

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 04/29/2013

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Welcome, everyone. Thanks for being here. I have no announcements, so I'll take your questions.

Q Thank you. The Russians appear to have given the U.S. some information in recent days that they had from 2011 about Tamerlan Tsarnaev and his mother. Is the President concerned at all that the U.S. didn't have this information before the Boston bombings happened?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have any confirmation to give you about the content of information the Russians may or may not have been giving us in recent days. The FBI has put out some information about the alert that the Russian authorities gave to U.S. authorities in the past, on two different occasions, and made clear the actions that they took in response to that information.

We have a cooperative relationship with our Russian counterparts when it comes to counterterrorism. We have an ongoing conversation with Russian officials on this specific matter, the bombing in Boston. As you know, we have been cooperating with the Russian government on travel from the embassy by a team of Americans to investigate down in Dagestan, the trip that Tamerlan Tsarnaev took, and that cooperation continues.

But I don't have -- since these are matters that are under investigation at this time, I don't have specific details about what information is being passed back and forth.

Q Is the President comfortable with the level of information in general that the Russians provided to the U.S. before the bombings?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a characterization of the President's views on this. I can tell you that cooperation like this is important and it is the kind of cooperation that we have with governments around the world and allies and partners around the world because the

terrorism threat is a global problem, not a national one. And that kind of information-sharing is extremely valuable when it comes to combatting terrorism both in this country and around the world.

Q Would the President be concerned if the Russians had withheld any information that could have, at the very least, led the FBI to do a more extensive investigation?

MR. CARNEY: Well, that's a couple levels of speculation. I think the President hopes and expects that we are able to share information back and forth with governments on a variety of counterterrorism subjects. And this is the kind of thing that it's obviously very important that we have that kind of cooperation from other governments on. And we provide it, as well, of course.

So I don't want to characterize too much the nature of conversations or information-sharing on this case with the Russians beyond what the FBI has already discussed. I can tell you that obviously the President has spoken with President Putin and will continue to have conversations, of course, with his counterpart there, as our governments cooperate on this matter and other issues.

Q On a separate topic, NBA player Jason Collins announced today that he's gay. Does the President have any response, any reaction to that announcement?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't spoken with him about it. I can certainly tell you that here at the White House we view that as another example of the progress that has been made and the evolution that has been taking place in this country, and commend him for his courage, and support him in his -- in this effort and hope that his fans and his team support him going forward.

Q Jay, on Syria, some questions are being raised about whether the Syrians actually used sarin on their people. What confidence does the United States have in this evidence? And can you characterize what exactly the evidence is in any way and what standards you're trying to meet in terms of establishing it?

MR. CARNEY: We have established with varying degrees of confidence that chemical weapons were used in limited fashion in Syria and the agent is sarin, as we have said. We have some physiological tests that are part of that collection of evidence. But there is much more to be done to verify conclusively that the red line that the President has talked about has been crossed.

And it's very important that we take the information that's been gathered thus far and build upon it, because an assessment of varying degrees of confidence is not sufficient upon which to base a policy reaction, as we've said and as the President said in the Oval Office on Friday.

So our work continues. We have a team -- or the United Nations has a team ready to deploy to Syria within 24 to 48 hours if Assad allows that team in and follows through on his stated commitment and interest in having this matter investigated. And we are working with the French and the British and other allies and partners to gather more

evidence. Chain of custody is an important issue -- establishing not just that there was an incident of chemical weapons used, but how the exposure occurred, under what circumstances, who specifically was responsible, and again, the chain of custody, how the incident itself was brought about.

Q You say physiological. Can you be any more specific about what that evidence is and who is holding it?

MR. CARNEY: Physiological is tangible evidence. And beyond that, I'm not going to be specific about it or methods and sources in terms of gathering evidence. It is a piece in the puzzle that needs to be put together to establish the kind of verifiable, reviewable evidence that can be corroborated that we need to establish as we make decisions about policy.

Q And can I ask on a budget issue -- was the White House surprised at how quickly Congress moved last week to provide flexibility to the FAA to prevent flight delays? And having set that precedent, how can the White House hold out any hope for reversing the sequester this year?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we were glad to see Congress sufficiently concerned about the negative effects of the sequester on our air travelers that they were willing to do something about it. The fact that that is what it took reinforces what we have been saying, which is that Congress failed to eliminate the sequester. It is Congress -- it is within Congress's power to reverse that decision, take action in a balanced way to reduce our deficit and replace the sequester.

This was not our ideal solution because the money involved in solving this problem at the FAA makes up less than one-half of 1 percent of the more than \$80 billion that the sequester represents over seven months. And it is not the way to go about dealing with a law that never should have become law -- or rather that never should be implemented. The sequester was designed purposefully to be terrible policy, and we are seeing in the various impacts it is having across the country that it is, in fact, terrible policy.

And while we are glad the Congress shared our concern, the concern that we warned them and the public about months in advance when it came to furloughs at the FAA, and the effect that would have on travelers and the delays that that would cause, we hope that Congress would show the same kind of unified passion when it comes to helping families whose kids are getting kicked off of Head Start, or seniors who are losing access to the Meals on Wheels program, or families whose breadwinners have lost their jobs because they are involved in defense industries or in military communities, or overall the 750,000 people who won't have jobs because Congress decided -- or Republicans, specifically, decided that sequester was a good idea, a political victory, a way to shore up their base and win praise from the tea party.

Bad policy begets bad consequences. And that's what we're seeing.

Jon.

Q Jay, on Syria, where exactly is that red line?

MR. CARNEY: The President has made clear, as he did again Friday, that the use of chemical weapons or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups would cross a red line.

What we have made clear, and we can go over it again, is that we have established with varying degrees of confidence that there have been incidents of chemical weapons used, sarin, in particular, in a limited fashion in Syria. We are now working to build upon that evidence to increase the amount of evidence to find specifically what happened, what occurred, who was responsible and build that case, if you will.

Q So is it the use of any amount of chemical weapons?

MR. CARNEY: There's not a gradation here that I can engage in. I can tell you that there have been, as we have assessed with varying degrees of confidence, incidents of the use of chemical weapons in a limited fashion. But the issue here is chain of custody. It is going on more than simply intelligence assessments. I think our history provides us with examples of why we need to be especially assiduous when it comes to evaluating and gathering evidence in matters related to these kinds of issues. And that's what we're doing.

Q But I'm trying to understand -- because I heard the President say "systematic use" on Friday -- so is it any amount? Is it a small amount? Does it have to be a large amount to cross the red line?

MR. CARNEY: I think that the issue here is the use by, we believe, the regime -- because we are highly skeptical of any accusations that the opposition may have used chemical weapons -- the use by the regime of chemical weapons against the Syrian people or the transfer by the regime of some of its chemical weapons stockpile to terrorists --

Q Any amount? Even a limited amount?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have an amount to give you. Obviously, the nature of chemical weapons varies depending on the agent. The use of chemical weapons can depend on the instance and the chain of custody. So that's what we're investigating now. That's what we're calling on Assad to allow the United Nations to investigate.

So this is a very serious matter. The President made clear this was a very serious matter. And it is because that it is so serious that it is essential to establish a broader process of verification that will allow us then to assess whether that red line has been crossed and what the policy response will be.

Q And on chain of custody, does it have to be something that is directed by Assad and his --

MR. CARNEY: We have said the use by the regime of chemical weapons would be President Assad's responsibility. And we believe and have assessed that the chemical weapon stockpiles in Syria are under the control -- continue to be under the control of the Syrian regime, led by Bashar al-Assad.

Again, I don't want to speculate on the incidents that we have assessed with varying degrees of confidence have occurred or may have occurred. We are further investigating all credible information about possible use of chemical weapons in Syria and call on Assad to comply with his own request for an investigation of chemical weapons use in Syria by allowing that team in to investigate. It's ready to go.

Q And just one more. How long do you think this process takes? Are we talking like --

MR. CARNEY: I don't think it's possible to say necessarily, because building -- the building blocks that create the evidence necessary to make these kinds of assessment depend on what we're able to gather and it's a complex process. Establishing the use of chemical weapons and the incidents involved and the chain of custody is not easy business, but it is essential business.

Again, if you're as serious as the President is about this kind of transgression, if it were to occur, you need to be sure of your facts and you need to have facts that can be corroborated and that can be reviewed and that are airtight.

Q So it could be weeks, it could be months. It could be impossible --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a timetable for you. I would not give you a timetable.

Q There's a fairly widespread concern out there that the White House is manipulating the sequester on various fronts -- the FAA, Head Start --

MR. CARNEY: You mean widespread concern like among -- on the chat shows by Republicans? But beyond that --

Q Well, among Republicans and probably other people, too. You've got to give them some credit. It might not just be the Republicans.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I haven't heard anybody who has lost a slot in Head Start suggest that that's because anybody here wished it to happen. We've been pretty clear that the Congress needs to act. The fact that the Congress acted -- was able to act on the FAA demonstrates that this is a problem that Congress needs to solve. And we call on them to do it.

Q When people look at this, it becomes clear that it's simply a matter of reprogramming funds from one pocket to another, which means nothing to most people, and yet, average Americans are inconvenienced or worse by the sequester and find it difficult to believe I think in many cases not restricted to the Republican right that you couldn't do more about it.

MR. CARNEY: Well, Bill, I appreciate the question. And I think it's really important that reporters, when they report on the sequester, because it is complicated, lay out these facts clearly. Congress had to pass a law because it was not possible legally to simply reprogram funds. That was established clearly, which is why Congress had to act. The sequester was written in a way that makes that the case. Congress had to act. That's why Congress did pass the measure that has fixed the problem within the FAA.

The sequester was written in a way to make it bad policy, and that is why we are seeing the impacts that we have seen. What is also the case is that \$80 billion-plus in cuts in seven months cannot be wished away through moving around some funds. As Secretary Duncan has said about funding for Education Department programs, the choice would be -- if that flexibility even existed -- do I help poor kids or do I help disabled kids?

That is not how it is supposed to work. That is not how policy should work. And that's why Congress ought to do the responsible thing and eliminate the sequester by adopting the kind of broad, balanced deficit reduction package that the President supports and that the very American people that you've mentioned support.

Q But when you frame it like that -- do I help poor kids or disabled kids -- it looks as though you are framing it in a way to make it least palatable to the public.

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure I --

Q Isn't there something else that can be done, people might ask.

MR. CARNEY: Well, they might, and it would be your job, I think, and all of our job to explain to them that this was written in a way to make it impossible to do that unless you eliminate the sequester.

That was the case with the FAA funding problem. It required an act of Congress to allow for funds that, by law, were not -- we within the administration, the FAA was not able to transfer without Congress acting. And that kind of scenario is replayed every time you look at this problem -- which is why we have the problem, in addition to the fact that Congress seems to be unwilling -- or Republicans in Congress seem to be unwilling to ask millionaires and billionaires to give up some special tax breaks in order to avert the kinds of negative effects that the sequester is having now on regular folks out there.

Brianna.

Q Thanks, Jay. There's a report in The New York Times today citing current and former advisors to President Hamid Karzai who -- they say that suitcases, backpacks, sometimes even plastic grocery bags of cash would come on an almost monthly basis to the President's office. Did President Obama approve that?

MR. CARNEY: I have no information on that report, and I would refer you to the CIA for any questions on it. I can tell you that, as we have said many times, we and our Afghan partners remain committed to our shared strategy and goals of a fully sovereign

Afghanistan that is not a safe haven for al Qaeda and that is responsible for its own security.

That's why the President has put in place a policy where, after plussing up forces there and training Afghan National Security Forces, we are now drawing down American forces, keeping the President's commitment to do so, as we transfer security lead over to the Afghans.

Q Is the President aware of these CIA payments?

MR. CARNEY: Again, you're making an assertion about something I have no comment on.

Q American officials in the story say that actually the money didn't go to buy influence, as it was initially intended, that it actually fueled corruption. Does the White House have any reaction to that?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't have any specific comment on this.

Q The President is heading to Mexico and Costa Rica this week. Can you talk broadly about some of his goals, and then specifically with Mexico, what his message is on immigration reform while he's there?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we will have more information about the trip the President is making later in the week. His visits to the region are always significant because of the President's commitment to expanding our economic ties to the countries of Latin America. That's very much a part of this trip. Our relationship with Mexico is especially vital and important economically and culturally and in other ways, and that remains the case.

When it comes to immigration reform, I think that the President's message is less specific to his visit here than it is generally in that it's about the need to reform a system that is broken, and in doing so, to enhance our border security, hold our businesses accountable, strengthen the economy by helping those 11 million people who are in this country illegally -- provide for them a clear path to citizenship -- and to enhance our national security by having those folks enter the system.

So the broad principles that the President laid out a long time ago now are the principles that guide him as he looks at the work that the Congress is doing, specifically so far that the Senate has done. And he is encouraged by the progress that has been made thus far. But we are still in the early stages of seeing that bipartisan effort move its way through the Senate and hopefully move its way through both houses so that it can land on the President's desk in a way that meets his principles and he can sign it.

Q Does he see this trip to Mexico as -- can you talk about how he sees it? Is it a way to elevate this issue? What is he hoping to get out of it in terms of talking about --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think our relationship with the countries in Central America is vital in many ways. It's certainly not limited at all to the matters of immigration reform in this country. That's something that you can expect he'll talk about because it's very topical here in the United States and it is of interest to countries in the region. But our relationship with those countries is vital in terms of our economic trade and other matters. And I'm sure those will be topics as well.

Q Jay, I wanted to follow on Syria, Jon's questions about the timeline and whatnot. Understanding, as you say, that the evidence has to be airtight -- because nobody should suggest that the administration rushed through this -- if it takes months and months to verify this or maybe a year, doesn't that keep the door wide open for Assad to use chemical weapons? I mean, when the President was in the briefing room here some months ago he made it seem like there will be action taken if this line is crossed. If it drags on for months and months, it seems like the door could be open for Assad to do this again.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I certainly appreciate the question and I understand it. What I won't do is speculate about how much time might be required to gather the evidence necessary to be able to assess clearly in a way that can be corroborated and reviewed whether or not this red line has been crossed.

I think all Americans would hope and expect that on a matter of this seriousness that we would be very careful in that process and would insist upon gathering all the facts, and not rushing to take action in a policy sense in reaction to assessments that are very important but are based on incomplete information.

So we need to build upon the excellent work that's been done thus far. We call upon Assad to allow the inspection team from the United Nations to conduct the investigation that Assad himself asked for. But we are not relying on the United Nations alone; we are working with our partners and allies as well as the Syrian opposition, very importantly, to gather more facts and evidence because this matter is so serious.

Q Let me ask you a different question. Back here at home, Hurricane Sandy -- obviously a lot of attention being focused six months later. A kind of a two-part -- first being giving you the opportunity to explain where you and the President think we are in rebuilding very important communities in America right now.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I appreciate that. It is six months now since that terrible storm devastated New Jersey and New York and other parts of the country. And I can tell you that we continue to bring all resources to bear to support those affected by the storm as they continue to recover.

In the last six months, FEMA has obligated more than \$1 billion to support state and local rebuilding efforts, and disbursed more than \$1.3 billion directly to affected families, covering eligible repair costs and meeting temporary housing needs. And that's in relation to the major disaster declarations.

Separately, after signing the \$60 billion supplemental for Sandy aid, the administration has worked expeditiously to get the first portion of that money out the door, and in February provided an additional \$5.4 billion to the affected states. Also the Sandy task force, led by HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, along with FEMA, continues to work closely with our state and local partners as they make decisions about long-term rebuilding needs.

On Friday, Secretary Donovan announced the approval of New York State's recovery action plan, and today Secretary Donovan joined Governor Christie of New Jersey to announce the approval of New Jersey's recovery action plan.

Now, we know there is more work to do. And the President committed at the time that this administration would be working with state and local authorities in support of the recovery efforts long after the cameras went away and not just when there are anniversaries to mark. And that has been the case. And this is very important business, and that's why the President asked Shaun Donovan to head the task force. And he is making the progress that I just described, as is FEMA and other elements involved in this effort.

Q So then my question on that would be then, even after saying all that money has been put out there in the pipeline, and Governor Christie, who has had very nice things to say about the White House and the President, he himself in his interviews was saying there are thousands of people who still have not had their homes built. So in fairness, the President is not going to be out there with a hammer and nails. Shaun Donovan is not going to be. We understand that. But what can be done? What needs to be done so that this money actually gets to these people and their homes are actually rebuilt?

MR. CARNEY: Well, this money is getting to people, but you're right that there's an enormous amount of work to be done. It has been six months, half a year, since the storm, and there are people -- as we have all heard again or seen again today on this sixth-month period, anniversary -- who are still suffering greatly from the impacts of that terrible storm, which is why that work needs to continue even when it's not an anniversary, and why the President has made sure that through the task force and through the other levers that we have here at the federal government to assist these states, that that work is being done.

Q Can I follow up, Jay?

MR. CARNEY: Peter, and then -- Peter and Peter.

Q If I can ask quickly about the announcement that's going to be made at 2:10 p.m. today about the Department of Transportation new nominee, very briefly. Before on him specifically, are we going to hear about a Commerce Secretary or Trade Representative today, or is it just one individual today?

MR. CARNEY: I think we have the announcement that you made reference to for the Secretary of Transportation today. I have no other personnel announcements to make.

Q I appreciate that. Going back to Syria quickly. The Free Syrian Army over this weekend said that Israeli Air Force jets flew over Assad's palace and that they bombed a chemical weapons site near Damascus this weekend. Do you have any more information about that and what the message is to Israel?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any information on that.

Q And then, finally, if I can quickly, as we speak about Syria, can you explain -- there's some sense that the White House is perhaps out over its skis, to use a colloquial phrase, in terms of the issue on Syria; that the language that was used before to describe this red line as this being a game-changer is now the policy doesn't meet that place, that the words perhaps got a little bit ahead of policy right now. If the White House wasn't 100 percent sure when they put out the information to the Hill late last week, why right now? Why not wait to have said something to -- created this new, complex situation?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think, as you know, the President made clear the fact that there was a red line for the United States long before this report came out because he was making clear to President Assad how seriously we would view the use or transfer of Syria's chemical weapons. And he made that clear again on Friday when asked about this in his meeting with the King of Jordan. And that is why we have to be so thorough in our review of and collection of evidence to prove that chemical weapons have been used. And I think the American people would expect nothing less.

That's why we have made clear that while there is some evidence that leads to an assessment of varying degrees of confidence that chemical weapons have been used in a limited way in Syria, more evidence needs to be gathered to build upon the work that's been done thus far, and that includes working with allies and partners who care deeply about this issue and have their own assessments that have been made. It includes working, very importantly, with the Syrian opposition, and it includes urging President Assad to allow the United Nations team into Syria.

Q So given the challenge that's posed by the last part of your answer, which is Assad's willingness to allow inspectors in there, if he doesn't allow inspectors in, as appears increasingly to be the case given that hasn't happened to this point, can the White House or can this administration ever reach a point of certitude to know that chemical weapons are being used, to mandate this reaction that the President has discussed, a game-changer?

MR. CARNEY: I think that it is certainly easier if you were to have a team on the ground allowed entry by the Assad regime, but we are not waiting for that process. We are moving forward, as we have already, to collect information and gather evidence. We are relying and working with the Syrian opposition, as well as our allies and partners in that effort. And that effort will continue.

But there is no question that this not easy business and it needs to be thorough, and we need to establish the highest possible level of confidence in the assessments that we make. And that's why we're assembling the facts in the way that we are.

Q Thank you, Jay.

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Peter.

Q Vice President Biden often talks about how, if you show him your budget, he can tell you what you value. We hear him say that. So with respect to the sequester, would it be unfair for people to conclude that what Congress and the White House values is the convenience of air travelers as opposed Head Start recipients?

MR. CARNEY: I think it's fair to say that about Congress. We do not have independently the power to eliminate the sequester either in piecemeal fashion or in its entirety. If we did have that power, we would have exercised it, and we would pass a budget very much like the one the President submitted that eliminates the sequester, achieves \$4.3 trillion in deficit reduction in a balanced way, invests in our economy, helps the middle class grow and thrive and protects our seniors.

Republicans in Congress chose a different path. Although late last year, just a few months ago, the Speaker of the House said that through a process of tax reform, up to a trillion dollars in revenue could be generated from the wealthy and well-connected and applied towards deficit reduction, he now says, no way, no how. And that's unfortunate, because the only responsible way to reduce our deficit that doesn't ask seniors to bear the burden alone, or middle-class families trying to educate their kids or small businesses or other regular folks out in the country and the economy trying to bear this burden alone, they have said no. And that's unfortunate.

So, yes, the decision by Congress to act swiftly to alleviate the delays being caused by the furloughs at the FAA I think demonstrates a level of concern for some people who are affected by the sequester that we wish, and the President wishes, would be applied elsewhere to other Americans who are suffering from these effects, and to the economy as a whole. Because it's important to remember that it can be viewed as a political tactic or something "in your pocket," as John Boehner said, to play in the Beltway games with the White House and Democrats, or you can view it as something that's costing us up to three-quarters of a million jobs and a half percentage point of economic growth.

And then, you have to ask yourself, am I doing -- if I'm supporting this so that I can support the tea party or avert a primary challenge, am I actually doing right by average Americans out there who are having to bear the brunt of this decision?

Q Because the President could make an important symbolic statement by saying, you know what, what I value are these other groups affected by the sequester; I'm going to veto this bill and we're not going to pass it or I'm not going to sign unless and until these other groups are also protected.

MR. CARNEY: Well, Peter, the Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood stood before you here months ago and made clear that this would be one of the effects, and I think in doing so, we made clear that this was an effect that we thought would be of great concern to

Congress and to the American people. Unfortunately, because Republicans chose to embrace the sequester we now have seen that effect play out in airports across the country.

And we welcome the decision by Congress to take action to eliminate this portion of the harm being caused to the American people. But let's be clear, that's not our preferred approach and a piecemeal approach is not the way to it. If you just do the math here, this is one-half of 1 percent of the sequester -- less than that. If you were to do it on average on that basis and try to eliminate the sequester piecemeal, you'd have to have more than 200 acts of Congress. Well, that doesn't happen, right?

So the easier, smarter way to do it is to eliminate the sequester and replace it with good policy -- balanced, fair, sensible policy, including smart cuts; including smart entitlement reforms; including tax reform that generates revenue that can be applied to deficit reduction. That's the way to go about it. That's what every bipartisan commission that has looked at this says is the way to go about it. It's the way every iteration of the Simpson-Bowles report says we should go about it. Republican senators have said -- many of them -- that that's the way we should go about it.

So the President hopes that through his conversations with Republican lawmakers that we can find some common ground here to do it in this way -- that eliminates the sequester and helps our economy.

Q A little off topic, but today with the announcement of the Charlotte Mayor as the Transportation Secretary, the Cabinet is kind of taking shape at this point. Is the President satisfied that his Cabinet this time around represents the diversity of the American people and the diversity of the electoral coalition that actually got him elected to the White House?

MR. CARNEY: The President believes that diversity is very important because diversity in his Cabinet and among his top advisors improves the decision-making process. It improves the input and, therefore, improves his capacity to deliberate and make the best decisions possible when it comes to policy for the country. And he is pleased with the individuals who have agreed to accept his nominations for positions in the Cabinet, those positions that have opened up because of folks leaving.

And obviously, there are other nominations still to come. And I think that what you will see is a Cabinet that reflects the diversity of the country and reflects the quality of people who are willing to serve their country in these important positions.

Q Does this kind of look like America and the sort of proportions that there are in his electoral coalition?

MR. CARNEY: I think that the focus here is on making sure that diversity is part of what is sought in picking senior advisors to the President. And I think that's reflected in the choices he has made. And I think that the quality of personnel who have agreed to serve the country in his Cabinet reflects the President's insistence that he get the very best people in these positions giving him advice on these very important policy matters.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks. The President is going to be traveling to Mexico later this week, where he'll be talking about trade. Is the White House concerned at all that not having a Commerce nominee or a U.S. Trade nominee might hurt those talks those at all?

MR. CARNEY: I would not expect that. I think we have an excellent team that has worked on these issues for a number of years now. And we have obviously worked with the Mexican government closely on matters of trade and economic development. And in terms of specific personnel nominations, I don't have any announcements to make.

Mark.

Q Yes, Jay, just one more on the sequester line of questioning. By accepting the FAA, haven't you now opened the door to a bunch of folks coming along asking for a piece-by-piece fix on the flexibility in a particular agency or budget line, but taken the pressure off for the very grand bargain, balanced compromise that you say you want?

MR. CARNEY: No, because as I pointed out, piecemeal is not the way to fix the sequester. It would tax not just this Congress, but any Congress in history to go about the business of trying to fix this in a piecemeal fashion. It's not the way to do it. We should do it in a broad -- as part of a broad, balanced deal that reduces our deficit and helps our economy grow through key investments.

Q On the first test, that's exactly what you did; you accepted piecemeal.

MR. CARNEY: I think I made clear that the President, as Secretary LaHood made clear to you guys two months ago, was very concerned about this potential effect. He's also concerned about all these other effects. And he calls on Congress to show the same level of concern for parents of Head Start kids who are no longer enrolled in Head Start, or for seniors who are no longer getting Meals on Wheels, or for military families who -- or families in military communities who have experienced furloughs or job loss because of the sequester, and to take action accordingly.

And the way to address all those problems is to replace the sequester with good policy -- replace bad policy with good policy. That might be the job description in Congress, in fact -- let's replace bad policy with good policy. And we encourage Congress to take that action and do away with the sequester that was never supposed to be implemented in the first place.

Jon-Christopher.

Q Thanks. Sandy six months-plus. It seems his Royal Highness Prince Harry is coming over from Great Britain to visit with Governor Christie in New Jersey, do a walk-through of some of the damage. Can you tell us if the President or anybody from this administration might be meeting with Prince Harry?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any meetings to announce. We obviously welcome the attention paid on the tremendous damage done by the storm and the ongoing efforts to recover in the region. But I haven't got any meetings to announce.

Steve.

Q The President has a lot of things in his budget that he considers good policy that are cuts -- hundreds of billions of dollars in his own cuts that he's proposed as part of the grand bargain, thinks is good policy. Why not use that to replace some of the sequester and some of these horrible things that you keep mentioning? Given that the Republicans are dug in on revenue, it doesn't seem like you're going to get anything.

MR. CARNEY: Because the Republicans were sent here to work to solve problems -- just like the President was and just like Democrats in Congress were. It is their responsibility to solve those problems in a way that's good for the whole country, and it is their responsibility to work cooperatively to try to find common ground. That's what the President believes.

And it is the wrong way to reduce our deficit or eliminate the sequester by simply saying, you know what, we'll just ask seniors to deal with it. We'll hold harmless millionaires and billionaires. We'll let those tax loopholes stay in place for those who benefit or own corporate jets, or the oil and gas industry that has made record profits in recent years, we'll let them keep their taxpayer subsidies. We'll ask seniors to pay the bill for eliminating the sequester. That's not the way this can happen. It's not the fair and right way, and it's not good policy.

And that's why the President insists that we need to do this in a balanced way. That's what the American people say they want. That's what every bipartisan commission that's looked at this has said is the right way to go. And that's why the President is engaged in these conversations with Republican lawmakers to see if common ground on this issue can be found.

And if we take that approach, it will be not just good because it eliminates the sequester -- although that is a good thing -- it will be good because it will send the signal to the country and the world that we can work cooperatively in a way that the American people overwhelmingly support. It will be good for our economy. It will be good for the middle class and for seniors. These are all goals that supposedly members of both parties on Capitol Hill share.

Q Jay, on Syria and chemical weapons, you say you want certainty. Is there a certainty, though, that the United Nations, the allies, NATO, and/or the Arab League are going to go along and say, yes, a red line has been crossed? Or is there a possibility of fracturing over this -- these nebulous, quantitative measure or whatever?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think we need to get first steps first. And we are in the process of evaluating evidence, collecting evidence, working with allies and partners and the Syrian opposition to put together the necessary evidence that can be corroborated and reviewed in the aim of trying to establish whether or not the red line was crossed.

I think it's pretty clear that we are not the only country that has the concern here about the possible use by the Assad regime of chemical weapons and the implications of that. And we will work with countries who share our concern as we assess the facts that have been gathered and as we gather more facts.

Q But won't it be expected for the United States to say, yeah, the red line has been crossed, and then try to bring everybody else along?

MR. CARNEY: I think we've been pretty clear that -- we made the point about the severity of this potential problem, the President did, and we have made clear that as it has become more evident that chemical weapons may have been used in Syria by the regime that we need to gather all the facts to decide whether or not that red line has been crossed, and then decide what policy implications flow from that. And that's why we provided the information that we have to the Congress, and that's why we continue this work.

Q Thanks, Jay.

MR. CARNEY: In the back.

Q Yes, you mentioned it's not the right way to go on the sequester to do piecemeal, but will the White House accept more piecemeal fixes? Are they going to push Congress to maybe do some piecemeal fixes for stuff like -- the American Cancer Society is talking about fixes to try to make more cancer research available. Is the White House going to push for stuff like that?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't seen any proposals along the lines that you point out. But the reason why I used the example that Secretary Duncan had used in the past is that there are -- when you have \$80-plus billion in across-the-board cuts in seven months with exclusions included in it that make the cuts where they take effect even more deep and severe, there are no happy options generally.

In the FAA case, there was money that was unobligated for essentially capital projects that could be transferred -- by an act of Congress only -- to alleviate the furloughs. But that tradeoff doesn't necessarily exist in many other places. And even then, there is a consequence. That means that when regional airports are looking to fund capital projects, they'll turn to the FAA and find that that money has been used to avert the furloughs, and there will economic consequences to that. So even in this case, there is a negative impact of trying to solve the sequester in the way that it's been solved for this particular issue.

The right way to do this is simply to agree to approach our deficits in a balanced way, reduce them in a balanced way, and ask the wealthiest and well-connected to have some skin in this game. What's amazing to me when you look at the budget that the House Republicans passed and the calls you now see for tax reform that would not just close some loopholes and cap some deductions but give a substantial tax cut to the wealthiest Americans, you wonder if there really is seriousness among Republicans who claim to be concerned about deficits and debt -- because the numbers just don't add up.

The right way to do this is through a balanced approach that includes savings from entitlement reforms, savings from spending cuts, and savings through tax reform. And that's the way that the President has proposed we do it. Many others have said that's the right way to do it. And at varying times, Republican leaders have said they would be willing to do that. But now they say no, and that is not how it should be.

Q But you would sign more piecemeal fixes if they came?

MR. CARNEY: You're asking me to speculate on bills that don't even exist. I think that we made clear that this is not the right way to go about it. It doesn't solve the overall problem.

We welcome the opportunity to alleviate this specific problem, but there are many other impacts, including the macro impact. I mean, solving half of 1 percent of this problem doesn't get you very far in saving those 750,000 jobs, or eliminating the .6 percent drag on our economic growth. We need to do this in the right way, and that's the way the American people expect us to do it.

Thanks very much.

END

1:29 P.M. EDT