

Press Briefing by the Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 9/17/2015

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/17/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-9172015

September 17, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 17, 2015

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:55 P.M. EDT

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. Let me do a quick topper before I go to your questions.

With two weeks left to pass a spending bill and avoid a second government shutdown in two years, Republicans in Congress have shown no interest in taking Democrats up on their offer to join them at the table to negotiate a budget that keeps the government open and prevents irrational cuts to our economy and our national security.

But instead of working with Democrats to find common ground on a budget that invests in the priorities of middle-class Americans, House Republicans are promoting a plan to eliminate access to health care for families across the country and shut down the government. This is a strategy, I would note, that was supported by a preponderance of the Republican presidential candidates at the Reagan Library last night.

Unfortunately, however, the story gets even worse. Today, House Republicans are proposing to make permanent tax cuts for the wealthy and well-connected without offering any relief to working families. Today, House Republicans are considering a measure that would offer permanent tax cuts for corporations and businesses to the tune of \$400 billion.

Now, to put that in perspective, it's a lot of money. In fact, it's so much money that the tax cuts that Republicans are advancing cost five times what it would cost to replace the sequester for the coming year and would prevent automatic budget cuts that would harm our economy and military readiness.

Alternatively, while Congress has failed to adequately invest in infrastructure, the tax cuts that Republicans are advancing today are four times larger -- four times larger -- than the six-year shortfall of the Highway Trust Fund. So this is money that could be used to make a substantial investment in our infrastructure.

One way to quantify this for you, the tax cuts that Republicans are advancing cost twice as much as making permanent vital tax credits for about 25 million working families and students. And this is something that Republicans have failed to act to prevent from expiring.

So the bottom line here is that instead of giving away hundreds of billions of dollars of corporate tax cuts, Republicans should actually do the most basic job, first and foremost, and that's fund the government at levels that are consistent with our economic and national security priorities. They should do that on time. And then if they want to have a conversation about taxes, we need to make sure that middle-class families aren't left out the way they are right now in this current Republican discussion.

So, with that, Darlene, let's go to questions.

Q Thanks. What is the objective of the President's meeting with Reid and Pelosi this afternoon?

MR. EARNEST: Darlene, this is an opportunity for the President to sit down with the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives and the Democratic leader in the United States Senate to talk about a range of priorities for the fall. It won't surprise you to hear that at the top of their agenda is a discussion about what I was just highlighting, which is the need for Congress in the next two weeks to pass legislation that would prevent the government from shutting down, but also making sure that adequate investments in our economy and national security are made.

There is a shared priority among Democrats about the urgency of this issue. We have said for some time that a solution will be yielded from a process that starts with Republicans in Congress sitting down to negotiate with Democrats in Congress. We've been quite candid and I don't think anybody has been surprised that the administration would be supportive of those kinds of conversations, but at the same time, we're going to be sitting on the same side of the table as Democrats in Congress because they share our values when it comes to making sure that our top priority is the safety and security of the American people and doing everything we can to expand economic opportunity for the middle class.

Those are our priorities. They should be reflected in the budget. And we certainly are supportive of the invitation that Democrats in the House and Senate have extended to Republicans in the House and Senate to sit down and talk this through. So this will be an opportunity for the President to discuss that effort with Leader Reid and Leader Pelosi this afternoon.

Q Should he sit down also with Speaker Boehner and Leader McConnell at some point? Do you anticipate that he'll do that? And why is he having a meeting with Reid and Pelosi today, not the Republicans?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think to answer the question very directly is Republicans in Congress should be negotiating with Democrats in Congress. That has been the principle that we have supported for quite some time, principally because it is the path to success.

In 2013, the last time that we faced a budget showdown like this, Republicans did engineer a successful shutdown of the federal government for two and a half weeks.

When that shutdown was resolved, the long-term budget agreement was generated through conversations between leading Democrats and leading Republicans in the Congress, and that resulted in the bipartisan bill that for most of the last two years has allowed us to enjoy an end to the budgetary brinksmanship Republicans seem to salivate over.

So we'd like to see another agreement like that. That previous agreement was reached based on negotiations between Democrats and Republicans in Congress, and we believe that's how it should be resolved this time.

That said, I wouldn't rule out future conversations between the President and some Republicans in Congress, including the Republican leaders. But at this point, the next conversation that needs to occur is between Democrats and Republicans in the Congress.

Democrats are ready for that conversation, but Republicans have rebuffed those overtures for months.

Q Switching topics, the House Energy Committee passed a bill today to end the ban on oil exports and you said the White House doesn't support that legislation. Now that it's starting to move through the process, can you say whether that's something the President would veto if it ends up getting to his desk? Because there is a lot of support for it in both houses of Congress.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a specific veto threat to offer at this point. But our position on this bill is crystal- clear.

Q Thanks.

MR. EARNEST: Julia.

Q Thanks, Josh. The Syrian air force has launched an air campaign against the Islamic State-held city of Raqqa. And is there any kind of coordination between the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State and the Assad government when they have a shared goal here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Julia, we have made clear from the beginning of our actions inside of Syria that it was the responsibility of the Syrian government to not interfere in our activities. The fact is the United States and our coalition partners hold the Assad regime responsible for the dramatic growth that we've seen in ISIL over the last year and a half or so. It's because of Bashar al-Assad's failed leadership inside of Syria that that nation has ruptured and created an opportunity for extremists of a variety of flavors to establish a foothold in Syria.

No one has been able to as successfully exploit that opening as the extremists in ISIL. So we believe the thing that would do the most to advance our strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL is for Assad to leave power so that we can see the kind of political

leadership inside of Syria that would restore at least some semblance of stability to that country, that would make it much more difficult for ISIL to operate and would enhance our efforts to degrade and ultimately destroy them.

Q Right. But is there any kind of communication even through a third country? When you have two different parties carrying out an air campaign on the same force in the same city -- is there any kind of communication perhaps through another party?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any specific conversations to tell you about, other than the kinds of conversations that date back to the very beginning of our military airstrikes, this military air campaign that began in Syria a little over a year ago now. At that point, the United States and our coalition partners made clear to the Syrians that they shouldn't interfere in those efforts, and they haven't.

Q I know that you and the President have declined to weigh in on last night's debate, but I did notice that the White House put out three statements right at the beginning of the second prime-time debate. Two were veto threats on Planned Parenthood and a new process for approving projects -- in other words, an opposition to Lawsuit Abuse Reduction Act. Was that at all timed to have the White House view out there at the same time as the debates? Specifically the one about Planned Parenthood.

MR. EARNEST: It was not. I think those news releases were part of the daily rhythm of news coverage here at the White House, something that you're quite familiar with after being here for a while now.

Jim.

Q Josh, you said that the President was not going to watch the debate last night. Does he have any general impressions of what he saw last night in clips, in the coverage, and what he read online?

MR. EARNEST: Presumably. I haven't talked to him about it, to be candid with you. But I did have an opportunity to watch the debate, and I have to admit that sort of watching the debate reminded me a little bit of a tough day at the airport. (Laughter.)

Q Can you tell us how?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you saw a dozen people in suits who were lined up in kiosks in front of a plane. They seemed angry, they seemed pessimistic, and they're looking for somebody to threaten. But they also stood there for three hours, so you could hardly blame them.

But what we didn't see is we didn't see a lot of the sunny optimism that was typical of the President whose library they stood in. And we also didn't see a whole lot of commitment to the policies that were advanced by that President either. Instead, we saw what I might describe as an odd nostalgia for the George W. Bush era. This is an era that was characterized by a rush to war and economic policies that nearly led us into a financial abyss, only rivaling the scale of the Great Depression.

Now, the fact is, is that when then Senator Obama ran in 2007 and 2008, you had a situation where Osama bin Laden was still threatening Americans; that you had an economy that was plunging toward a second Great Depression; and despite all those reasons to be concerned, this was a candidate that plastered “Hope” on his yard signs. And he ended up winning that election and he won reelection, and he’s led our country back to have the safest, strongest economy in the world.

So I think that’s a testament to the idea that having an optimistic, forward-looking, positive vision for the country isn’t just a good political strategy, it turns out to be a good governing one, too. Apparently all the Republican candidates for President at this point have a different strategy in mind.

Q And speaking of one of those candidates, Carly Fiorina came away with a lot of positive reviews for her performance. But one thing that she said during the debate is that she would not talk to Vladimir Putin. The President has spoken to President Putin on numerous occasions. Does that sound like a good strategy to the White House?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don’t want to turn the White House briefing room into the post-debate spin room. But I will just say in general that the President has made the case repeatedly that the interests of the United States are more effectively advanced around the world through engagement. And we tried a policy of isolation against Cuba for more than five decades that didn’t yield very much. So the President is advocating a different strategy there and has implemented some policy changes according to that philosophy.

We’ve seen a similar effort to try to advance our interests in preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. We believe that that diplomatic agreement is the most effective way to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Many of our military leaders share that assessment. And that was a diplomatic agreement that was only possible by the United States and the President leading a strategy of engagement.

So it is clear that this is an area of disagreement between President Obama and many of the Republicans on the stage last night. And I will say that this is a worthy debate for us to have, and I’m confident that over the course of the next year or so, in advance of the general election, that there will be ample opportunity to sort of consider the merits of these arguments, and the American people should do that as they contemplate who the next President of the United States should be.

Q You may have spotted a segue, but has the President called Vladimir Putin yet?

MR. EARNEST: No, he has not.

Q He has not.

MR. EARNEST: Not recently, at least.

Q Is there any -- I mean, is that something that you would like to see happen? Is that something that might be forthcoming? Sometimes you like to say, “Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if...”

MR. EARNEST: I think at this point what I would say is President Putin has made it clear that he's very interested in trying to sit down with the President, but I don't have additional meetings to tell you about at this point.

Q And finally, on the situation in Syria with Russia and the overall difficulty that you talked about yesterday with respect to the President's strategy for dealing with ISIS in Syria, the four to five Syrian fighters that have been trained so far as part of that policy -- does the President still have confidence in General Austin?

MR. EARNEST: Of course, he does. And I think it's important to note -- and I made a reference to this yesterday -- General Austin, to his credit, sat before that congressional committee, took the oath, faced the cameras and delivered some hard news about the status of one aspect of our strategy. And that is not the kind of courageous stand that we've seen from those who have long advocated this kind of train-and-equip operation as essentially the silver bullet inside of Syria. The President has long been skeptical of relying solely on this strategy. That's why he isn't, and our country isn't relying solely on that specific train-and-equip operation to lead our efforts inside of Syria.

The fact of the matter is the United States has provided important material support to Syrian opposition fighters, particularly those Syrian Kurds and Syrian Arabs that are operating in northern and northeastern Syria. They've made tremendous progress in driving ISIL out of thousands of square kilometers in northern Syria.

There's a range of other support that the United States has provided -- nonlethal support - - things like MREs and medical supplies that are critical to the ability of many of these fighting forces to sustaining their efforts. That is on top of the ongoing military airstrike campaign that has advanced the efforts of many of those fighting forces on the ground. That is on top of the strategy that we've implemented to shut down financing for many of ISIL's operations. That's on top of the strategy that the administration has put forward to target senior leaders in ISIL. We've got a couple of high-profile members of ISIL that just in the last couple of months have been taken off the battlefield. That strategy is yielding some results. There is a coordinated --

Q The President can't be satisfied with \$500 million for four or five ISIS fighters.

MR. EARNEST: Of course not. I don't think anybody is. And that's exactly why General Austin indicated that --

Q Has he communicated that to General Austin? Have they had any conversations where he said that's not acceptable?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not going to get into any of the conversations between the President and the Commander of Central Command. But I will say that General Austin testified -- again, to his credit -- before the cameras, in front of an open committee, indicating that some changes to that program were needed and that he was going to make some recommendations for doing that.

But again, that is not what we have seen from our critics, who, for years, criticized the President for not pursuing this kind of approach and suggested that that is actually the only thing we need to do in order to solve all of our problems inside of Syria. So, still waiting to hear from those individuals about what they believe we should do now.

April.

Q I want to go back to your equating the GOP debate to a bad experience at an airport

MR. EARNEST: Yes. It looked like they had their flight cancelled, didn't they? (Laughter.) Standing there in line, waiting for their tickets, angry. (Laughter.)

Q Well, wouldn't the FAA oversee that, though?

MR. EARNEST: Some big multinational company was making them wait three hours before they could get their situation resolved.

Q So what did you think about the attacks on the Obama administration when it came to not keeping this country safe, when they were talking about security and foreign policy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, you know, a lot of those kinds of attacks and charges didn't really hold up to a lot of scrutiny. So I don't want to get into a situation, as I told Jim, and sort of get into a back-and-forth with those candidates. They'll have an opportunity to have that debate. So they certainly have claims that they're entitled to make, but many of those claims are not backed up by the actual facts.

Q Moving on to another subject, this is a big week in Washington for the Congressional Black Caucus members. Many of the administration personnel are going over there to speak for various events. And I understand that Vice President Joe Biden is going Saturday night to the Phoenix Awards, as well as Hillary Clinton. Is there something that we should be reading into this that Vice President Biden is going to the event and normally he does not go every year? He's normally home on the weekends in Delaware.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of the specific plans for the Vice President's schedule over the weekend. You can check with his office. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he is attending the dinner. I don't know if he attends regularly. I'm sure it's not the first time that he has attended, if that's what his plans are.

The President is certainly looking forward to the opportunity that he'll have to address the gathering on Saturday evening. This is an event that the President has spoken at frequently, particularly since he's been in office, and he regularly looks forward to this opportunity.

Q And he was once a member. And also, so as the President speaking about criminal justice Saturday, there was somewhat of a criminal justice type meeting, I understand, here yesterday with grassroots leaders from Ferguson and Baltimore -- meeting with Valerie Jarrett. Can you talk about that meeting, and why now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, April, this has been part of our ongoing efforts to meet with those activists who share the priority that this administration has placed on trying to improve trust between law enforcement officers and the communities they're sworn to serve and protect. In many cases, these were advocates for those individuals who have been victims of police violence, and many of these are individuals who are interested in trying to find a constructive solution.

I would also note that as is typical of our efforts, the administration has also made a concerted effort to reach out to law enforcement and engage them in these kinds of conversation. I would note that the Police Chief of Philadelphia actually was the chair of the -- or one of the co-chairs of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. And today, senior White House officials, including Ms. Jarrett, will be meeting with law enforcement officials to talk about this issue as well.

And I would describe this as part of our ongoing efforts to continue to consult with those who are interested in this issue as we try to leverage as much federal influence as we can to try to address this problem.

Q So should we expect out of these continuing meetings some type of paperwork or something to come out saying this is what we gathered and this is what we need to implement further? Should we expect something like that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there was a task force report that was issued earlier this year --

Q But beyond the task force report, is this something -- because they're also listening to what I understand -- they were going back telling Valerie Jarrett things that they're still hearing on the ground, so this is beyond the task force. Is there something that could result or stem from these meetings?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I certainly wouldn't rule out the idea that there could be some additional best practices or additional findings that could be shared here. But the President long envisioned the creation of this task force to work quickly to incorporate a variety of points of view and put forward some consensus recommendations about what can be done to try to improve the situation, or at least address the situation. And one of the most important things that they did was to put forward a good list of best practices that draw upon the experience of local law enforcement officials in communities all across the country. By sharing these best practices it can give law enforcement leaders in other communities some additional tools for addressing some of these challenges.

And if additional discussions yield more common ground and more consensus about what additional best practices would look like, we will not hesitate to share that.

Q Thank you.

MR. EARNEST: Julie.

Q Just following up on that, can you give us a little bit of an update on where things stand with the criminal justice reform legislation on the Hill and the push to get that going and to get a bipartisan deal on that, and whether any of the rhetoric from Republican presidential candidates linking crime to either President Obama's rhetoric or to the "Black Lives Matter" movement have in any way undermined the bipartisan sort of movement that was coalescing behind doing something on that in the short term? Is that still on track, or has that gotten derailed by some of the presidential campaign --

MR. EARNEST: That's a good question. Let me answer it in a couple ways. I mean, the first thing that I would point out is that there were some candidates on the stage last night, even in the context of Republican primary, who indicated their support for some criminal justice reform measures. And I think that probably is a pretty powerful way for us to evaluate the continuing support on the Republican side of the aisle for some criminal justice reform measures.

There has long been deep support on the Democratic side of the aisle for confronting some of these issues. And we welcome and even have been complimentary of some Republicans with whom we don't often agree about their support for some of these issues. I mean, I'll be blunt. I don't think that there's been a lot of legislative work that's been done on this over the last couple of months, primarily because Congress has been out of town for most of the last couple of months, and since they've gotten back they've been bogged down in some of these issues related to funding for Planned Parenthood. But I think that would be another reason that we're eager to see this budget situation resolved, because this is, I think, a rich opportunity for bipartisan agreement around a set of issues the President has long prioritized and were eager to get to work on.

Now, there have been some conversations, but the real legislative hard work and legislative negotiations that need to take place are still a little bit down the line.

Q Down the line, how far? Is it something that could get done this year? Or does the President now see this as -- given the divide that's happened on the Iran deal, given the divide now over the budget and all the other items that they have to fight over this fall, then it's not going to get done till October?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I wouldn't set a timeline on it, but I don't think there's any -- look, the President recognizes that he's got another 15 months or so in office. So there's a particular sense of urgency around many of these priorities, particularly this one. So we're hopeful that we'll have an opportunity sooner rather than later to try to start advancing this.

Devon.

Q Speaking of urgency and priorities, I wanted to ask you about Gitmo. The Pentagon today announced they have transferred another detainee, their first in three months. As you know, there's 115 left there; 56 of them have been cleared for release, but you just can't find a place to put them. And I remember when the President tapped Ash Carter,

one of the -- the buzz around him was that he was going to sort of expedite this and clear those 56. Why is it still taking so long for those 56 that have already been cleared to get out of there and be placed?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Devon, the numbers that you have match with what I have here. Right now there are 115 detainees who remain at Guantanamo. It's not insignificant that since President Obama took office we've transferred 123 detainees out of Gitmo. So that's an indication that we have made a lot of important progress; more than half of the detainees who were at Gitmo when the President took office have been transferred. So that's an indication of the President's commitment to this.

I think there are a variety of things that make this quite challenging. The first is we've seen a number of obstacles erected by Congress intentionally to make this more difficult. And Republicans and Democrats -- and some Democrats on Capitol Hill have been pretty candid about that. So one of the things that makes this difficult challenge much harder is the kind of congressional interference that we've seen.

The second thing is that the President himself has set a high standard for ensuring that our national security interests are served by these transfers. The Secretary of Defense is responsible for certifying that appropriate measures have been taken to mitigate the risk to national security when any of these individuals is transferred. And I know that Secretary Carter takes that responsibility quite seriously.

There's also been a concerted diplomatic effort on the part of State Department officials to work with our partners and allies around the world to find an appropriate way to transfer these individuals. And so that work is ongoing.

Q -- not been more fruitful? Is that -- is it a failure of diplomacy? Is it a difficulty in working with some of our partners to take those 56 that have been cleared but not --

MR. EARNEST: Well, Devon, I think for a lot of these other countries there's not a lot of upside to taking a Gitmo detainee, right? In fact, that's why the Bush administration tried to sidestep this issue from the very beginning and open up this prison several years ago because they didn't know where to put them. And I think that is further explained by Congress passing legislation that effectively prevents any of their transfers to the United States. So it's not surprising that it takes -- it requires more than one conversation to convince another country to accept custody of these individuals.

That said, the reason -- so then you're asking yourself, why does any country accept these individuals, and the reason for that is that they share the goal of the administration of closing the prison. And these are countries -- the leaders of these countries understand that the prison in Guantanamo Bay and its continued operation does serve to effectively benefit extremists recruiters; that they hold up the prison at Guantanamo Bay as a reason that people should radicalize and join their cause.

Q And just one more, one the domestic political side. From this podium three months ago you said that you were in the final stages of drafting this plan that was going to -- again, your words -- going to short-circuit some of the GOP opposition on this. Is there

any update on where that plan is or what it would be?

MR. EARNEST: This is the plan that continues to be under development. Since we last talked about this, the officials at the Department of Defense have made site visits to a couple of facilities inside the United States to evaluate how those facilities may fit into our broader plans. So there is work that is actively being done on this. And we are hopeful that we can finally see some constructive engagement from members of Congress to accomplish a goal the President set out to achieve more than six years ago and that's to finally close the prison at Guantanamo.

Margaret.

Q On that same note, is the President still confident that he can close Guantanamo Bay before he leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: He's sure going to try. And I think that today's announcement is an indication that while a lot of this difficult diplomatic and national security work takes place behind the scenes, that this is something that the President has made clear to his team they need to remain focused on. And again, the fact that we've transferred 123 detainees -- and that's more than half of the detainees who were in custody when the President took office -- is an indication of the dogged effort that's taking place, again, mostly behind the scenes to try to accomplish what the President has laid out as a significant national security goal, which is closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Q I want to follow up on one of the answers you gave. Can you just clarify -- do you see the bottleneck here as the problem being with diplomacy or with the certification process? Because there have been countries lined up to take some of these detainees, but the Sec Def hasn't signed off on all of them.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the chief bottleneck is Congress. That's true in a lot of areas; it's true in this one as well. We have seen Congress pass legislation that they put in place intentionally and to specifically make closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay much more difficult. That's unfortunate, but it's the situation that we're dealing with. That is the chief bottleneck.

But again, I think I was pretty direct in answering Devin's question that there are significant national security considerations to make when considering these transfers. The President holds those as high priorities, and it's the responsibility of the Secretary of Defense to dig into the details of the arrangements that we reach with other countries to adequately mitigate any threat to our national security that these transfer detainees may pose.

And, yes, it's a difficult diplomatic conversation to make the case to another country that they should bring these individuals inside their borders. So that's difficult diplomatic work, too. But none of that is enhanced by what has been an obstructionist policy that's been pursued by Congress.

Q And do you have a timeline on when a plan is going to be submitted to Congress?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a timeline at this point. This is something that we've been working on for a few months now, and I would anticipate that once we've gotten that plan maybe not finalized but at least in a condition where it can be shared with members of Congress, we'll be in a position to at least talk about a little bit more with all of you.

Q Quick question on Russia. Apart from the Putin-POTUS possible meeting there, this proposal from the Russians to have a military-to-military conversation -- where is the White House on that? And is there concern that having military chiefs, defense chiefs sit down together would at least give the appearance of collusion between the U.S. and Russia?

MR. EARNEST: Well, first, Margaret, the fact is -- and we have said this many times, but in the context of this question I think it bears repeating -- there's no military solution to the turmoil that plagues Syria right now. The solution to this lies in advancing the kind of political agreement that would transfer Assad out of power and put in power a government inside of Syria that has the confidence and reflects the will of the Syrian people. That's the root of this.

As you know, and as you've closely covered, the significant military-to-military cooperation between the United States and Russia was deeply affected by Russia's decisions to try to annex Crimea and engage in a variety of destabilizing actions using their military in eastern Ukraine. So we've made clear that Russia's military actions inside of Syria, if they are used to prop up the Assad regime, would be destabilizing and counterproductive; that propping up a regime that's losing its grip on power in many cases only has the effect of driving more Syrian citizens into the arms of extremists.

Now, that all being said, we have long indicated -- and I've been saying this for quite a bit over the last couple of days -- we would welcome constructive contributions from the Russians to the anti-ISIL coalition. So that's why we'll remain open to tactical, practical discussions with the Russians in order to further the goals of the counter-ISIL coalition and to ensure the safe conduct of coalition operations.

Q The proposal from the Russians, the word "de-conflict" was used there, sort of suggesting that if the U.S. coalition forces and Russians are acting in the same space, Syria, that there could be concern of being in conflict with each other --

MR. EARNEST: Surely.

Q -- even inadvertently.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q So when you say you're open to tactical, practical conversations, does that include this proposal from the Russians to sit down and say, let's not be at odds here, even if we don't have the same ends in our intervention?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think we would use any venue that we had to reiterate to the Russians the things that I started out here -- that there's no military solution, that we continue to have significant concerns with the conduct of their military in Ukraine, and we would warn them against doubling down on their support for the Assad regime. That's a losing bet. It's a losing bet for Russia, it's a losing bet for Syria, and it's a losing bet for our efforts to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

But we do have some of the concerns that you just described, and that's why we'll remain open to what I would describe as tactical, practical discussions with the Russians. And those discussions would be focused on furthering the goals of our counter-ISIL coalition and ensuring the safe conduct of anti-ISIL coalition operations.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I just want to sort of follow up very quickly on Margaret's question. You said earlier that you mentioned that Syria has a responsibility not to interfere with U.S. operations in Syria. Does that also apply to the Russians have a responsibility to not interfere with U.S. operations in Syria?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, I think what it is, is that we've made clear to the Syrians that they shouldn't interfere with our military activities inside of Syria. And when I say "our," I mean our coalition's anti-ISIL efforts that are focused on degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.

When it comes to the Russians, we obviously would welcome their constructive contribution to that efforts, and we'll be open to the kind of tactical, practical discussions that may be needed to try to advance our anti-ISIL goals and to ensure the safe conduct of anti-ISIL coalition operations.

Q Does the White House view Russia's activities in Syria as a provocation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly would view Russian activities in support of the Assad regime as destabilizing and counterproductive. We've made that clear in private in the midst of conversations between Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov. I think they've spoken now three times in the last week or so. In each conversation, Secretary Kerry has made clear our view on that. And obviously that's something that we've discussed at some length publicly as well.

But ultimately -- well, let me explain the reason for that. We believe that further propping up the Assad regime only serves to double down on a losing bet. The Assad regime has lost significant territory in the last several years. They are isolated, or largely isolated from the broader international community. And efforts to prop them up only makes the priorities of our counter-ISIL campaign more difficult to achieve.

Q Is it difficult, though, to sort of suspend what you're seeing? It seems like Russia is propping up the Assad regime. Does the White House not see that, or do you not view it that way?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think at this point it's -- and I've been pretty candid about this in the past, too -- it's difficult to discern exactly what their most important priority is. The Russians have even said some conflicting things in public about what their exact intentions are. So that's why we're trying to be as clear and direct as we can about what our intentions are and what our priorities are. And again, we've made those intentions known both in public and in private, and there's no misunderstanding them in Moscow.

Chris.

Q Just a couple of things about the debate last night, since you did watch it. The numbers just came out on the viewership; it was early numbers -- 22.9 million, just below what the Fox debate was. Obviously a tremendous amount of interest, and most people would have a similar take on why that is. But are you surprised that there's that much interest this early in the campaign? And does it argue -- for those who have been trying to tell Debbie Wasserman Schultz and the Democrats that maybe they should consider more debates -- that more eyeballs, more chances to get their message out there might be a good idea?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I'm not sure that the Republican prospects in the general election in 2016 were enhanced by a large viewing audience last night. I think they saw a lot of angry, pessimistic, threatening people on their screen yesterday. Now, again, these were individuals who were standing in line for three hours, so you can understand why that -- to borrow a word -- that their persona might look like that.

But the fact is there will be an opportunity for us to have a very robust discussion in this country about the best way for us to capitalize on the really important progress that our country has made over the last six or seven years. There's a tremendous opportunity awaiting the next President of the United States. The United States and our influence around the world is quite strong, and there are a variety of ways to measure that -- whether it's the success that President Obama had in building a coalition of more than 60 nations to degrade and ultimately ISIL. There was a lot of skepticism in this room -- understandably so -- about how broad that coalition would be. But there's no arguing about the success of those diplomatic efforts.

We've talked quite a bit about how the international community when it came to confronting Iran over their nuclear program was going in a thousand different directions, struggling to know exactly what should be done in the face of a quickly advancing nuclear program inside of Iran. The President demonstrated some leadership on the international scale and built -- essentially led international unity around a strategy that applied tough sanctions on Iran, confronted them over their nuclear program, received significant concessions from Iran in terms of the constraints that they would apply to their nuclear program and the kind of inspections that they would submit to verify their compliance with the agreement. That has strengthened the hand of the United States in the international community.

To say nothing of the long list of statistics I could recite about the inherent strength of our economy. Our economy right now is the envy of the world. And again, I think the way that our economy has bounced back is primarily a testament to the grit and determination and inventiveness of American workers and American entrepreneurs. But those efforts were significantly enhanced by difficult policy decisions that this President made in the earliest days of his presidency. And whether that's the Recovery Act, or rescuing the auto industry, we've got a heck of a lot to show for it.

And what that means is it means that the next President of the United States will be very well-positioned to lead the country into the future. And the risk associated with that, however, is that by reverting back to the policies that were championed by the previous administration, those gains are tenuous, and we could be in a situation where we pay an economic price for going back and pursuing those failed economic policies, particularly the middle class.

And so that's why the President feels like he's got such a big stake in this election. And that's why he would welcome every opportunity to have a robust public debate about the future of the country.

Q Well, then to go back to my original question, the arguments that you just made, that presumably some Democratic candidates might make given the opportunity, does it make sense for them to consider more debates, more opportunities to get the message you just articulated out to an audience of millions?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the view of the President is that debates are important and they certainly do attract attention. And I know that the DNC has announced that they would have six debates among all the candidates. The President has not taken a position about the appropriate number of debates, other than his view that he believes that they should have them. And he's pleased to see that they'll do that.

And that will be -- in contrast to the Republicans that I don't think will be well served, or have been well served by the debates that have drawn a large viewing audience -- I do think that the opportunity that Democratic candidates will have as early as next month to engage in the debate about the priorities and values of this party I think will be quite good for our prospects in the general election next year.

Q Since you saw the debate, you know that your boss was mentioned more than a few times. Let me just ask you about one particular instance since it has been cited I think both by more liberal and more conservative pundits as one of the big moments of the night, and that was Carly Fiorina who dared Hillary Clinton and the President to watch the Planned Parenthood tape -- obviously, the extra significance given the budget battle. And she said they should send a message because this is about "the character of our nation." And I wonder if you have any reaction to that.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a specific reaction to her comments. I think we've been quite clear about the fact that Planned Parenthood did offer an apology about the comments that were made in the context of those videos. That certainly was appropriate

for them to do so. The comments that were made in those videos were shocking.

Presumably that's why those videos were released. So the President believes that was an appropriate thing for Planned Parenthood to do.

But he does not believe it would be appropriate for Republicans to follow through on the promise that they have made to shut down the government over funding for Planned Parenthood. The fact of the matter is -- everybody in this room I think knows this, but it bears repeating -- the fact of the matter is federal funding is not allowed to be used for abortions. That's the federal law. That's the law that this administration has enforced.

And that's why when Republicans suggest they should shut off funding for Planned Parenthood, the only thing that they're doing is proposing to cut access to health care that millions of Americans rely on.

Q So let me ask you, do you think that the conversations that were had last night, the reaction in that room and some of the reaction that we've heard since then to that argument, and others who made similar arguments about Planned Parenthood and about defunding, will have an impact on the budget process? Do you think it's brought the conversation more broadly? Did you listen to it last night and say this could make it harder for there to be a budget deal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, I think that -- are you referring specifically to this question of Planned Parenthood, or the active debate in the Republican presidential primary on it?

Q Well, I'm just saying there's an active debate, but this certainly has shone a spotlight on it in a very huge way last night.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I took note of the fact that the preponderance of candidates on that stage last night advocated for shutting down the federal government just to prevent millions of families in this country from getting access to health care. That is the effective impact of the policy that they're advocating. And people should understand that. And 22.9 million viewers who watched CNN now I think do. And that is certainly not an approach that the President supports, and for a variety of reasons -- what's that? You're welcome for the plug. (Laughter.)

But that certainly is not a policy or an approach the President supports. And the way that Republicans, including some Republican candidates, have injected this ideological issue into the midst of the budget debate has made it more difficult to reach a bipartisan budget agreement and does have consequences for the ability of the Congress to reach a budget agreement, which also has significant consequences for our economy.

You heard the President yesterday, particularly in the context of volatile economic markets around the world -- volatile financial markets around the world -- it doesn't make sense for Congress to be adding this volatility into the economy so unnecessarily. And that President is hopeful that this will be one of those rare instances in which common sense will actually prevail on Capitol Hill.

Cheryl.

Q Thanks. To sort of follow up on a government shutdown, it seems we're talking about this every year now. Does the President now see the threat of a government shutdown as routine? And what kind of effect does this have, particularly on the federal workforce?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Cheryl, let me start by saying that we didn't have this brinksmanship last year, primarily because in the aftermath of the last government shutdown that was engineered by Republicans, Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill sat down and hammered out a two-year budget agreement. That ended up being good for our economy. That was an important way that Congress could support the U.S. economy and the private sector.

And we encourage them to do that again. It doesn't mean that they yielded a perfect product or a piece of legislation that was beloved by anybody in either party. It's not the kind of legislation for which they will erect a specific wing of the Barack Obama presidential library, but it is a notable achievement in that it reflected bipartisan compromise and it adequately funded our economic and national security priorities, and it prevented this damaging debate and avoided the unnecessary risk of a potential government shutdown.

But two years after the last Republican-engineered government shutdown, unfortunately we seem to be careening toward another one, also engineered by Republicans. So that's bad for the economy, and I do think it does have an impact on the mindset of the federal workforce. And that's one of the many, many consequences of this kind of irresponsible gamesmanship that we've seen from Republicans on Capitol Hill and needs to stop.

Q Just to follow up, though, on the impact. Does the continued threat of government shutdown undermine the public confidence in government? Does it hurt productivity and morale? Does it undermine our standing on the global stage? I just heard you talk about how strong the United States is now on the global stage, but yet it's like another government shutdown.

MR. EARNEST: It surely doesn't help any of that. And again, if we're in a situation where Congress wants to try to find a way to play a constructive role for a change, simply doing - - fulfilling their most basic responsibility in some ways is an important way for them to do that. Congress was entrusted by our Founding Fathers with significant power, and the most significant of those powers was the power of the purse and the ability to pass the budget -- and essentially, their requirement to pass a budget to allow the federal government to function.

So we're hopeful that they'll live up to that responsibility. And certainly the last thing that the U.S. economy needs is the unnecessary injection of even more volatility into the U.S. economy.

Toluse.

Q There was apparently a military coup in Burkina Faso. I'm wondering if the White House has a response to that.

MR. EARNEST: I do have a little something on this.

The United States is deeply concerned about the unfolding events in Burkina Faso. We call for the immediate release of all officials that are being held there. The United States strongly condemns any attempt to seize power through extra-constitutional means, or resolve internal political disagreements using force.

The United States calls for an immediate end to violence, urges the military personnel involved to return to their barracks, and reaffirms our steadfast support for the civilian transitional government to continue its work of preparing for free, fair and credible elections that are scheduled for October 11.

Q I also wanted to ask about the video that the President starred in or did a voiceover for earlier today about citizenship. I'm wondering if that video, sort of timed the morning after the debate and the earlier comments by the President saying anti-immigrant rhetoric is United Nations-American, and what we heard from Joe Biden saying that Trump's comments were "sick" -- I'm wondering if there is sort of a concerted effort by the White House to promote citizenship and pro-immigrant language at a time when we're seeing Donald Trump and sort of some Republicans who have expressed different thoughts get a lot of support from the voters on the Republican side.

MR. EARNEST: Toluse, the video is released today to mark "Citizenship Day." And it's an opportunity for the White House to unveil the "Stand Stronger" Citizenship Awareness Campaign, which is a project that we've engaged in with a nonprofit called Civic Nation. And the goal is to encourage eligible immigrants to take an important step in their American journey and commit to American citizenship.

To launch this effort, the President released a video message that can be found on CommitToCitizenship.org. Overall, the initiative is focused on encouraging the 8.8 million legal immigrants -- legal permanent residents to the United States that qualify for citizenship to learn more about the naturalization process so they can solidify their roots here in the United States and tap into the incredible opportunities that await new American citizens.

It also bears mentioning at this point that the United States also has a path to citizenship for refugees. And we've talked a lot about the status of refugees over the last several weeks. I believe that the number is 370,000 refugees that have gotten citizenship since 2009, when the President took office. And again, these refugees are individuals who are classified as refugees by the United Nations -- they have a very specific status. And the United States takes in more of these individuals with the specific U.N.-designated refugee status than every other nation in the world combined. And those refugees are afforded some important benefits, including the opportunity to get citizenship here in the United States.

So it's a very particular path, it's a very specific one, but it does reflect the kind of opportunity that awaits refugees, and it reflects the kind of opportunities that the United States is willing to give to those who go through this legal process of becoming either a

legal permanent resident or going through this U.N.-administered refugee process.

Q If I can just follow up on an earlier question about the oil export ban. You mentioned that the White House position is crystal-clear. But in the past, you sort of said that this is a decision that's housed at the Commerce Department. I'm wondering if you can go a little bit beyond that to talk about whether or not the White House is actually studying this issue, whether or not the Commerce Department, which is under the White House, is in conversations with you. Do you have a broader philosophical position on the crude export ban itself, more than just sort of saying this is something that the Commerce Department is in charge of?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's a clever way to ask the question. Our crystal-clear position is in opposition to the legislation that's currently being contemplated by Congress right now. The fact is, this is a policy decision that's made at the Commerce Department. I would allow that there is a view at the White House, but I'm not prepared to engage in that philosophical conversation from the podium today. I'm sorry?

Q Why not?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that particularly readers of Bloomberg are well aware of the market sensitivities associated with these kinds of deliberations, or the fact that these deliberations may even be taking place -- which I'm not in a position to confirm from here. So that's why I've been quite circumspect, maybe uncharacteristically circumspect in discussing this particular issue.

Go ahead, Scott.

Q Is it fair to say that you're crystal-clear against this particular bill --

MR. EARNEST: That's correct.

Q -- but you're not necessarily crystal-clear against another bill that would lift the ban on oil? I mean, is it something about this bill in particular, beyond the basic fact of lifting the ban on oil?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we are opposed to this bill, and the reason that we oppose the bill is because this is a decision that actually can be made and should be made, in our view, by the Commerce Department.

Q So it's jurisdictional.

MR. EARNEST: It doesn't require an act of Congress to make this policy decision. So we believe that the Commerce Department has access to all the expertise and information that they need to set this policy.

Francesca.

Q Hey, Josh. I'm being made aware that the list of attendees for the Pope's visit, the reception that's being had hasn't been released yet. But a news organization today reported that among the list of guests there would be a pro-choice, a transgender woman, and an openly gay episcopal bishop. And I was wondering if the White House is trying to send a message or make a statement with the invitees at that reception.

MR. EARNEST: Francesca, I have not seen the news report that you're referring to. I think it's important for all of you to, as you consider chasing that report, to know that there will be -- I believe the number is about 15,000 people who will be on the South Lawn of the White House, or in the vicinity of the White House to participate in those ceremonies welcoming the Pope to Washington.

So we'll have more information on the guest list once I can actually confirm for myself who's on it. But I think that's why I would warn you against drawing a lot of conclusions about one or two or maybe even three people who may be on the guest list, because there will be 15,000 other people there too.

Q Sure. I'm just making sure that there's also not some sort of other reception that's taking place, like a private reception maybe they would be not necessarily on the open lawn thing that you're talking about where 15,000 people would be at.

MR. EARNEST: We'll have more information about the exact itinerary for the Pope early next week.

Q 15,000 here?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, on the South Lawn and on the Ellipse and things. It's why you may have noticed that the Officer of Personnel Management has encouraged federal workers, at least on that day, to take advantage of telecommuting policies that may be in place at their agency. Traffic is going to be a mess.

Steve.

Q Back to Planned Parenthood. I'm wondering, would the White House be interested or willing to consider a potential compromise that would fall short of defunding Planned Parenthood, which you've made absolutely clear is on the table but be vetoed? There are proposals that would address the specific issue in these tapes, which is money changing hands for fetal body parts from aborted fetuses. And there's a proposal in the House by Kevin Yoder that would say you couldn't get any expenses paid for -- you couldn't get a check in your account if you're Planned Parenthood -- work at another clinic. Is that the sort of thing that maybe this could resolve this fight short of a shutdown, that the White House would be interested in potentially trying to negotiate?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Steve, I haven't seen any other those -- or at least that one proposal that you've noted there. So I'm reluctant to weigh in on it one way or the other, or even indicate our willingness to consider it. I think we've been pretty direct about what our concerns are, and those concerns center on the fact that there is already federal law in

place that's enforced by this administration that prevents any organization from using federal funds to perform abortions. It's against the law, and it's a law that this administration enforces.

That's why the effect of the policy that's being advanced by Republicans does nothing more than take away health care access for millions of families all across the country. And that's why the President is vehemently opposed to it. That's why -- I guess I'll also point out this is not the first time that the President has opposed a Republican effort to take health care away from people. I'm not really sure what the Republican fascination is with taking health care away from millions of American families, but it's not something the President is going to go along with.

Q And you don't have a position at this point on whether the President would veto an effort to prohibit anybody from getting a check in return for a body part?

MR. EARNEST: I just don't know that that -- what I'm saying is I don't know that the administration has considered that specific proposal from Mr. Yoder.

Q Back to Guantanamo. Senator McCain -- who I know the President called this spring to try to set the stage for a compromise on this -- Senator McCain is telling reporters today that he needs to see a specific plan from the White House, a plan for where these detainees are going to go, an actual specific site if they're going to be brought to the United States, and not just sort of a range, a menu of options.

In addition to -- you haven't had a timeline yet, but you're facing a deadline with the defense authorization bill that the President has threatened to veto over this issue. And McCain says he can't go to his colleagues and get them to vote for something that you want until he has that. Is that sense of urgency known in the White House? Do they understand where McCain is at here?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Senator McCain is one of those in Congress that, depending on the day you ask him, does indicate a willingness to work with us constructively to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay. And so it appears that today might have been one of those days. So I think what you would see from the administration is a desire to engage him. And I would just point out that, as I mentioned in answering an earlier question, that the administration has been doing site surveys of specific locations. And I think that should give you an indication that the administration is taking the formulation of this plan quite seriously and is interested in how the details of that plan would work.

I don't want to prejudge at this point exactly what form a presentation like that would take. I don't want to get ahead of any proposals that they may have to offer in terms of what those details look like. But the interest that Senator McCain is showing today in cooperating with the administration on this national security priority is one that we take seriously. And I think that's why you have seen us seek to engage him in a spirit of cooperation and respect to try to advance that measure.

So there is hard work being done on this. And I think, quite frankly, I'll be in a position to speak a little bit more about the details of this plan once something has been sent up to Capitol Hill.

Q Well, he's also threatened -- if the President and his veto threats stand, he's also threatened to start blocking civilian nominees for the Senate.

MR. EARNEST: Because they're just speeding through right now, I mean just sailing through. It's hard to keep track of all of them, isn't it?

Q Well, I'm just saying that this is starting to escalate. You're coming up near the end of the year.

MR. EARNEST: I'm not too concerned about it, though. We saw all kinds of roadblocks with our nominees all the time. So that's not something that we'd be particular concerned about.

Dave, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. Back on Syria. A year ago the President said he wanted to train and equip 15,000 opposition fighters to defeat ISIL. I quote him saying, "We must strengthen the opposition as the best counterweight to extremists." Does the President still believe that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Dave, I mean obviously the specific train-and-equip program that the Department of Defense has been working to implement over the last year or so has fallen far short of that goal. We knew at the beginning and the President knew when he uttered those words how difficult of a challenge standing up this proposal and implementing this proposal would be. I think in fairness to the President, I don't think he contemplated those 15,000 Syrian opposition fighters being trained and equipped and fighting all within the space of one year.

But what I will say is that there is -- that General Austin has made clear that he's going to consider changes to the program and try to determine what kinds of changes can be made to yield much better results.

The other thing that the administration has sought to do is to offer greater support to those Syrian opposition fighters that are already fighting. And there is significant support that the United States and our coalition partners have offered to Syrian Kurds, in particular who have been effective in driving ISIL out of some areas of northern and northeastern Syria.

We are in a place where we have nearly shut off ISIL's access to the border with Turkey. This is a border that's nearly 600 miles long. And they only have a narrow corridor now in which to operate, and we're seeking to close that. That is thanks primarily to the efforts of those Syrian opposition fighters that are being backed by coalition military airstrikes. And those fighters have also benefited from material support by the United States and our coalition partners, as well.

So that's just one example of how we have been able to deepen our cooperation with fighters on the ground in Syria in a way that has advanced our goal to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Q And in July Secretary Carter said, to that point, we had trained and equipped about 60 Syrian fighters. And now we have four or five. Is it fair to say the President is discouraged by that direction?

MR. EARNEST: I think it's fair for you to say that the President believes that the program needs to operate at a higher -- a much higher level. And that's why General Austin is considering a range of changes to the program. For the kinds of changes they're considering I'd refer you to the Department of Defense. They may or may not be able to tell you about some of those plans. But the President certainly has much higher expectations for the program.

Thanks a lot, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

Q Josh, did you see the Fed news? You probably didn't.

MR. EARNEST: I didn't.

Q They're leaving the rates unchanged. Is the White House going to have a comment on that?

MR. EARNEST: I doubt it.

Q Doubt it. Okay.

MR. EARNEST: Thanks, guys.

END

2:04 P.M. EDT