

Press Gaggle by the Press Secretary en route Austin, Texas, 3/11/16

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

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Aboard Air Force One
En Route Austin, Texas

**Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.

12:05 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome aboard Air Force One as we make our way deep into the heart of Texas, to Austin. The President is looking forward to his event at South by Southwest today. Many of you heard the conference call that White House officials did yesterday previewing the President's visit. But obviously, this is an opportunity for the President to talk about innovation in the tech center and the potential that has to bring about some significant changes in our government in the way that it has our economy.

And there were a number of announcements over the course of this week that we've made from the White House that illustrate the concerted effort we're making as an administration to incorporate that innovation and that entrepreneurial spirit into the government. It has significant benefits for the way that government can perform for our citizens, but also in the way that we can address some intractable policy problems.

So the President is looking forward to this conversation today. All of you will have an opportunity to be in there to hear it.

I wanted to make one additional statement on the Supreme Court before I get to your questions. On the Supreme Court, earlier this week, we saw that Senator Cornyn from the great state of Texas came out earlier this week and predicted that the President's nominee to the Supreme Court would be treated like a piñata. There are a variety of concerns that a statement like that arouses. The first of them, frankly, is that the President hasn't even decided on the nominee yet. It sounds like Republicans are prepared to follow through on their threat to not consider the credentials or experiences or character of the President's nominee, but rather attempt to tear that person down.

A day or two later, we saw some interesting comments from Senator Johnson of Wisconsin. He was speaking on a conservative radio program where he acknowledged that Republicans would not treat the Supreme Court nominee of a Republican President in this way. He said -- and I have part of the quote here -- we'll get you the full one if you would like it -- he said, "Generally, this is the way it works out politically if a conservative President is replacing a conservative justice, then there's a little more accommodation."

So it's clear that Republicans' vow to treat the President's nominee like a piñata is not motivated by some sort of principle, but rather motivated purely by party politics. That's unfortunate. This string of bad news continued for Republicans yesterday when Senator Graham observed during the Senate Judiciary Committee meeting yesterday that what Republicans are prepared to do is without precedent. His comment was, "We're setting a precedent here today, the Republicans are."

So we've had a lot of hue and cry in Washington, D.C. in the weeks since Justice Scalia's death. That hue and cry has been characterized by a lot of old quotes being thrown back and forth. But what's true is that Republicans are vowing to rough up the President's nominee without considering his or her credentials or character. Republicans are acknowledging that they're only doing this because President Obama is a Democrat, and that they would not be doing this if the President of the United States were a Republican. And they're acknowledging that there's no precedent for them to act this way.

So we'll have a debate about the President's nominee. We'll have a debate about the President fulfilling his constitutional duty. But the case against Senate Republicans is closed when it comes to the fact that what Republicans are doing is unprecedented, is motivated entirely by party politics, and is an abdication of their constitutional responsibilities.

Q Josh, given that sort of unprecedented nature, as you describe it of what they're doing --

MR. EARNEST: As Senator Graham described it.

Q Okay. Are you all prepared to handle the nominee and the nomination differently than would normally be the case in the sense that normally a nominee doesn't say anything until the hearings? Are you prepared, whoever the nominee is, for that person to do interviews and be sort of out there defending themselves? Are you guys going to talk more about the nominee's background and have the President talk more about it than you normally would in these situations given the kind of -- the nature of the situation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think at this point it's too early to say exactly how this will play out. Our expectation is that the President will put forward of unquestioned legal credentials --

Q When is that going to be?

MR. EARNEST: At a time of the President's choosing. But we'll have more on that.

Q Before he leaves for Cuba?

MR. EARNEST: Not necessarily. But the President will put forward somebody who is eminently qualified, as he has the two previous times that he's put forward a nominee to fill a Supreme Court vacancy. I've noted on previous occasions that those two nominees earned bipartisan support. And the President will certainly put forward somebody this time that deserves bipartisan support.

We'll have to see if Republicans are going to follow through on their threat to do something that is entirely unprecedented and motivated entirely by party politics, and not even judge this nominee on the merits, but rather judge this person based on the fact that they were nominated by a Democratic President. That would be unfortunate. It would certainly be inconsistent with the expectations of the American people, and inconsistent with the intentions of the Framers of the Constitution.

So we'll have to see -- in terms of our rollout strategy, we'll have to see exactly what the response is from the Senate before determining what our path forward is.

Q Just to clarify, you said that it's not necessarily something that would come before the Cuba trip?

MR. EARNEST: Not necessarily.

Q Can you give any guidance on timing, Josh?

MR. EARNEST: Unfortunately, I can't -- other than confirming for you that the President will not make this announcement at the South by Southwest event today.

Q I wasn't looking for confirmation about that. (Laughter.)

Q He has not made his decision? So it's not -- because you just said just now he hasn't made his decision, so it's not that he's made it and has not yet announced it, but he has not yet decided?

MR. EARNEST: That is correct. The process of reviewing information about potential nominees continues.

Q -- the weekend while the President is here in Texas?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if the President will have the opportunity to do much work on it while we are in Texas, but I would anticipate that the President, over the course of this weekend, will spend some time on it -- possibly on the flights, but most likely when the President is home in Washington on Sunday.

Q -- the ruse to interview Supreme Court candidates? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Not that I know of.

Q Is there any candidate or potential nominee like Secretary Lynch that have taken their names out of the running based on the potential political difficulties this may make for them?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of. I'm not aware of any other comments like that in private or in public.

Q Can I ask you about the President's meeting with Justin Trudeau yesterday and if the F35 project came up at all, and whether the President pushed him one way or the other on any F35 purchases? That's going to be kind of a sticking point with Canada.

MR. EARNEST: I don't actually have a more detailed readout of their discussions from yesterday. But I'll check with my colleagues back in Washington and see if they can give some better guidance about where this particular situation stands.

Q Josh, the President gave an interview to the Atlantic -- or several interviews to the Atlantic that were published yesterday. Britain is concerned about his comments about Prime Minister David Cameron and the status of the special relationship. Did the President realize, or is he surprised by the reaction there of his criticism of David Cameron? And can you expand on what he meant when he said that the Prime Minister was distracted during the time of the Libya crisis?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think -- let me start by saying that President Obama values deeply the special relationship between the United States and our allies in the UK. In particular, President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron have established a particularly effective working relationship that has allowed the United States to work closely with our British allies on a whole range of significant challenges, including our ongoing campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

One of the key asks that we have made of our NATO allies is to demonstrate a clear commitment to investing in defense and national security capabilities up to 2 percent of their GDP. And we were quite gratified to see Prime Minister Cameron a couple of years ago make a commitment to ensure that the UK would live up to that 2 percent threshold and to see them follow through on that commitment. That will ensure that our British allies have the kinds of resources to make sure that our NATO alliance will remain strong and will retain all of the necessary capabilities to defend our alliance.

I think that's just one good example of how Prime Minister Cameron has been a particularly effective interlocutor with President Obama, but more importantly, a partner and ally when it comes to confronting core national security priorities for both our countries.

The President has acknowledged on a couple of occasions some of the shortcomings of the situation in Libya. What the President has acknowledged as recently as his remarks to the General Assembly at the United Nations last fall that there wasn't the kind of follow-through that we would have liked to see after the military intervention there. And the President acknowledged in his remarks at the U.N. that the United States bore some responsibility for that as well.

So I think more broadly the argument that the President was making in the Atlantic piece is that the United States cannot and should not put ourselves in a situation or in a position to be the world's policeman. We need to count on -- we need to be able to count on our partners and allies around the world to help us confront significant challenges. The United States is going to continue to be an indispensable country; when there are big challenges around the world, people look to the United States to step up and address them. That has been true for many generations. It will be true for generations to come. And it certainly has been true while President Obama has been in office, and in fact, based on our effective advocacy of American values and American principles, the United States has actually been more effective in advancing our interests around the globe by enhancing our capacity to confront these challenges.

The Iran situation is probably the best example of this. When President Obama took office, Iran was on the march to building a nuclear weapon and the international community was fractured in terms of trying to figure out what sort of response we should marshal to prevent that from happening. President Obama laid out a clear strategy for engaging the Iranian regime that was subject to intense criticism back here at home, but it was a strategy that was ultimately successful, by rallying the international community to

our side, imposing tough sanctions on Iran, bringing them to the negotiating table and negotiating an agreement that, in a verifiable way, prevents them from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

That approach to problem-solving has bolstered the United States standing in the international community. It has confronted one of the, if not the most pressing national security threats to the United States, and has enhanced our ability to work with our allies to achieve it.

Q The question, again, was about British Prime Minister Cameron. Did the President mean to be critical of him? And what's his response to the reaction over there to that interview?

MR. EARNEST: I guess to put a more fine point on it, no. And if you look at the direct quotes from the President in the story, it doesn't include a criticism of Prime Minister Cameron.

Q What did he mean when he said that Prime Minister Cameron was distracted?

MR. EARNEST: I think the President was acknowledging that the international community, including the United States, including the United Kingdom, including France and other countries who were involved in the military intervention in Libya, didn't follow through after that military intervention in Libya in a way that was sufficient to safeguard our interests in that country and to bring about the kind of political transition that reflected the will and ambition of the Libyan people.

So there would be -- under any circumstances, there would have been significant challenges in succeeding in that effort. But it's clear that the amount of attention that was devoted to Libya after the military intervention was insufficient.

Q He didn't say all of us were distracted, he said David Cameron was distracted.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess what I'm pointing out is that in the President's speech to the U.N. General Assembly last fall he acknowledged that the United States also bore some of that responsibility.

Q The pressing point seems to be that the international community dropped the ball on Libya somewhat. Is it picked up yet? I mean, are the Europeans doing what they need to be doing right now to isolate the Islamic State or roll back the Islamic State there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Andrew, you obviously have your own experience covering this issue, and I think even based on your observation in your reporting, we've made a lot of important progress in Libya over the last two or three years. The U.N. has led a painstaking diplomatic effort to try to put in place -- or assist the Libyans to put in place a democratic government that is responsive to the Libyan population in a way that can address a lot of the political but also security instability in their country.

The United States has had a special envoy to that effort and the United States has made a tangible contribution to try to bring the parties together to accomplish that goal. The United States has also devoted some military resources to carrying out strikes against extremists in Libya that could pose a threat to our interests in the region.

So we've made important progress, but there's more important work that needs to get done in Libya, and we will not be successful in Libya without the continued engagement of our European allies that have a lot of experience in Libya.

Q Do you think there's been too much foot-dragging over forming the Libyan government? Are you frustrated by the speed of progress? Is it time to kind of knock some heads together?

MR. EARNEST: I think what is clear, we would have liked to have seen this process move more quickly. But, look, there are a whole host of very special challenges to Libya. After decades of authoritarian rule, trying to put in place and support a successful democratic government is challenging. You essentially didn't have much of a civil society in Libya because it had been decimated by an authoritarian, totalitarian dictator.

So bringing about this kind of political transition was always going to be challenging, was always going to be marked by setbacks, but we've made a lot of important progress, and that is thanks primarily to the good work of diplomats like the Special Representative from the U.N. and other diplomats, including the U.S. Special Envoy, trying to bring the parties together and form a stable government that can try to put to rest some of the political turmoil there, but most importantly, try to bring some control over the security situation in that country.

Q I want to ask about two different things in the story. The first is President Erdogan. President Obama's opinion of him is -- President Obama reportedly believes that he is a failure, authoritarian, and hadn't done enough militarily to intervene in their neighbor, Syria. Is that an accurate kind of representation of the President's view and what he conveyed in those interviews?

MR. EARNEST: Let me just say that what our view of Turkey has been is that we did spend some period of time urging the Turks to engage more effectively with our counter-ISIL coalition. And over the last nine months or so, that's what they've done. We have seen the Turks give access to the United States and our partners to military facilities inside of Turkey that has made military operations against ISIL in Syria more efficient and more effective. We have seen the Turks take specific steps to more effectively seal off their border between Turkey and Syria. Now, there's more work that we'd like to see them do, but there's no denying that they have made important progress in sealing off the border.

Turkey has also borne a significant burden when it comes to Syrian migrants fleeing violence in their country. And we have certainly been appreciative of all that the Turks have done to try to meet the needs of those people. And the United States has provided the Turks significant financial assistance to do that. And we have made the case that Turkey should take these steps because of the obvious national security consequences for Turkey. All this instability along their border is destabilizing and not good for the country.

So they had their own interests for intervening, and we made clear that we would stand by our NATO ally as they did it. We have done that. And that has served the interests of Turkey, it's served the interests of the United States, and it served the interests of our counter-ISIL coalition quite effectively.

Q So is it fair to read from your silence that you don't dispute the notion that President Obama sees President Erdogan as a failed authoritarian?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is also true is, even though we had been able to effectively cooperate with the Turks when it comes to Syria and a whole host of areas, we also have expressed our concern with some aspects of the political climate inside of Turkey. There

are some ways in which we feel the Turkey government has not been sufficiently supportive of universal human rights -- the kind of human rights that we obviously deeply value here in the United States and that we advocate for around the world.

Let me give you one example. Recently, the Turkish government announced essentially the takeover of Zaman newspaper in Turkey. This is one of the largest media outlets inside of Turkey and it has essentially been taken over by the government. Here in the United States, we deeply value the freedom of the press -- in fact, that's one of the main reasons we're having this conversation right now -- and we are concerned when we see those kinds of values be so obviously trampled upon. And we have not hesitated to speak out when we see it, and we have not hesitated to speak out in those instances in Turkey where it's clear it's happening.

Q The other thing that sort of piqued my interest in the story was that Secretary Kerry has reportedly repeatedly advocated sort of a covert airstrike against targets belonging to the Assad regime. The President also reportedly has sort of denied those requests. But I'm wondering if you could rule out the possibility that the U.S. would ever take that type of airstrike against the Assad regime, especially without kind of getting prior congressional authorization, which is something that you guys have emphasized as an important part of your strategy there.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me just say that our focus inside of Syria has been focused on degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL. And there are significant military resources that have been expended in that effort, and we've made important progress inside of Syria. By supporting forces on the ground and carrying out military airstrikes, we've retaken about 20 percent of the territory in Syria that ISIL previously held -- that's populated territory. And we've done that by implementing a strategy that the President has laid out of supporting forces on the ground who are fighting for their own country.

We have been clear and unambiguous about the fact that President Obama does not believe that there is a military solution that can be imposed on Syria. There are a variety of problems that are plaguing that country. And what is required to address those many problems inside of Syria is a long overdue political transition.

And the United States, Secretary Kerry, in particular, has led the diplomatic effort to try to bring the world together, the interested parties together to try to bring the parties inside of Syria together to organize the opposition and to organize and facilitate conversations with the regime, and bring about a transition inside of Syria that would allow a

government that has the confidence of the Syrian people and reflects the will and ambitions of the Syrian people. That is the ultimate solution to the situation in Syria, and that's what our efforts in Syria have been focused on.

Q So despite all that, you won't rule out the possibility that the U.S. can take military action against the Assad regime in some capacity?

MR. EARNEST: I think that I'm not going to get into any private conversations between Secretary Kerry and President Obama. But what's clear is that Secretary Kerry himself has probably spent more time than anyone else trying to bring along all of the parties to get these political talks on track so that we can address the political turmoil inside of Syria that has contributed to the rise of ISIL and the significant humanitarian disaster inside of Syria that has not just destabilized the region, but has had an even destabilizing impact on Europe.

Q German intelligence services and U.K. media outlets have apparently got their hands on the names of around 22,000 Islamic State -- or people who are believed to have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with the Islamic State. Does the U.S. have that intelligence for themselves? Is it real? Is it actionable? Could it be a significant breakthrough in kind of dismantling ISIS?

MR. EARNEST: Unfortunately, Andrew, I don't have a whole lot on this. I can tell you that we're obviously aware of the reports -- they've gotten quite a bit of attention. And obviously part of our counter-ISIL coalition efforts are devoted to intelligence cooperation and intelligence-sharing, and that includes an effective intelligence relationship with the Germans. That's enhanced national security in the United States and Germany and has contributed to our campaign against ISIL. But beyond that, there's not much I can say.

Q Josh, do you guys have any reaction to the Russian that was -- the announcement that the Russian friend of Putin is now -- that died last fall has now been -- it was decided that he was killed?

MR. EARNEST: I've read those rather lurid media reports. This is a death that is still under investigation by the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., where this death occurred. I understand that the FBI is involved as well. But I don't have any information about this ongoing investigation.

Q Are the national security parts of the government monitoring, or whatever, in terms of any diplomatic and/or in a foreign policy implication -- as the investigation goes forward?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, I'm not aware of any specific conversations along those lines. But obviously the local law enforcement authorities and the FBI will conduct an appropriate investigation, and if it's necessary for the Department of Justice and the FBI to update relevant national security components of the U.S. government on the pace of that investigation, then they will do that. They will do that in a way that doesn't interfere with the investigation. But if and when they do, it's something I probably won't be able to discuss publicly.

Q Josh, just a quick question on North Korea. The North Korean President has issued another order or edict for more nuclear tests to be carried out, I believe. And this comes on the back of a series of announcements about military capabilities and tests and so on. Are you seeing this as just business as usual, the usual kind of saber-rattling? Or is this something more significant that's brewing in North Korea?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what is certainly true is that there is a long history of provocative acts and destabilizing actions on the part of the North Korean government. That's particularly true this time of year as the United States is engaged in a series of military exercises with our South Korean allies and with other allies and partners of the United States in the region. Those exercises are often an excuse cited by the North Korean government to say and do provocative things. But we obviously take the threat from North Korea quite seriously. After all, that's why we conduct these international military exercises, is to ensure that our forces are ready to protect our allies in South Korea and our other allies like Japan, who could also be at risk.

So we certainly take this seriously. We're going to continue to monitor the actions and comments of the North Korean leader and other North Korean government officials. But what's also true is that we have had some success in mobilizing the international community to impose sanctions against North Korea that go beyond anything we've done before. That will put additional pressure on the North Korean government. It will further isolate the North Korean government, but ultimately, it will be up to the North Korean government to decide if that will prompt them to change their behavior.

Q Would the President be going to Nancy Reagan's funeral if he were not going to Texas right now?

MR. EARNEST: It's certainly a possibility, Darlene. I don't know if this -- obviously this visit to Austin has been on the books for a number of weeks now and was certainly on the books long before President Obama -- long before we learned of Mrs. Reagan's death.

We're obviously pleased that Mrs. Obama will be representing the administration at the funeral and offering her condolences not just on behalf of the family but on behalf of the country.

Mrs. Reagan was a remarkable woman and will have an important place in American history. President Obama has had an opportunity to talk about this a couple of times.

And certainly Mrs. Obama's attendance at the funeral is consistent with past practice and the way that previous administrations were represented at the funerals of previous First Ladies.

Q Has he spoken with any of the Reagan children or sent condolence notes or anything like that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know if any specific conversations like that. I'll check on it for you. But obviously Mrs. Obama will be bringing with her condolences that she'll share to the Reagan family not just on behalf of the Obama family but on behalf of the country.

Q Can I do the weekly check-in on if you guys have anything to say on the Burr-Feinstein legislation on encryption coming out of the Senate?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything new -- which is to say we continue to be in touch with Congress, and I continue to be personally skeptical -- more broadly, going beyond just this specific legislation, I continue to be a little skeptical of Congress's ability to handle such a complicated policy area, given Congress's recent inability to handle even simple things.

Q And I'm wondering if you can talk at all -- there have been a couple violent incidents at Trump rallies. The two Democratic candidates have issued statements expressing concern. I'm wondering if there's anything that the White House wanted to say about this.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll just say in general that there is no excuse or justification for acts of violence against reporters who are covering a political event. And the White House, like many other people, including other Republicans, has been concerned by the invective and taunting that's been directed at journalists covering a political event. And it's totally inappropriate. It's not consistent with the standards of political discourse that should be observed by anybody who is seeking the highest elected office in the greatest country of the world.

Q We've asked this before, but I guess I just want to take another little shot at it. Is some of the tenor of this rhetoric starting to affect the way the U.S. government conducts its business around the world? I mean, are you getting questions from foreign leaders about this now that Trump appears to be the frontrunner for the Republican nomination?

MR. EARNEST: I think the thing that I have learned in this job, and having an opportunity to travel around the world much more than I did prior to working at the White House, I'm often struck by how people in other countries closely follow and have a pretty sophisticated understanding of American politics. Certainly much more than Americans follow the political climate or political campaigns taking place in other countries.

So people around the world are watching. And it does -- the tone and tenor of that debate does have an impact on the way that people around the world see the United States. It's why the stakes of U.S. elections, particularly when they are elections for President, are so high. They have lots of consequences for domestic policy in the United States, but they also have consequences for the way the United States is viewed around the world.

Many others have observed that this is one of the reasons that President Obama's election in 2008 was such a seminal moment in American history. It had a profound impact on the way that the United States was viewed around the world. And the truth is -- this is why it's also important -- the truth is that President Obama's election informed the world a whole lot about the American people and about the potential that exists here in America.

So I think in some ways, that's a good example and a good reminder of the way that people around the world continue to watch our political debate, and they continue to follow our elections. And it's why what is said on the campaign trail by leading candidates

for President matters. It's not just idle chatter. It has an impact. But it's also why the decision that the American people will have to make this fall is so significant.

Okay. Let me do a quick week ahead. It's short.

On Monday, the President will visit the State Department to deliver remarks at the Chief of Missions Conference. This is the Chief of Missions of U.S. diplomatic facilities around the world are coming to Washington for a conference. The President will address those diplomats who are doing such important work representing the United States around the world.

Q Will that be in the morning?

MR. EARNEST: I believe it is late morning and early afternoon, actually -- around lunchtime.

Afterwards, the President will deliver brief opening remarks to the performance of musical selections from Hamilton. This will be a culmination of a daylong event hosted by the First Lady for students of the Broadway cast of Hamilton. I anticipate a lot of jockeying to be in the White House press pool that day.

On Tuesday, the President will hold --

Q (Inaudible.) (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: We'll get back to you on the timing. (Laughter.)

On Tuesday, the President will hold his annual bilateral meeting with Taoiseach Kenny of Ireland. Afterwards, the President and the Vice President will travel to the United States Capitol to the "Friends of Ireland" luncheon. Later on, the President will deliver remarks at a reception for St. Patrick's Day at the White House.

On Wednesday, the President will deliver remarks for Women's History Month at the White House.

And the President's schedule for Thursday and Friday still remains in flux. Obviously we'll be spending some time preparing for the President's trip to Cuba and Argentina. But we'll keep you updated on the President's schedule to the end of the week.

Q Josh, given that you mentioned the Taoiseach, is the President concerned about the fact that the Irish government still hasn't been organized, and do you expect him to talk with him about it when he's here?

MR. EARNEST: On previous visits when the President has met with the Taoiseach it has been an opportunity not just to celebrate the close ties between the United States and Ireland but also to discuss some important policy issues. And there are certainly some areas where we would like to see the Irish continue to make progress and continue to implement some reforms that they've been focused on for a long time.

Thank you, guys.

END

12:41 P.M. EST