

Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz, 5/15/2015

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. SCHULTZ: Good afternoon. I have one quick announcement at the top, and then we will go right to your questions.

On Wednesday, the House passed the USA FREEDOM Act with overwhelming bipartisan support. This legislation passed the House with even more support than a previous iteration of this bill received late last year. Indeed, the USA FREEDOM Act represents a reasonable compromise that strengthens the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act's privacy and liberties protections, while preserving essential authorities for intelligence and law enforcement professionals.

We strongly support the bill, just as many national security professionals as well as civil libertarians do. And we urge the Senate to pass it before their Memorial Day recess. This is the Senate's last opportunity to act before important national security authorities expire on June 1st.

With only five business days remaining before the Senate recesses, we understand that Senate Republicans intend to vote on a short-term reauthorization that provides no reforms. But a bipartisan group of leaders in both chambers have made it clear that they will not consent to any extension that doesn't include any reforms of the current program. If some Senate Republicans allow important intelligence authorities to expire by rejecting reasonable reforms that have overwhelmingly already passed the House and have strong bipartisan support in the Senate, they will be weakening our nation's security and standing in the way of reforms that would have enhanced -- that would enhance the American people's trust and confidence in the agencies tasked with protecting them.

With that, Darlene, I'm happy to take your questions.

Q Thank you. I wanted to follow up on a question that was asked at the news conference yesterday, but there wasn't really an answer. The question was for the President's thoughts on the Vatican's decision to recognize the Palestinian State. Does the White House have anything to say about that? Or do you all not want to be seen as criticizing Pope Francis?

Q Time's up. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHULTZ: I'm ready to go. Darlene, the President did speak to this yesterday, and our position is clear -- that we continue to believe that the preferred path to this resolved conflict is for the parties to reach an agreement on final status issues directly. If you have questions about the Vatican's position on this, you should probably check with the Holy See.

Q But the Vatican is recognizing the Palestinian State. That's something the United States has not done. So the question is, what do you all think about that? I mean, do you think that will help the two-state solution -- get the two-state solution that the President has talked about? Or will it hurt efforts to do that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think as the President aptly said yesterday, that we believe that peace between Israelis and Palestinians is necessary, just, and possible, and will only come with a two-state solution. That's why we've worked hard over the years for a two-state solution and to develop innovative ways to address Israel's security and Palestinian sovereignty needs.

As the President pointed out yesterday, the government that was formed in Israel, some members of that government aren't the most ardent supporters for a two-state solution, so we understand that this isn't something that is particularly imminent. But that's not going to water down the President's support.

Q Monday, is there a possibility of a side trip to Philadelphia when the President visits Camden, New Jersey?

MR. SCHULTZ: Darlene, as you point out, on Monday, May 18th, the President will travel to Camden, New Jersey to visit with local law enforcement and meet with young people in the Camden community.

Up there, the President will hear directly about the efforts of the Camden County police department to build trust between their department and the community. This visit is a continuation of the administration's support for understanding and highlighting what is working, including recommendations included in the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. So that visit is going to be focused on that issue.

Q And lastly, Congress has passed the Iran bill. Do you have any sort of timeline for us on when the President might sign that?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't. As the President mentioned yesterday, he was pleased that Congress did pass this piece of legislation. We have said for a while now that that bill represented the reasonable and acceptable compromise that the President would be willing to sign. I know the House passed it earlier. But I don't have an update on when that's being delivered to the White House just yet.

Q So the President yesterday, when asked about Senator Warren on their kind of back-and-forth on trade, made the point that this was not personal and that even some of his best friends in the Senate disagree with him. But have there been meetings in the past week between people at the White House and Senator Warren to try to work out some of these differences? Or do you foresee them going forward as the trade bill moves forward?

MR. SCHULTZ: As you pointed out, yesterday the President made clear that the differences he has with those who oppose both TPP or TPA are not personal; in fact, they're policy differences. And he was actually very candid in his understanding of why those differences exist; that for years, the issue of trade has been particularly challenging for Democrats. That's because the previous trade agreements have not lived up to the hype.

That is why the President has doubled down on his determination to make sure this trade agreement is the most progressive in history. That includes environmental protections, labor standards, human rights protections that we haven't seen before. And the President has insisted that those protections be included as part of the text -- not in any side deal or side agreement -- but right there in the body and in an enforceable way.

The President does indeed look forward to having conversations with both supporters of the bill and those who he hasn't convinced yet. I'm not sure Senator Warren is on the "convincible" list, but we absolutely plan on engaging folks from across the spectrum to make sure we can sell any skeptics.

Q Okay. I also wanted to ask you about this boat of Rohingya from Myanmar, that it had been turned away by -- or apparently Thai authorities said that they wanted to continue -- they're essentially adrift. As you know, this is a humanitarian crisis. What could the U.S. be doing -- or what is the U.S. doing to prevent this from becoming a major humanitarian crisis even more than it already is? And is there any way for the State Department or U.S. officials to be pressuring other countries, perhaps working with Indonesia, to find a place for these people?

MR. SCHULTZ: Julie, I have seen some of those stories, and they've been heartbreaking. We are absolutely aware that over the last year, increasing numbers of migrants from several of these countries are risking their lives on the seas because of dire humanitarian and economic situations they face at home, out of fear of ethnic and religious violence.

The United States continues to raise these concerns with the Burmese government, and underscore the urgent need to fulfill the government's commitments to improve the lives of all those affected by that humanitarian crisis.

Jim.

Q Just to follow up on that, we were in Myanmar just last year, and the President was insisting that the government there -- and he's made Myanmar one of his top priorities in that part of the world -- he was insisting that this government show greater respect for these ethnic minorities, like the Rohingya Muslims. So what happened?

MR. SCHULTZ: Jim, yes, I was on that trip too, and it was a significant one. You are right -- the President and this administration, from senior White House officials all the way up to the President, but also our team at the State Department and elsewhere throughout the federal government have worked hard on this. The reforms that are happening in Burma are important, are significant, but the process isn't done. They have not completed their democratic reforms.

That's why, as I said, the United States is going to continue to raise concerns with that government and underscore the urgent need to fulfill that government's commitment to respecting these human rights.

Q Okay. And I wanted to follow up on something the President said yesterday in response to Mike Viqueira's question about Syria and the use of chemical weapons. In response to Mike's question, the President said that while there was some reporting out there that the Syrians had used chlorine gas, there are also reports that sarin gas and VX gas have been used. So I just wanted to get sort of an update from you. What is the U.S. assessment of those recent reports? And the other question I had about that is that the President seemed to be saying that while he did enforce that red line by ridding, or supposedly ridding Syria of its chemical weapons, apparently that may have not happened. So where do things stand right now on that issue?

MR. SCHULTZ: Jim, thank you. It's a fair question. I think what the President was referring to was our successful work to destroy the 1,300 metric tons of dangerous chemicals in Syria's declared stockpiles. Those are chemical weapons that the Assad regime no longer has. They were identified, retrieved and destroyed, so the Assad regime no longer has access to those.

At the time, though, we were very clear that that declaration remained incomplete, and so there's no doubt that more work needs to be done in a number of these areas to ensure that the Assad regime fully meets its obligations. So while that declaration is incomplete, in the interim we know that the OPCW, the international organization charged with this as its mission, is looking into those. And as the President made clear, if those reports are confirmed, he is going to work with the international community, specifically Russia, in order to apply pressure to make sure that never happens again.

Q And, I mean, what kind of options would be on the table for enforcing this? I suppose that red line still stands. I know he took the option of not using military force at the time, and opted for this idea of trying to work with Russia and rid Syria of its chemical weapons. But I suppose if this conversation gets restarted again, we have to go back to that question, and that is the question of potential for military force. I'm just curious, where do things stand in that area?

MR. SCHULTZ: Jim, I think my boss, Josh, entertained a few questions earlier this week on Secretary Kerry's travel to Moscow. And I think it's going to be important to note that in the wake of those conversations, we would look forward to working with our Russian colleagues to build upon the collaborative approach that Secretary Kerry built with Foreign Minister Lavrov that facilitated the elimination of the Assad regime's declared chemical weapons. This is, again, a strategic weapons of mass destruction capability that was removed and destroyed under the threat of the use of force.

Q And one last quick question. Was the First Lady here yesterday when this drone incident occurred?

MR. SCHULTZ: That's a good question. I don't know the answer to that.

Kristen.

Q Eric, thank you. I'm just going to follow up on Jim. The President and you just mentioned that the international community is investigating the potential use of chlorine bombs. Can you be more specific? What exactly is being done to try to determine if chlorine bombs were used?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, Kristen, I would say that this administration continues to prioritize our work with our international partners to put in place an attribution mechanism through the United Nations Security Council, and collaboratively with these partners, to determine the best way to bolster accountability for those responsible for the chemical weapons attacks. There is no doubt that more work needs to be done in these areas. And specifically what we look at is the United Nations Security Council resolutions 2118 and 2209 to represent fully, completely and accurately its chemical weapons program in its declaration to the Organization of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

As we said, that declaration at the time was incomplete, and so I know the OPCW is currently investigating. We're going to let that work continue.

Go ahead.

Q How much urgency is there, though? I mean, is the President pressing for a specific timeline? When does he want to get an answer to this question?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, there is urgency, Kristen. And I think that's underscored by the United States working with the international community to do our utmost to empower and strengthen the efforts of the OPCW, and press the Syrians to abide by their commitments to cooperate to the fullest extent they can with the OPCW fact-finding mission, and secure access to all necessary locations and information so that they may fully investigate these wretched incidents of chemical weapons use.

Q Can we just ask you about a development out of Colombia? As you know, on Thursday Colombia ordered a halt to the aerial spraying of illegal plantings of coca. Is the government -- is the administration concerned that there could be an increase in cocaine

production? And are you concerned that this could strain relations between the U.S. and Colombia?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't think we are concerned that this will strain relations, because any decision about the future of aerial eradication in Colombia is a sovereign decision for the Colombian government.

Speaking for the United States, we have many tools to help Colombia confront the problems of transnational crime and narco-trafficking. The overarching U.S.-Colombian goal of countering drug trafficking has not changed. If aerial is not possible, in coordination with our Colombian allies we're going to redouble our efforts to use other tools.

Q So you're confident that you will still be able to combat this in the same level that you are now?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes. This is Colombia's sovereign decision to make. We have many tools to help Colombia confront the problem of transnational crime and narco-trafficking. So if aerial is not possible, in coordination with our allies we're going to redouble our efforts to use other tools available.

Francesca.

Q Thank you so much. So earlier this week, the administration released a very lengthy list of reasons that it would not support the House's Defense Authorization Bill. But Senator McCain suggested this week that potentially, because the Senate version of the bill that passed the panel this week contains less restrictions on transferring detainees from Guantanamo Bay, that the White House might be more inclined to sign that bill. And I wanted to know what your thoughts were on that, if that was true -- if you guys would be more inclined to sign the Senate version of the bill because of Guantanamo Bay restrictions being lessened.

MR. SCHULTZ: Francesca, I appreciate you pointing out that one of our most ardent objections to the NDAA bill was the Guantanamo provisions. As we have said, the operation of this facility weakens our national security by draining resources, damaging our relationships with key allies and partners, and emboldening violent extremists. And rather than bringing this dark chapter of our history to a close, as the President has repeatedly called on Congress to do, this bill aims to extend it. So that is a very significant objection we have to the NDAA bill.

But there's other objections as well, and let me take a moment to lay them out. The President has been very clear about his core principle that he will not support a budget that locks in sequestration, and he will not fix defense without fixing nondefense spending. Sequestration levels will damage our ability to restore readiness and advance badly needed technological modernization and keep faith with our troops and their families.

I think you probably have heard Secretary Carter, Secretary Johnson, other members of this administration make clear that issues that colloquially we think would probably end up on the defense side of the ledger for national security purposes are actually budgeted on the nondefense side of the ledger. So let me give you an example. All of DHS is in the nondefense side. The VA -- the nondefense side. All of the funding for our countering violent extremism grant program -- that's something that you all have asked a lot of questions about -- that comes out of the Department of Justice, so that's on the domestic side. And those are a few of the reasons why we object to the NDAA bill.

Q Sorry, that was a lot. So I just wanted to be clear -- so would the White House be more inclined to support the Senate version of the bill because of the Guantanamo Bay language in it, or no?

MR. SCHULTZ: No.

Q No -- okay.

MR. SCHULTZ: Steven.

Q Can you speak about the gains that ISIS has made in Ramadi, et cetera? There has been talk from the podium about progress that's been made against ISIL. This obviously seems like a big setback. What is the White House assessment? Are we losing this war? Do we need to do something differently? And what is the White House doing to try and prevent this critical city from falling?

MR. SCHULTZ: We do continue to work, Steven, with our coalition partners along several lines of effort to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL. As you know, more than 60 partners are contributing to this coalition along the key lines of effort, including military support, countering ISIL's finances, countering foreign fighter flows, exposing ISIL's true nature, and providing humanitarian support.

It's been a while since this has come up in this briefing, so let me just give you our latest rundown of the progress that we have indeed been making. The coalition has conducted over 3,900 airstrikes against ISIL terrorists, nearly 2,400 in Iraq and nearly 1,500 in Syria. We've taken out thousands of ISIL's fighters and over 6,000 specific ISIL targets, including numerous commanders. We've taken out thousands of ISIL's fighters, numerous commanders, over 1,700 vehicles and tanks, over 170 artillery and mortar positions, nearly 4,000 fighting positions, checkpoints, buildings, bunkers, staging areas and barracks. Airstrikes have also damaged over 150 oil and gas facilities.

As a result of this effort, ISIL's momentum has indeed been blunted, its ability to mass and maneuver forces degraded, its leadership cells pressured or eliminated, its command-and-control and supply lines severed.

Despite these successes, the President has made clear that there's going to be ebbs and flows in this fight, that this would never be something that was going to be short term in duration, but ultimately will be successful.

Q Well, one of the things that the President has been talking about with his strategy is to get the Iraqi government to enlist the Sunnis and to provide them what they need to defend themselves. This looks like an example where that failed. This is the capital of Anbar Province. Is there a failure here by the Iraqi government to take the steps they need to take? And does the White House need to step up either its assistance or its pressure on the Iraqis themselves?

MR. SCHULTZ: You asserted a lot of facts that I'm not sure are quite in evidence. I will tell you that in conjunction with Anbar tribal forces, the Iraqi security forces have indeed been confronting ISIL fighters in Ramadi and around Anbar Province for several months now. Today, ISIL is once again attempting an offensive in the city of Ramadi, but the coalition is supporting the Iraqi security forces and the brave citizens of Anbar Province to help protect the people of Anbar and support their efforts to force ISIL from Ramadi and other cities. Coalition forces continue to provide air support in ISIL-held and contested areas throughout Iraq.

But I am going to refer you to the Iraqi government on the latest status of their forces, and to the Department of Defense for more on the United States support there.

Q There's no broader reexamining right now in the White House of the broader strategy of we're going to let the Iraqis take the lead, we're going to be mostly doing airstrikes?

MR. SCHULTZ: No, Steven. There may be others who are suggesting a reoccupation of the country of Iraq. That's not something the President has said he's been open to. But the President has been clear that this is going to be a long-term proposition, that there will be ebbs and flows to this fight, but he is committed to making sure we're successful.

Jon.

Q Just following up on that, how can you say that ISIS's momentum has been thwarted when they are now going into Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province? They're still well entrenched in Mosul, no sign of them being moved out of the second largest city in Iraq. So now you have a situation where they're moving into the capital of the largest province in Iraq and still maintaining control of the largest city in Iraq. And you're standing there and saying that their momentum has been thwarted?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think if you look at --

Q How do you define that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure. I think if you look at a lot of the data, Jon, the Department of Defense estimates that ISIL no longer has freedom of movement in about 25 percent of the populated areas where it once operated freely. This is not just broad swaths of desert, but populated area where ISIL had essentially ruled. Much of that has to do with the support the coalition has provided to local forces to make these gains.

But as you point out, ISIL is attempting an offensive on the city of Ramadi. But, clearly, Iraqi security forces are focused there. The U.S. coalition is performing the role that the President has envisioned. And that's why we're focused on it.

Q Okay, so let me turn back to Syria. I want to come back to the President's comments at the press conference. The President was asked directly about the use of banned chemical weapons, and he said, "Assad gave up his chemical weapons. That's not speculation on our part. That, in fact, has been confirmed by the organization internationally that's charged with eliminating chemical weapons." He was, of course, referring to the OPCW. Well, now you have multiple reports that the OPCW has uncovered evidence of the use of sarin and ricin gas in Syria. So how -- was the President unaware of those reports, or does he think those reports are not credible?

MR. SCHULTZ: Jon, I think what he said -- he's very much aware of the reports. But I think what he was alluding to --

Q But he said that the chemical weapons had been -- that Assad gave up his chemical weapons and that's been confirmed. Now you have evidence that that may not have been the case.

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure, and I believe the President mentioned those reports in his remarks yesterday.

Q He mentioned chlorine, which is not one of the banned chemical weapons. So the reports are sarin and ricin, two banned substances that were supposedly turned over as part of the Russian deal.

MR. SCHULTZ: I understand. And our point is, 1,300 metric tons of dangerous chemical weapons in Syria's declared stockpiles were removed from that country as part of the deal you're referencing. But at the time, we were also very clear that Syria's declaration remained incomplete. So the OPCW is looking into the very reports you mentioned. And once there's a conclusions drawn, then we are going to work with our international partners, just as we did a few years ago, to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Q And if those banned weapons were used, is that -- to get back to Jim's question, is the red line still there? Is that crossing the red line again? Is it time to consider what would be done in reaction?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think the President was very clear yesterday that what he wants to do is, if those reports become confirmed, then what we will do is we will work with our international partners. There happens to be a framework that was set up where Secretary Kerry worked with his counterpart over in Moscow to use the relationship between the Assad regime and Russia in order to rid the Assad regime of chemical weapons.

Q Okay. And then just a question on the National Defense Authorization Act. You've laid out the forceful case that the White House has previously laid out why the President would veto that bill that passed the House. Forty-one Democrats voted for that bill, nearly a third of the Democratic caucus. The President has also made the case very

forcefully for the trade promotion authority bill and TPP. And you'd be hard-pressed to find more than a dozen Democrats in the House who are willing to agree with the President and vote in favor of that. So my question is simply, who right now is the leader of the Democratic Party? It doesn't seem like the President is really showing much persuasive power with Democrats on Capitol Hill right now.

MR. SCHULTZ: Jon, I'm not sure that's true. The President is the leader of the Democratic Party. If you look at the legislative priorities, the public policy priorities over the past six and a half years now, they enjoy broad support within the Democratic Party, even those who disagree with him on this specific issue of trade.

But the President has not allowed his party affiliation to preempt him from working across the aisle on issues that enjoy bipartisan support. He'll be the first to admit that trade is a difficult issue for Democrats; that because of past trade agreements not living up to the hype, that there's a residue of bad feelings. And he'll be the first to admit that. That's why he's insisted to make sure that we learn from the past, and that's also why he believes that not passing this trade deal would lock in the status quo. And that's why he believes that doing that would be a bad idea. So he's willing to work with Democrats on this. He's willing to work with Republicans on this.

Thank you. Jordan.

Q Senator McConnell yesterday made some very kind remarks toward the President. We've been seeing a lot of this over the past two weeks. What does the White House make of these overtures by Senator McConnell? And do you think that the relationship between the two has improved since the Republicans took control of the Senate in January?

MR. SCHULTZ: Jordan, I know the President has a good deal amount of respect for Senator McConnell. As you point out, they work together closely on trade promotion authority. The President feels good about the bipartisan coalition that was built to move forward on that.

I don't have any grand projections to make for you about the relationship. I would note there's a number of important pressing pieces of business in front of Congress right now that we hope they get to work on before the break next week. That includes, again, the USA Freedom Act; that also includes the transportation bill, which is also set to expire.

The President believes we shouldn't be kicking the can down the road; that these are investments that are important for our country, but they're not partisan. There's no Republican bridge or Democratic bridge. These are American investments worth making. So we hope that Congress gets to work.

Q Do you know the last time that Senator McConnell met with President Obama?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have a date of any specific meeting. But I know that the President and Leader McConnell had been in touch over the past couple of weeks, as have our staffs.

Laura.

Q Does the President -- about Syria -- still want President Assad to leave?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes. Can you ask that question again? Sorry.

Q Does President Obama still want President Assad to leave power?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes. We believe President Assad has lost the legitimacy to lead, and that he should leave.

Q When?

MR. SCHULTZ: As soon as possible.

Q And how? Because it's not happening at this moment.

MR. SCHULTZ: Laura, again, we believe that President Assad has lost the legitimacy to lead, that he must go; that Syria needs a change in leadership, given the barbaric and inhumane acts that President Assad has committed against his own people.

Q But what do you want to see in Syria, instead of Assad?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think there would need to be resolution at a negotiating table with a political framework. The President believes that all countries are stronger when there's a legitimate political framework that is an all-inclusive government.

Colleen.

Q Thanks, Eric. I just want to ask how the President plans to follow up with GCC nations over the next six weeks as Iran negotiations continue. Is he going to keep in regular touch? Did they sort out a game plan for updates?

MR. SCHULTZ: The President did indeed find the conversations yesterday and the night before valuable and productive. He had the opportunity to reiterate the United States' strong commitment and strong national security interest, and the security and stability of the Middle East generally, and the Gulf region specifically.

They did have an extensive and candid conversation on the P5+1 framework. Secretary Kerry and Secretary Moniz and Secretary Lew were there to brief our Gulf partners. We were encouraged by some of the statements that they released, expressing support for these negotiations. So, yes, you bet we're going to stay in touch with them.

Q Is there any particular plan for that?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think we will stay in touch with them at all levels, both at the State Department, here at the White House, and obviously using the specific equities, if they have questions. As the framework is negotiated down to the technical details, we'll be sure to make sure they stay briefed.

I'd also point out that yesterday the participants found this engagement to be so fulfilling and rewarding that they have announced that they're going to meet again next year under a similar set of circumstances.

Thank you. Bill.

Q The Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee say that the five guys who were swapped for Sergeant Bergdahl have been indulging in militant activity. They want the President to pressure Qatar not to give them passports, and release them when their term is up at the end of this month. Will he do that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Bill, I don't have an update for you on that. I will tell you that when this arrangement was negotiated with Qatar, we negotiated strong and stringent security protocols to make sure that these folks don't return to the battlefield. This was done only after a unanimous vote within the President's National Security Council.

But I don't have an update for you on any of those decisions.

Q Well, the travel ban expires at the end of this month; in other words, in a few weeks.

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure, Bill. I haven't seen the letter or report you're citing from House Republicans. I'm happy to look into it. But I don't have an update on any decisions pending before the administration.

Thanks. Julie.

Q Thanks. On the defense bill that passed this week, there was an amendment in there, a bipartisan amendment that called for the creation of an interagency hostage recovery coordinator. And obviously we've been hearing all sorts of concerns about the way that American families of captives held overseas are treated and coordinated with. So I'm wondering what the President's position is on that -- whether you think that's something that should happen, and whether that would be something that you'd want to see stay in the defense bill, in the version that you all support.

MR. SCHULTZ: Thank you, Julie. We have been engaged with a number of members of Congress on this, and we're going to continue to look at ways to synchronize and reinforce our respective initiatives and the shared interest of ensuring the improved coordination of hostage recovery efforts, as well as family engagement.

So I don't have a specific position for you on that piece, but I do think that it's important to note that as part of the ongoing review we are absolutely looking at better ways to be communicating with these families. One option that I've heard discussed here is the creation of an interagency fusion cell, which would ensure a whole-of-government response to overseas hostage events. This will include a permanent group of subject matter experts from the key departments and agencies. That includes the FBI, the Department of Defense and State, and the intelligence community in order to sort of streamline communications with these families.

Q And do you envision that having one coordinator atop that group? Is that something's that's --

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure. I do also want to be clear that this process -- this policy review is still ongoing, so I don't want to get ahead of where we are on that process. But I do think that streamlining those communications are an important piece of the work they're doing right now.

Q And just to follow up on the President's comments earlier today at the Peace Officers Memorial, he talked about needing to support and provide the resources for law enforcement officers. Is he thinking up any new investments that need to be made beyond what is in the budget to step up the level of investment in some of the communities he's talked about needing a lot more help and a lot more resources to combat poverty and to repair the relationships between departments and the citizens they're looking at?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure. Julie, I think if you do look at the President's budget, you'll see a very good guide on the investments that the President wants to make -- not only in law enforcement, but also in a lot of the underlying issues that, as you point out, the President has been talking about recently.

That includes the conversation he had earlier this week here in Washington on poverty. That includes investing in some of our more challenging neighborhoods and communities. That includes protecting and defending civil rights of all Americans. That includes making sure young people have the chance to go to college. As you know, the President has proposed two years free of community college. The President believes the surest path out of poverty is a job. And the best way for that is an education. And that's why the President has committed to these proposals.

But I don't have anything -- I don't have new programs to announce today.

Q Specifically on police resources. He seemed to be talking about, and the gentleman who introduced him talked about how they need more resources, they need more money to do what they do and to be supported in that. So what is the President going to do about that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think there are a number of proposals in the President's budget that speak to this. I also think you will -- this is directly related to the Monday event, where the President is going to go firsthand to Camden, see for himself the strong work that has been done there. This was a community that was dealing with a very severe gap between law enforcement and the community. But they have a remarkable story -- remarkable turnaround -- to bridge that gap and strengthen that relationship. That did involve some investments -- I know in technology, for example. So we are going to have an opportunity to discuss this on Monday.

Thank you. Toluse.

Q Thanks, Eric. Yesterday the President said about the two-state solution that it seems distant now. He also made some comments about the governing coalition that Prime Minister Netanyahu has put together. Is the President disappointed in the governing coalition that's been put together? Has he expressed those same comments that he made publicly privately to the Prime Minister?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have any private conversations between the President and Prime Minister Netanyahu to read out to you. I know the government was only formed about 24 hours ago. I think, broadly speaking, the President does look forward to working with the Prime Minister and his new government. The President did emphasize yesterday that the United States places great importance on our close military, intelligence, and security cooperation with Israel, which reflects the deep and abiding partnership between both countries and reflects an understanding that Israel's stability and security is also, he believes, in the national security of the American people.

So we continue to look forward to continuing consultations on a range of regional issues, including international negotiations to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and, yes, the importance of pursuing a two-state solution.

Q Despite him saying that it seems distant now, (inaudible) the end of his presidency, is that sort of a concession that this is not going to happen before he leaves office? Is he sort of basically conceding that the two-state solution is not going to be part of his legacy?

MR. SCHULTZ: No, I think it's a concession that some of the members of the new government are not necessarily in favor of a two-state solution. That's what the President was speaking about.

Q Just a follow-up quickly about Chicago. Moody's downgraded Chicago to junk status earlier this week. The city is going through some pretty tough financial -- a pretty tough financial situation. It's the President's hometown. He's going to have his presidential library there. And it's the biggest city to be downgraded to junk. Has the President been briefed on this? Does he have any thoughts on the development?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sure. I don't have any specific conversations with the President to read out to you. As you know, he is generally made aware of these sorts of situations. I do know that the Treasury's Office of State and Local Finance is and has been monitoring for some time the municipal finance situation in Chicago, as well as briefing senior administration officials about these downgrades. So I'd refer you both to Treasury and maybe the city of Chicago, which I understand has a pretty savvy press office.

Jared.

Q Thanks, Eric. Just on transportation really quick. Does the President have any reaction -- just yesterday he was saying that it's time to -- he was reiterating his call to end these short-term measures. The House -- looks like Ryan and Shuster putting down a bill that will fund it through another two and a half months. What's the reaction to that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Jared, as, again, my boss has pointed out several times now, Republicans ran very hard to get control of both the House and the Senate. There was a lot of money spent, a lot of resources spent for them to have majorities in both of those chambers. I believe the leaders of both of those chambers penned an op-ed in Colleen's Wall Street Journal that talked about getting Congress moving again.

Now we're a few months into their tenure, and not only have they stipulated they can't pass the full six-year transportation bill, but it looks like they might not even get the short-term one done. We believe that would be a dereliction of responsibility; that they should not leave town before doing that. That if they were to leave town on their recess, I can't imagine being a member of Congress, going back to their district and explaining to some of these work sites and some of these workers why those projects are no longer on track.

Q I don't want to ask you about 2016, but I do want to ask you about comments the President has made in light of things that are being said on the campaign trail. The President called the situation in Iraq "a dumb war." We're hearing similar comments from 2016 candidates, that it was a bad idea. What they're saying -- some of them more generally speaking -- is that it's a bad idea, or it was a bad idea knowing what we know now. The President in the 2008 election was essentially saying -- and please -- this is what I'm asking, and please correct me if I'm wrong -- that it was a bad idea knowing what we knew then. Is that an accurate representation of what the President was saying in 2008?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes.

Q And one last one. We go -- sometimes the President as "Sports Fan in Chief." Will he be watching the Romney-Holyfield fight? (Laughter.)

MR. SCHULTZ: I just saw a teaser of that on the television, and I had no idea that was happening. So I was pretty dumbfounded by the imagery. (Laughter.) But I don't know if the President plans to watch.

Q Well, does he have any advice to Evander Holyfield -- (laughter) -- having beaten Romney? They both are -- they suffer -- Romney has a height advantage over both men.

MR. SCHULTZ: That is true. But again, I have not spoken to the President about this. I didn't even know it was happening.

Kevin.

Q That's too good to pass up. (Laughter.) Thank you, Eric, appreciate it. I just want to follow up on Ramadi very quickly. Marine Corps Brigadier General Tom Weidley characterized the latest gains there as propaganda. He says, "These things typically don't materialize into long-term gains." Does the White House agree with that assessment?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think that it's our understanding that ISIL is again attempting an offensive in the city of Ramadi. That is why the coalition is supporting the Iraqi security forces and the brave citizens of the Anbar Province to help protect the people of Anbar and support their efforts to force ISIL from Ramada and other cities.

We've talked about a couple of times now that the coalition forces continue to provide air support in ISIL-held and contested areas throughout Iraq. I would note today that the coalition launched numerous airstrikes in Ramadi. But I'm going to refer you to the Iraqi government on the latest status of their forces, and to the Defense Department for the latest on the U.S. support thereof.

Q Two quick ones. One on GCC and the summit. It seemed apparent that many of the partners were looking for a formalized security pact to come out of that conversation at a minimum because of all the threats that they face, in particular from Iran. Broadly speaking -- or as Josh likes to say, as a general matter, can you sort of explain why that didn't happen? And might that be a focus of the follow-on summit to come next year?

MR. SCHULTZ: Kevin, you're already looking forward to next year's.

Q Yes.

MR. SCHULTZ: This year's was so much fun. Look, I think that there was a lot of speculation leading up to the summit. But I think what you'll find hearing from our GCC partners was how relieved and how heartened and encouraged they were by both the discussions yesterday over the past few days and the commitments that the United States made to the security relationship between the United States and those countries.

Q Stated, but not written and formalized?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think there were some definite concrete commitments made. I think you saw the communiqué that was released yesterday, but I'm happy to review some of those. That includes expanding our military exercises and assistance to meet the full range of conventional and asymmetric threats. That means more training and cooperation between our special operation forces; sharing more information and stronger border security to prevent the flow of foreign fighters; and our increased enforcement to prevent terrorist financing.

We're also going to redouble our efforts to counter violent extremism, including online; and more broadly, expand our cooperation on maritime security, work to harden our partners' critical infrastructure. I would draw you to the specific piece of the joint statement where the leaders pledged to further deepen the United States and Gulf relations on these and other issues in order to build an even stronger, enduring, comprehensive strategic partnership aimed at enhancing regional stability and prosperity.

Q And lastly on trade. TPP, TPA, it seems to be moving in the right direction from the President's perspective. But I'd like to get into what is probably a real disappointment, and that is, how is it that his former Secretary of State didn't weigh in on TPA and, more

broadly, TPP? And how much does that bother him? After all, he went to bat for her when it was politically inconvenient vis-à-vis the email server scandal. Is it too much to ask that she would step up on his behalf on a tough issue? And she simply hasn't done it.

MR. SCHULTZ: Kevin, I will refer you to Secretary Clinton's able team. I think they also have a pretty savvy press department.

Q Debatable. (Laughter.)

MR. SCHULTZ: Not in my mind. And I would tell you that our focus has been on the United States Senate and the United States House of Representatives. That's where these votes are. That's the people we are trying to persuade in order to support the President's agenda.

Q But couldn't she throw him a bone and at least say, hey, he's got the right idea? (Laughter.) I mean, really. Is that too much to ask? He's done a lot for her. Does he pick up the phone and say, come on, get out there, help me out?

MR. SCHULTZ: Kevin, I don't have private conversations to read out to you between the President and the former Secretary of State. He has profound respect for her. And again, our focus has been on getting these through Congress.

Thank you. Mike.

Q Thanks. A question on Syria, if I could. Why was it important for the President to make a distinction that the use of chlorine was not historically viewed as a chemical weapon? Probably a distinction without a difference to the victims of a chlorine gas attack. And is there a concern at the White House that the Assad regime is using that distinction as a loophole to further victimize the opponents of Bashar al-Assad?

MR. SCHULTZ: Mike, I think what the President was talking about was that chlorine by itself as a substance has a whole range of uses. What is prohibited is the use of it as a weapon. So that's what the President was trying to get at in terms of the classification.

Chris.

Q Eric, in the country of Gambia, there is continued hostility by the government against LGBT people and other groups. The president, at a political rally earlier this month, threatened to slit the throats of men who wanted to marry other men in his country. And the Human Rights Campaign and the Robert Kennedy Center are now calling on the White House to speak out. Will you condemn the president's actions and antigay rhetoric?

MR. SCHULTZ: I haven't seen those comments, so I don't want to directly respond from here without having read them. But I will say the President has a strong record of speaking out for human rights and equal rights in countries around the world.

Victoria.

Q Does the White House agree with the former inspector general at the National Security Agency who is saying today to NSA employees that it was a strategic blunder to keep secret the NSA's data collection of all Americans' phone records and that this has greatly harmed national security? Do you agree with him?

MR. SCHULTZ: Victoria, I'm going to be honest with you. I have not seen the inspector general's comments or if he issued a report today. I think we --

Q He spoke.

MR. SCHULTZ: Okay. I just wasn't able to --

Q Do you agree with that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think the President has been very clear that the bulk collection that has been going on at the federal level needed to be reformed. That's why the President put forth a number of -- he first set up a team to take a steep study into a lot of these issues, then announced a bunch of reforms, one of which is the USA FREEDOM Act, to make sure that the intelligence needs of federal law enforcement are still met while better balancing privacy concerns. And that's why the United States Congress should go ahead and pass that bill.

Q So his point is that keeping it secret was not in the strategic interest of the United States, that it didn't serve any operational interests. So what I'm wondering is, if that's the case, are there perhaps other programs that are being kept secret, that are simply not in the interest of the United States to be kept secret, that you could, in fact, tell the United States public about, that it wouldn't hurt us to know? Otherwise, we're just going to find out from Edward Snowden at some point.

MR. SCHULTZ: None that I'm ready to talk about right here.

Q We'll just wait?

MR. SCHULTZ: Goyal, we'll give you the last one.

Q Thank you. Two questions. One, as far as the earthquake is concerned in Nepal, many Nepalese are asking and they have a White House petition for the President's help, they're seeking -- because many Nepalese have no papers to go back and come back to the U.S. They are seeking one time some kind of resolution from the President so they can go and visit their loved ones and help them. And if the President is thinking that this is the time for the Nepalese to get a one-time visa or waiver or something for them. And also, this was the first time that -- never, ever a U.S. President visited Nepal, and President Obama could be the first one to visit.

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, we have a year and a half left. I don't have any scheduling announcements for you. I also don't have a response to that request, which I was not aware of previously.

I will say, and I think the President noted this earlier in his remarks, that the Department of Defense has now confirmed that the wreckage of the U.S. Marine helicopter missing in Nepal has been found and that its crew of six U.S. Marines and two Nepalese servicemembers is presumed dead.

Our hearts and prayers go out to families and loved ones of all those lost. I would refer you to the Department of Defense for additional details. But I do think it's important to note that we thank our Indian and Nepalese partners who assisted in the search for the helicopter. We mourn this loss, but we are resolved to continue our humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts in Nepal, which has suffered so much through two recent earthquakes.

Q And second, as far as the U.S.-India trade, when we're talking about trade is concerned -- recently, U.S. Ambassador to India, Mr. Verma, was here in Washington and he was speaking at the Carnegie Institute, and laid down the U.S.-India relations on trade and economic and many issues. Now, Prime Minister Modi, since he was here in the White House, now he's going around town, around the globe, including now in China. So where do we stand as far as U.S.-India trade is concerned? Because he has been with him now throughout China and Germany, and now he will be going to South Korea and also for the summit.

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have an update on that for you. Clearly, this is an issue we're focused on. We're specifically focused on the TPP arrangement right now, and especially getting trade promotion authority through country.

I do have a week ahead, if anyone is interested. It's robust. (Laughter.)

On Monday, the President will travel to Camden, New Jersey to visit with local law enforcement and meet with young people in the Camden community. The President will hear directly about the efforts of the Camden County police department to build trust between their department and the community they serve. Camden was recently designated as a Promise Zone, which, as some of you know, leverages federal grants to increase economic opportunity, reduce crime, and improve public health.

The President is going to take this opportunity to discuss how these kinds of partnerships and community investments are a crucial part of creating ladders of opportunity for all Americans. We will have further details about this trip in the coming days.

On Tuesday, the President will be here at the White House attending meetings.

On Wednesday, the President will travel to New London, Connecticut to deliver the commencement address at the United States Coast Guard Academy. While in Connecticut, the President will also attend a DNC event. Further details about that trip will also be available in the coming days.

On Thursday, the President will hold a bilateral meeting with President Essebsi of Tunisia at the White House. This visit will underscore the United States' longstanding friendship with Tunisia, our commitment to strengthening and expanding our strategic partnership

with Tunisia's new government, and our support for the Tunisian people following their historic 2014 democratic elections.

In the afternoon on Thursday, the President will hold a Cabinet meeting here at the White House.

And on Friday, the President will travel to Congregation Adas Israel, one of the largest congregations here in Washington, to deliver remarks in celebration of Jewish American Heritage Month, which recognizes the contributions of Jewish Americans to American society and culture.

In the afternoon on Friday, the President and First Lady will host the Diplomatic Corps reception for the Foreign Diplomatic Corps here at the White House.

With that, I hope you all have a wonderful weekend. Thank you.

Q Thanks, Eric.

END

2:28 P.M. EDT