

# Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Josh Earnest en route Greensboro, NC, 10/11/2016

 [obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/11/press-gaggle-press-secretary-josh-earnest-en-route-greensboro-nc](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/11/press-gaggle-press-secretary-josh-earnest-en-route-greensboro-nc)

October 11, 2016

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 11, 2016

Aboard Air Force One

En Route Greensboro, North Carolina

1:12 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Hello everybody. I didn't realize we were having such a good time back here. I guess the fun is over, though, because I'm here.

Let me do two announcements at the top and then we'll get to your questions. I think I have a sense of what a couple of them might be.

Let me start by noting that today is International Day of the Girl. And as you know, the President and First Lady launched Let Girls Learn last March to help the millions of adolescent girls around the world who are not in school get the education that they deserve. To continue these efforts, the President's FY2017 budget requested more than \$100 million in new funds for Let Girls Learn. And since the launch, together with the U.S. Department of State, USAID, the Peace Corps, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and most recently, the Department of Labor and the Department of Agriculture, Let Girls Learn has committed more than a billion dollars in girls' education programming in more than 50 countries, and announced more than 110 private sector commitments to adolescent girls' education.

Later today, the First Lady will participate in two capstone Let Girls Learn events. She will be at the Newseum for a livestreamed global conversation hosted by Glamour Magazine and its Girl Project, with girls in Peru, Tanzania, Jordan, the UK, and of course, in D.C. As a part of the program, they'll be discussing what they have faced and overcome in achieving an education.

Mrs. Obama, as well as Ambassador Rice, will host a White House screening for the new CNN Films documentary, "We Will Rise," which was filmed on the First Lady's trip to Liberia and Morocco earlier this summer. The film features Meryl Streep, who will be at the White House event, and Freida Pinto. The film will be released on CNN, around the

world, premiering in the United States tomorrow at 9:00 p.m. Forty-four of the girls who the First Lady met on that trip over the summer will be at both events over the course of the day today. So the First Lady obviously has got some important events today.

There's one other thing about the President's activities on the trip that I wanted to give you a heads-up on. Prior to the beginning of the town hall, the President will have an opportunity to do a short clutch with several of My Brother's Keeper initiative participants from across the country who are also participating in the town hall. So he'll get a chance to visit with them a little bit and talk to them about their experience in the My Brother's Keeper initiative in the community. And then they'll later participate in the town hall that the President is participating in.

This is an event that was organized by ESPN and their Undeclared platform. It'll be hosted by Stan Verrett, as you know, who is an ESPN anchor, and it will be premiering tonight at 10:00 p.m. on ESPN, across the country.

Q Pool access to the clutch beforehand?

MR. EARNEST: There's not pool access to the clutch, which is why I wanted to give you a head-up on it. And I think there is a chance, although we don't know this -- there is a chance that some of the participants may be called on to ask questions at the town hall, in which case they would reference an interaction with the President. So I didn't want you guys to be all surprised about that.

Q Why is he holding a clutch and not a meeting?

MR. EARNEST: Right, it's basically is not like a -- it's not a formal opportunity for them to sit down and meet with the President, but they'll have a brief opportunity to talk a little bit about their experience.

I think that's all I have, so we can go to your questions now.

Q Now that the U.S. has come out and said that Russia was behind the recent hacking attempts, can you talk a little about what the next steps are in terms of the U.S. taking action against Russia for the hacking?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the intelligence community did announce in a statement on Friday afternoon that they have concluded that the Russian government directed the email compromises of persons and institutions in the United States, including political organizations. And the disclosure of those emails at sites like WikiLeaks, and DCLeaks, and Guccifer 2.0 is consistent with methods and motivations of Russian efforts.

The intelligence community has assessed that the theft of this information and its disclosure is in an attempt to interfere with the U.S. political system. These tactics are not new for Russia. We've seen them use -- deploy these tactics to try to destabilize democracies in other parts of the world. I think, in every case, those democracies are not as durable and resilient as the U.S. system of government and our political systems.

With regard to a response, we obviously will ensure that a U.S. response is proportional. It is unlikely that our response would be announced in advance. It's certainly possible that the President could choose response options that we never announce. The President has talked before about the significant capabilities that the U.S. government has to both defend our systems in the United States, but also carry out offensive operations in other countries. So there are a range of responses that are available to the President, and he will consider a response that's proportional.

Q Would that include sanctions or some sort of retaliatory activity against Russia?

MR. EARNEST: I wouldn't be specific in terms of foreshadowing potential responses, but there are a range of options on the table, including the two that you have mentioned.

Q On Russia, Vladimir Putin just cancelled a trip planned to France later this month. French President François Hollande answered by saying he was always ready to talk with Mr. Putin in order to advance peace. I was wondering whether the President sees it as -- is there value for him to interact directly with President Putin at this stage regarding Syria, be it over the phone or meeting him? Is there a value there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by saying that when we talked about this situation a little bit last week in the briefing room, you heard me highlight a variety of examples that indicate how Russia is increasingly isolated from the rest of the international community because of the way they have handled the situation inside of Syria. And the most apt comparison is, when you look at President Putin's participation at the 2015 U.N. General Assembly, he came and gave a much ballyhooed speech, he had a bilateral meeting with President Obama, and he discussed the constructive role that Russia was prepared to play in resolving the situation inside of Syria, particularly with regard to confronting extremist elements inside of Syria.

A year later, in 2016, we haven't seen dramatic changes in terms of the situation on the ground. We know that Russia's efforts have been primarily focused on shoring up the Assad regime. And they have not had a lot of success, thus far at least, in rolling back territory that had previously been held by opposition groups.

We have, over the course of the last year, made significant gains against extremist elements inside of Syria, but that's because of the work of the United States and our coalition partners, not because of the work that has been done by the Russians. Russia's efforts, to the extent that they are focused on extremists, have not been coordinated with the broader coalition. And, like I said, most of their efforts have been focused on shoring up the Assad regime a year later that has put Russia in a position in which they are isolated from the rest of the international community. President Putin didn't even come to attend the U.N. General Assembly, let alone attempt to speak.

And I cite all of this because I think we've got another good example. President Putin was planning to come to France to dedicate a new church. But he cancelled those plans after learning that President Hollande was eager to engage in a conversation about what could

be done to address the violence inside of Syria. That comes on the heels, of course, of a French-sponsored resolution at the U.N. Security Council being blocked by a Russian veto.

So Russia stands alone -- or at least they stand alone with countries like Iran, the Assad regime, and Venezuela -- in trying to justify their actions inside of Syria. The rest of the international community is gravely concerned about the tactics that they have used, including the targeting of civilians, the targeting of hospitals, and their support for an Assad regime that uses chlorine as a weapon, and other tactics like barrel bombs that are having a devastating impact on civilian populations inside of Syria. All of that has hurt President Putin's personal standing in the international community. It's also isolated Russia in a way that has not been beneficial to their economy or to a wide array of their national security interests. And again, I think the cancelling of his trip to France is further evidence of that.

Had President Putin decided to follow through on his trip to France, and had President Hollande raised, both in public and in private, the international community's concerns with Russia's actions inside of Syria, we would have had no objection to that. But President Putin avoided that scenario by canceling his trip altogether. And it's an indication of the weakened position from which he's operating in.

Q Just from President Obama's perspective, does he believe this is not the right time for him to engage directly with Vladimir Putin on Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Again, we would have no objection to a French conversation like that. As you know, Secretary Kerry continues to engage with his Russian counterpart bilaterally. There are also a range of conversations that are taking place in a variety of multilateral settings that involve the Russians, including at the U.N. Security Council and the International Syria Support Group that had a meeting in Europe last week. That's another multilateral effort that includes the United States, Russia, and other regional actors that have a direct interest in the situation in Syria.

So our multilateral engagement continues. What has changed with regard to our conversations with Russia is that we're no longer engaged in efforts to try to resuscitate a cessation of hostilities in exchange for U.S. military cooperation, because it was quite clear that Russia was either unable or unwilling to live up to their end of the bargain, to exercise influence with the Assad regime and reduce violence inside of Syria.

Q Can you address these reports today from WikiLeaks that suggest that Obama administration officials were tipping off or somehow coordinating with the Clinton campaign on this emails investigation? Is that a fair criticism? Are you confident and is the President confident that the administration and the White House is as removed from that as you should have been?

MR. EARNEST: Let me say that I'm not going to comment directly on the stolen emails of a private citizen. That was true when I was asked about the stolen emails from General Powell. And that's going to be true with regard to questions about stolen emails from

John Podesta.

What I can say in general is that both the Attorney General and the FBI Director have made clear that the investigation of Secretary Clinton's use of a private email server was conducted without regard to partisan politics. Again, you can go and check the testimony and public statements of both Attorney General Lynch and FBI Director Comey. They indicated that there was no influence from political actors on the investigation. This is an investigation that was led by career prosecutors who followed the facts and exercised their own professional judgement in arriving at a conclusion. And that was done without regard to -- without any political interference.

And I also know that at least Director Comey indicated that there was not even an attempt by the White House to influence that investigation. So I'd rely on the public statements from the individuals who were responsible to affirm the independence of that investigation.

Q But even if there wasn't any interference or any evidence of interference, would it be appropriate for someone in the administration to be communicating with a presidential campaign about the content of that investigation, whether it be status or anything else?

MR. EARNEST: With regard to any communications by the Clinton campaign to the Department of Justice, I'll refer you to the Clinton campaign. And if there was a need for an official at the Department of Justice to communicate with the Clinton campaign, then I'd refer you to the Department of Justice about what information was appropriate to communicate, if any.

Obviously, it was Secretary Clinton who was under investigation by the Justice Department, so presumably there was some communication there to, for example, schedule her interview, which she agreed to. But for the scope of those interactions and for the propriety of them, I'd refer you to the Department of Justice.

But I'd be remiss if I didn't remind you that the two individuals who were responsible for conducting that investigation both said publicly and under oath that their investigation was conducted free of political interference. And that is consistent with the President's expectations about how this should be handled.

Q Can you just talk a little bit about what the President hopes to accomplish in his event for Secretary Clinton this evening in Greensboro? And who is talking to? Is this primarily targeted toward African American voters like that radio ad that was released yesterday?

MR. EARNEST: Look, the President is enthusiastic about that campaign event that he has later today. The President is looking forward to addressing a crowd in Greensboro and making a strong, affirmative case for Secretary Clinton -- her values, her experience, and the agenda that she has for the country.

The President obviously campaigned vigorously in North Carolina, both in 2008 and in 2012. He was the first Democrat to win the state of North Carolina at the presidential level in at least a generation when he did so in 2008. As I recall, it was the most closely

contested state in 2012. So this is a battleground state. The President is obviously gratified that there is public evidence to indicate that Secretary Clinton has a lead in this state. But she certainly is not taking that lead for granted, and the President has indicated he's prepared to do everything he can to support her. And he's going to make a strong case to the crowd in Greensboro.

I would expect the crowd in Greensboro to be reflective of the broader community in Greensboro, which is, I anticipate it will be pretty diverse. And one of the reasons that Secretary Clinton is -- well, let me say it this way: One of the reasons that President Obama did well in 2008 and 2012 in this state is that it's difficult to win in North Carolina without assembling a genuinely diverse coalition of support across party lines, across racial lines, across gender lines. And that was critical to President Obama's success in 2008. And I think most independent observers would say that will be critical to Secretary Clinton's success here in 2016.

Q We haven't heard from you guys since the Trump tape came out on Friday. I guess two separate areas to go down. One is the President's reaction to the tape itself, whether he thinks Donald Trump was describing sexual assault. And then the other is sort of reaction among Republicans -- whether the White House believes that Republicans at this point have a duty to sort of disavow from him. What your reaction to the sort of friction between Speaker Ryan and the Donald Trump campaign is, and what you're kind of assessment of that is right now.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me start by saying that the President found the tape as repugnant as most Americans did. And I think there's been a pretty clear statement by people all along the ideological spectrum that those statements constituted sexual assault. I know you heard from the Vice President about that over the weekend, and that's an observation that we've heard from a wide variety of sources. That's why many people I believe have concluded that those statements are worthy of sharp condemnation.

With regard to the state of the Republican Party, I think you've heard my riff on this before. But for more than seven years, Republicans in Washington have prioritized opposition to President Obama above all else, above even advancing a conservative agenda that they claim to support. That's why it's not particularly surprising that the base of the Republican Party now has nominated somebody whose notoriety is derived primarily from his colorful opposition to President Obama and is promoting a variety of positions that aren't particularly conservative.

So I guess -- I think what my mom would say in this situation is, you reap what you sow. And for seven and a half years, Republicans in Washington have been sowing anti-Obama rhetoric to the exclusion of facts, to the exclusion of any sort of governing agenda, and even to the exclusion of conservative doctrine. And I think that's why Republican leaders in Washington find themselves in the situation that they're in right now. And it's not something from which they will quickly recover.

Q The President has talked at times about you trust Americans not to elect Donald Trump as President. He's also said something along the lines of, Democrats need to run scared and make sure they don't take it for granted. But does the White House, given the last two weeks or so, feel more confident right now about the state of the election and where this is headed, given some of the poll numbers as well?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President, for more than a year, has shown confidence, but he's also resisted complacency. And that would explain why the President is doing a campaign event in Greensboro tonight. The President is energized by this campaign and by the opportunity to advocate for Secretary Clinton's election. And you'll hear him deliver a very forceful case in support of her vision, and values, and experience that she would bring to the job. And I think the President, in terms of visibly making this argument, is only going to ramp up his activity in the four weeks that remain until Election Day.

Q A federal appeals court has ruled that the structure of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is unconstitutional, but he said that this could be remedied if the President is put in charge of the authority to fire somebody at will that's the head of the agency. What is the White House's reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we're still looking at the decision. It was only handed down a little bit before we boarded the plane here. Based on the initial reading of the ruling, it doesn't actually undermine the current activities of the CFPB. In fact, I understand that that actually was an option that was available to the judges who ruled in the case, but that was not an option that they chose to pursue. With regard to the next steps in the legal process, I refer you to the Department of Justice who will take a look at the ruling and evaluate the next steps in the legal process.

So obviously we're disappointed by the decision, but we continue to have confidence, as expressed by the judges, in the ability of the CFPB to do the important work of protecting consumers in Washington, D.C.

Q Josh, can I ask about -- President Erdogan today, heated remarks for Prime Minister Abadi of Iraq. He said Turkey would be involved in the Mosul offensive whether Iraq liked it or not. What's the U.S. reaction to that? Do you expect the Turks to be involved in that? And what kind of concerns, if any, do you have about both Iraqi sovereignty and the relationship with the Kurds who have been essential to our fight in Iraq?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I did not see President Erdogan's latest remarks. What I can tell you as a principle, though, is that the United States has made clear that the presence of the counter-ISIL coalition inside of Iraq is at the invitation of the Iraq central government, and all of the operations that are carried out against ISIL are under the command and control of the Iraqi central government, and that the contributions that are made, including by the United States and the rest of our coalition partners, are consistent with the orders and strategic decisions made by the Iraqi central government. This is a

sovereign country. They are a sovereign territory. The counter-ISIL coalition is operating there at their invitation, and we're going to continue to coordinate with those forces that operate under the command and control of the Iraqi central government.

Okay, all right. See you all in a little bit.

END

2:32 P.M. EDT