afghanistan government and the U.S. government, and would only be at the request of the Afghanistan government, and would only be for the purposes that I just mentioned.

Q How close is the President to deciding the U.S. troop levels after 2014?

MR. CARNEY: This is an ongoing process. I have no announcements to make. We are in the process of drawing down our forces in keeping with the President's commitment and policy, together with our partners, and turning over gradually full security lead to Afghan forces.

Q Can I ask you a question about Syria? Is the U.S. worried that Russia may be preparing to sell air defense systems to Syria? Is that something that Israel warned the U.S. about? And did the President and Bibi discuss it when they talked in the call that was read out yesterday?

MR. CARNEY: Well, you saw the readout that we gave of the conversation the President had with Prime Minister Netanyahu. I don't have any other details on that call. We are aware of the reports that you mentioned, but I have no further information for you on it. I would say that we have consistently called on Russia to cut off the Assad regime's supply of Russian weapons, including air defense systems that are destabilizing to the region.

We have also long said that Russia could play a more constructive role in Syria. Earlier this this week, the United States and Russia recommitted to the Geneva Framework and pledged to build on the Geneva process by working to bring both sides of the Syrian conflict to the negotiating table with members of the international community. We are working to build on this momentum. Certainly, the provision of additional weapons to the regime will not hasten a political solution.

Q Can you tell us whether the President and Mr. Putin have discussed this directly?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any details beyond what we've put out on those conversations. I'm not aware that they have. Obviously, again, as I just said, the Russians are aware of our view because we've expressed it that Russia could play a more constructive role in Syria. And we have consistently called on Russia not to provide a further supply of weapons to the Assad regime, including air defense systems that are particularly destabilizing to the region.

Q The fact that Russia has agreed to take part in this process with the U.S., does that make the White House think possibly that they might be prepared to change their position towards Assad?

MR. CARNEY: Well, Steve, I appreciate the question. And as you know, we've been very clear about our disappointment with Russia's support for the Assad regime, its veto of resolutions at the Security Council. But we have consistently engaged with Russia on this issue and made the case that further support for Assad would not be good for the future of Syria, for the Syrian people, or for Russia's relationship with Syria in the future. And we have been very consistent about that both in our conversations with Russian officials and in public. And those conversations continue.

We do view it as a step forward, the fact that Russia, with the United States, recommitted to the Geneva Framework to a political transition, and we will continue work on that basis towards what we believe ultimately has to happen, which is a political transition to a post-Assad Syria.

Q Yesterday in the Senate, they rejected Senator Coburn's bill for access to have guns on federal lands. It was rejected by four votes -- 56 to 43. Does that concern you at all that it was by a smaller margin than background checks not too long ago?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have any specific comment on that vote. The President's views on the disappointing votes taken by the Senate on expanding background checks and other measures -- common-sense measures to reduce gun violence are well known. Specifically on the issue of expanding background checks, you had a minority of the U.S. Senate explicitly and flagrantly reject the will of 90 percent of the American people, and that's very disappointing.

Q Jay, speaking also about the Senate, Republicans have submitted some 1,000 questions to Gina McCarthy and the EPA and there appear to be some delays in that process. Are you concerned about the nomination -- about her nomination specifically? And what is the reason for the EPA not answering those questions?

MR. CARNEY: Well, you've got your information wrong. The EPA has answered those questions. There has been an historic level of obstructionism --

Q All of them?

MR. CARNEY: Absolutely -- from the Senate on this nomination and others. This submission of record levels of QFRs has been consistent with Republican practice -- is consistent with Republican practice that we saw in earlier nominations this year. And it just demonstrates this predilection for obstructionism that is bad for the functioning of the federal government in important areas. And we call on Republicans in the Senate to stop gumming up the works when it comes to the confirmation process of nominees who are enormously qualified for the jobs that the President has asked them to fill and to get about the business of confirming them.

Q Are you concerned at all about her nomination?

MR. CARNEY: We believe that the Senate will confirm her to her post, and we call on Republicans to stop the theater and to move forward with the process.

Q Are you concerned, because of this following so soon after what's been happening with the Perez nomination, that there's like a pattern and practice? And what can you -- other than make a public appeal for it, what are you prepared to do?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think "pattern and practice" is a good phrase to describe the obstructionism that we've consistently seen from Republicans on nominations. It's regrettable, because these are nominees who are highly qualified for the positions the President has asked them to fill. And we're going to continue to work with the Senate to move these nominations forward.

Q Does the potential sale of the surface-to-air missiles affect the President's decision-making in terms of arming the Syrian rebels? Does it affect the timeline?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't have any specific comment on the reports about those arms sales. I did make my points about our view of Russia providing further weaponry to the Assad regime. When it comes to the options the President is consistently reviewing in our

effort to support the opposition in Syria, that process is ongoing. A lot of factors are taken into account.

What I said the other day remains true today -- and that is that it's very important to make sure that we make policy decisions that help achieve the goal that we seek, which is a transition to a post-Assad Syria and that we do not make decisions that inadvertently cause more chaos or more violence in Syria. And that's why we are very deliberate about our assessments of the options that are on the table.

Q McConnell and Boehner today --

MR. CARNEY: Can I just add I think an important point to note because it's public is that we announced an increase of another \$100 million in humanitarian aid to the Syrian people, building on the significant aid we've provided already that has made us the single-largest donor of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people.

Q McConnell and Boehner today sent a letter to the President saying they'll be declining to recommend appointments to IPAB. Is there any concern that public confidence in IPAB will suffer because there won't be any Republican input?

MR. CARNEY: The fact that Republicans have continued to push for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act I believe demonstrates how out of touch they are with the American people, who are tired of efforts by Republicans to re-fight the political battles of the past.

I've lost count, but I think the House has scheduled -- the House Republicans has scheduled a vote to repeal the Affordable Care Act for something like the 40th time next week. It didn't work 39 times prior; it won't work the 40th time.

We are about the business of implementing a law that will expand health care coverage to millions of Americans, will reduce overall health costs in our country, and will reduce the deficit in the long run, as the CBO has said in its analysis.

It just demonstrates again how out of touch with what the American people want the House Republicans have become. Instead of focusing on measures that could help us invest in innovation and manufacturing and job creation, instead of focusing on common-sense efforts to reduce our deficit in a balanced way, House Republicans are voting again to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Shockingly, John Boehner said two days after the election that Obamacare was law and that they would have to reevaluate their efforts to repeal it. I guess he was convinced to change his mind by elements of his caucus yet again.

Q Jay, what more can you tell us about the meeting on sexual assault in the military that Valerie Jarrett and Tina Tchen are having at the White House today? What lawmakers are coming? What's the purpose?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a list of lawmakers who are coming. I believe it's bicameral and bipartisan. But the White House will be able to provide I believe a list of attendees.

The meeting reflects the level of concern that you heard from the President the other day at his press conference with the President of South Korea. He has zero tolerance for this, for sexual assault in the military. And he was clear that, as Commander-in-Chief, he believes that anyone who engages in sexual assault is dishonoring the uniform that they wear, and that anyone who is a victim of sexual assault should know that he, the Commander-in-Chief, and the leadership that he has in place has their backs and is actively taking steps to address this significant problem.

Q Jay, is the White House preparing for a conflict with congressional Republicans over the debt ceiling this summer? And do you expect that tax reform would be a part of a deal over that at all?

MR. CARNEY: We are not negotiating over Congress's responsibility to pay the bills that they incur, period.

It would be -- it is remarkable to imagine that Republicans would want to hold the world economy hostage to their insistence on tax cuts for the wealthy. I'm in the communications business. I don't envy the person who has to try to sell that to the American people, that their position would be that they would wreck the economy, not just the United States but of the world, if they don't get more tax cuts for the wealthy. That's a tough sell.

Q When is the President meeting with entrepreneurs and also the local residents? Is it before the tour, after the tour? The schedule wasn't very clear.

MR. CARNEY: I'll have to get you more details on the schedule.

Q Is there anything else about today other than the school visit and the visit with the workers?

MR. CARNEY: We'll have further information for you as the day progresses.

Q -- the President's effort to turn Texas blue?

MR. CARNEY: I got that question yesterday, and I can tell you that this is a visit focused entirely on issues of economic development and job creation. Austin is a center for innovation and development of high-tech jobs, jobs that come from the industries of the future, and that makes it an excellent place to visit to highlight the kind of activity that's taking place in a variety of cities and states across the country where the creative energy of our entrepreneurs as well as our workers is contributing positively to economic growth and job creation.

And it reflects two things about Washington -- one, that it's unconscionable when Washington takes action, as it has because of congressional Republicans, to inflict wounds on the economy unnecessarily, to slow down the recovery that we've been engaged in from the worst recession since the Great Depression, and it underscores the need for Congress to assist that economic growth and job creation.

And as I mentioned at the top, the President is calling on Congress to support this initiative for an investment in these innovation hubs, innovation institutes. It's an initiative that has bipartisan support and that we hope will gain the support of Congress.

Q What congressmen are here --

MR. CARNEY: I believe Lloyd Doggett is here, but I'll have to check and see if there are others.

Q Ambassador Pickering has told some news outlets that he's willing to testify in front of the House Oversight Committee. Is there any expectation from the White House that he will? And furthermore, Dick Cheney was on the Hill this morning and he was talking to folks on the Hill, and he said that Secretary Clinton should be subpoenaed if necessary. Any response first on Pickering, and then secondly to Vice President Cheney's comments?

MR. CARNEY: You would have to address your questions to Ambassador Pickering. He's independent from the administration, served administrations of both parties honorably, one of the most highly regarded diplomats of his generation. So I would ask him. I have no comment on Vice President Cheney's remarks.

Q Forgive me if this has been asked in recent days -- has the President spoken with any of the women or families involved in the situation in Cleveland?

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

Q Is the President going to meet with Governor Perry while he's here?

MR. CARNEY: I don't know. I haven't seen that. He saw Governor Perry when he was in Waco the other day -- a few weeks ago at the memorial for the victims of the explosion in West, Texas. But I can check, but I don't believe that he's seeing Governor Perry today.**

** Governor Perry greeted and met with the President upon his arrival in Austin today.

Q Thank you.

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11:25 A.M. EDT