

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 12/7/2015

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PRESS BRIEFING

BY PRESS SECRETARY JOSH EARNEST

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

2:05 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Monday. Let me start with a couple of brief comments before we go to your questions.

Many of you had the opportunity to watch and report on the President's address to the nation last night where he talked about the significance of the terror threat and the national security threat facing the United States, and he walked through an overview of the steps that this administration has taken on his orders over the last year to combat this threat and to secure the homeland. Included in the President's comments in his address were some steps that Congress could take to assist this effort. Let me mention one thing that he did not. Congress needs to pass a budget on time.

Shutting down the government is not going to enhance our national security. There are also some Republicans who are suggesting that they may need some additional time and therefore would pass a continuing resolution to fund the government at current levels.

The fact is the reason that we don't want to fund the government at current levels is because the budget agreement includes necessary and adequate funding for our national security. So passing a continuing resolution because Congress is unable to come to an agreement on the budget agreement is only going to underfund our national security efforts. It seems like a pretty bad time to be doing that.

So, once again, it is the responsibility of Congress to step forward and do their job and pass a budget for the United States government on time. And that is going to require Republicans in Congress abandoning their ongoing effort to advance their ideological agenda through the budgetary process. There continue to be negotiations that are bogged down by the repeated inclusion on the part of Republicans of ideological riders that in some cases are nothing more than earmarks to their largest campaign contributors. When our national security is at stake, that's not the right thing to do.

With that, Julie, let's go to your questions.

Q Let me just pick up on that, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: Great.

Q Has the President spoken to Speaker Ryan? As far as we know, they haven't met face to face since Speaker Ryan took office.

MR. EARNEST: They've had the opportunity to speak a number of times, but it's correct that they haven't had any meetings. This is a process right now that rests with Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill.

Q But certainly you're an influential party in this.

MR. EARNEST: No doubt. In fact, that's how I have the knowledge that I do to be able to speak about the ongoing process. But ultimately, Speaker Ryan is the leader of a substantial majority of Republicans in the House of Representatives and Senator McConnell is the leader of a substantial majority of Republicans in the United States Senate, and they have a significant responsibility to work with Democrats to advance a bipartisan budget agreement.

The fact is the hard work got done earlier this fall, and some of that was thanks to the influence of at least Leader McConnell, who was in a leadership role at that time. So the hard work has been done. It's just time to finish the job and to do so before the end of the week.

Q Moving on to Chicago. Does the White House have any response to the Justice Department opening an investigation into use of force by the Chicago Police Department?

MR. EARNEST: I do not. The decision to open a pattern of practice investigation that the Attorney General announced earlier today is a decision that is made by prosecutors at the Department of Justice and this is an independent decision that they made. And obviously there is important work and serious responsibilities that they have in conducting an investigation like that, and I'm confident that investigators at the Department of Justice are up to the task.

Q And I know you were asked about this last weekend and we didn't get a clear answer. Has the President talked to Rahm Emanuel -- not about the Justice Department investigation, specifically, but the broader situation in Chicago?

MR. EARNEST: Not that I'm aware of.

Q Okay. And then one quick follow-up on the President's remarks last night on encryption. He said -- a pretty vague line in his speech -- he said he would "urge high-tech and law enforcement to make it harder for terrorists to use technology to escape from justice." It seems kind of like a throw-away line on a pretty important topic. Is there something behind the scenes, some actual process? I know we heard on a call yesterday that the administration is not going to be pursuing any kind of legislative avenue on this.

MR. EARNEST: Well, Julie, let me first assure you that this has been a priority of the administration for some time. I wouldn't describe it as a throw-away line as much as --

Q It was pretty vague.

MR. EARNEST: Well, but, Julie, we're talking about a 13-minute speech where the President covered a lot of ground. So the President made a point of acknowledging this fact because it is significant and something that the administration has been focused on.

You'll recall -- and I think you may have even covered this -- when the President traveled to Stanford back in February, where he convened a cybersecurity summit, there were intensive discussions about this issue of encryption among leaders in academia and the private sector and, of course, law enforcement. And there are equities to balance here, that we, of course -- and the President believes in the importance of strong encryption, but at the same time, as the President mentioned last night, we don't want terrorists to have a safe haven in cyberspace.

Q I want to make sure we're understanding this right. Does he see this as something that needs to have more robust attention and focus behind it because of the attacks in Paris and in California, or is it kind of just continuing a process that has already been underway?

MR. EARNEST: Well, at this point of the investigation, I haven't heard the FBI say anything about what impact enhanced capabilities in this area on the part of law enforcement would have done in terms of preventing something like this. But we're mindful of the need to ensure that law enforcement professionals and our national security professionals have access to the tools they need to keep us safe.

Jeff.

Q Josh, does the White House have a reaction to the elections in Venezuela?

MR. EARNEST: Obviously I've seen the reports about them, and they've garnered a lot of attention. The Secretary of State noted earlier today the significance of these elections. And I think what is clear is that the people of Venezuela have expressed their overwhelming desire for a change in direction. And what's necessary is for all of the parties involved to engage in a dialogue about the future of that country mindful of the election results. So that's a process that we'll certainly continue to watch closely from here.

Q Is the President optimistic that this will help improve the relationship between Washington and Venezuela?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's something -- I think that remains to be seen. But obviously the strong levels of participation and the overwhelming expression of a desire for change is encouraging and something that we'll watch closely.

Q The President said last night that there would be a review of the K1 fiancé visa. Can you explain a little bit about what will be involved in that review? Is there a timeline for that? Are there changes that the President or the White House can make without congressional backing, or do you expect to get Congress involved in that, as well?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff -- well, let me back up and just say that the President -- the reference that the President made last night was to the visa program that the female terrorist in the San Bernardino case used to enter the country. This is what's known as a K1 visa, as you point out, and this is often a visa that is essentially used to allow fiancés of American citizens to enter the United States.

Those who go through this visa program are subjected to rigorous screening, but obviously this incident begs questions about whether or not additional measures or reforms need to be implemented. This is a program that includes both DHS and State Department input. I believe that the way that this works is that you apply for this program through the State Department -- because obviously you have to do it from overseas -- but then when it is implemented, it involves the Department of Homeland Security. So both agencies will be taking a close look at the roles that they have in this program and obviously determine what kinds of reforms would strengthen our national security.

Q When did the President ask for this?

MR. EARNEST: The President just announced it in his speech yesterday.

Q So did he ask for it yesterday?

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Michelle.

Q Thanks, Josh. Speaking of reviews, this DHS terror advisory system change, can you talk a little bit more about that? What exactly is it going to look like? Is it actually going to do anything useful, or is it sort of a move that people aren't necessarily going to pay attention to? How do you want to get people to pay attention to it?

MR. EARNEST: So, Michelle, this is a reference to NTAS, the National Terrorism Advisory System. This is a system that has been in place for several years now. It was essentially designed as a reform of the color-coded terror alert system that the Bush administration put in place. And the kinds of reforms that are being considered are reforms to this specific system that would make it easier and, frankly, more effective for the Department of Homeland Security to communicate with the public about what threats have been perceived, what steps are being taken to mitigate those threats, and recommend any steps that we believe that the public should take.

So these are still reforms that are being considered. You should not consider this a replacement of this program but rather some important reforms to the program that would allow it to be more effectively used to communicate with the American public.

Q Because I think if you ask just about anybody on the street what is the terror alert now, and is it a color or is it some other designation, I don't really know how many people would know. But does it matter? Is this something you've put out and if people want to find it they can? Or are you feeling like now it needs to be at a level where more people do know about it, kind of a greater dissemination of this information somehow?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think, Michelle -- I think, frankly, it depends on the circumstances in which guidance or an alert is being issued. Obviously, if an alert is being issued, then we definitely want people to pay attention and for there to be broadness -- broad awareness of it.

But the goal of these reforms is to give the Department of Homeland Security a mechanism for more effectively communicating with the American public about threats that are perceived. And I think you've highlighted a couple of ways in which that program could be improved. This is a process that actually -- this is not a review that has just been commenced; this is actually a review that's been underway for some time. And I know that Secretary Johnson indicated earlier today that he expected the results of that review to be released relatively soon.

Q Okay. And lastly, what is your response to some of the reaction that was expected to come right after the President's address, especially from Republican candidates, saying that this isn't anything new; is this all there is; it's just a couple of bombs each day, that's not really going to defeat ISIS? And again, every time he speaks it's going to keep coming up that he doesn't say radical Islamic terrorism; he called it an "act of terror," but he's not wanting to say Islamic. Are you feeling like that is just going to be overly broad and it's going to exacerbate the problem, as you've mentioned? Or is it to the point that he's not going to say it because people are -- his opponents are calling for him to say it? What would be the harm of actually saying that one word?

MR. EARNEST: Michelle, I think this -- the President essentially covered this in the last four or five paragraphs of his address last night. So I think for careful consideration of this issue, I'd encourage people to go back and look at that part of the speech again. The President made clear, as his predecessor did, that it would only serve ISIL's interest to leave people with the impression that somehow the West or the United States or the entire world is at war with Islam. That's a fantasy. That is not true. There are millions of patriotic Muslims in America right now that are outstanding members of their community, that are serving in the United States military, that are teachers, that are coworkers, that are neighbors, that are friends.

And I think the President was quite direct about the role that those Muslim Americans can play in defeating ISIL, both in terms of the responsibility that the Muslim community has to stand up and speak out against those extremist voices inside their community. At the same time, the broader American community has a responsibility to make clear that we're going to work with Muslim Americans to protect our country and to protect those in their community that are at risk of being radicalized.

Q Calling it an individual act of terror, an act of radical Islamic terror, that would indicate that we're at war with all of Islam?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it certainly would advance ISIL's narrative that somehow they were acting on behalf of Islam when, in fact, as the President noted yesterday, that the ideology that they are seeking to advance is a gross perversion of that religion.

April.

Q Josh, I have two different subjects I want to ask you about. First, what are the new parameters in place now that have to be followed for the relationship with the President and Rahm Emanuel in light of the Justice Department's investigation? What can they say to each other? What's off the table?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not aware of any -- let me say it this way, April -- the President is not going to be involved in the ongoing Department of Justice investigation, so I'm not aware of any limits that this would impose on his communications with the Mayor.

Q He's not supposed to talk about investigations -- by law, he's not supposed to talk about investigations with the Justice Department. So would that also not allow him to talk about anything as it relates to the investigation with Rahm?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll just say that the President believes in protecting the integrity of this ongoing investigation and he'll ensure that his comments both in public and in private don't do anything to undermine the integrity of that important investigation.

Q And the President last night talked about the no-fly issue for terrorists. Is he aware of this bill that's in the House Judiciary Committee that is basically an act of Congress that would update the terrorist watch list to put new people on, to put young people in this country who are not on the old list -- that would essentially put them on that list so it would be a new no-fly list, so if they go over to fight in Syria they're not allowed to come back here if they're on that list. What does the President and this White House feel about that bill that's working its way through the House Judiciary Committee?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't seen that bill, so we'll have to get back to you if we have a specific position on it.

Q Is that along the lines of what he was talking about last night?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I'd want to learn more about the bill before I commented on it.

Andrew.

Q The President's address last night included a call for national unity. I was wondering if you're surprised that there hasn't been that kind of unity as you may have seen in previous attacks -- for example, after 9/11.

MR. EARNEST: That's a thought-provoking question, actually. I don't think I carefully considered it. I guess there are two things that immediately come to mind. The first is something I think that the President noted directly. The President referred to that national unity in the context, as I recall, of being part of every element of America's capability to protect the country; that one of the things that makes America so strong and so powerful and so influential is the fact that we're a very diverse country that is very united around a set of core principles, and that only serves to enhance our national security, but it also makes us the greatest country in the world. That's the first thing that comes to mind.

I think the second thing that comes to mind is that a lot of these issues are being discussed in the context of a hotly competitive presidential election, and we have seen a willingness on the part of some candidates in that election to use some divisive rhetoric. And they have done that I think in a rather cynical fashion, understanding that it runs contrary to the values of our country, but also understanding that the intensity of some of those emotions could propel their political campaigns.

So that's a pretty cynical conclusion that I think some might say is automatically disqualifying to serve in the Oval Office. But obviously the American people will make that determination.

Ron.

Q In a more general way, how is the President feeling this morning about the speech, the morning after?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't spoken to him this morning about the speech, but I spoke to him last night after he delivered the speech and I think he was pleased with the way that the process had come together, and that his goal was to speak before a large audience of the American public to address the concerns that are obviously being felt across the country, for good reason, about the threat of terrorism, and he felt it was an important occasion last night to help the American people understand exactly what steps this administration is taking to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, to secure the homeland, and to fulfill the President's top objective, which is to keep the American people safe.

Q I ask because the reaction has been in some ways very negative. It's been that the moment was lost.

MR. EARNEST: I strongly disagree with that. I think if you look at -- I mean, again, it's going to be arbitrary, we're all just going to be citing sort of one-off instances, but if you look at the -- I had an opportunity to look at the headlines on the front pages of newspapers all across the country about the President's speech. And we'll get them for you. I think this is worthy of inclusion in your news report tonight. They do --

Q You think the reaction has been positive?

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I just look at the news coverage and I think what the reaction has been has been consistent with the message that the President himself delivered. This is a serious topic and the President began his speech by talking about 14 innocent Americans who lost their lives. But in terms of the American people and the news coverage, at least in most outlets, reflecting exactly what the President was trying to communicate, we feel good about the results. I think the President does, too.

Q Because I was struck by a lot of reporting, a lot of analysis of it was --

MR. EARNEST: The analysis I think is risky, Ron. It's risky, buddy. (Laughter.)

Q -- this is where we are, there was nothing new, that there was no grand proposal, that it was -- you hear there was no strategy, that, again, that he used the Oval Office for the third time in his tenure and on a Sunday night and this is all we get, was what some of the narrative was.

MR. EARNEST: Mostly from people who are political opponents of the President. Again --

Q Do you think that's just politics? Is that the point -- I'm asking a serious question. The point is I have to think that there's got to be some sense of the President that regardless of what he says he's not going to convince some people, but does he feel like he's not getting a fair hearing on this? Does he -- he really feels like he said something that should have moved this whole dialogue forward, that should have been reassuring to the American public?

MR. EARNEST: Well, look, the President's political opponents are not going to be satisfied, and that's okay. That's part of the process; that's part of an election; that's part of people who are competing to win the support of the American people. And I think it's disappointing sometimes when it takes place in the context of national security issues and often takes place without any regard for facts or evidence. But if we spent a lot of time worried or focused on that, we'd be focused on the wrong thing.

Q I think the --

MR. EARNEST: Let me finish. What the President was focused on last night was speaking before a large television audience of the American public to, again, describe to them exactly what steps this administration has taken for more than a year now to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL in Syria and Iraq, to protect the homeland, and to ensure that we're following through on the kinds of steps that are necessary to protect the public, and doing that in a way that both reflects the lessons learned of our recent history but also reinforces the values that are critical to our national security.

Q But that's the thing -- you said it -- it's been more than a year, and now at the end of this year or so you've had Paris and San Bernardino, despite the strategy, and even though it's being amped up or stepped up, I think people are wondering isn't there more, something else that can be done, if after a year this is what's happening. Is it inevitable

that with the strategy -- and the President says it's going to take some time -- so is it inevitable that there are going to be these Paris and San Bernardino style attacks? I certainly wouldn't think that he would accept that.

MR. EARNEST: He does not. And I think that he said on a number of occasions that he will not allow this to become the new normal or some part of some routine. The President is determined to ensure that that's not the case. But as you point out, when the President first ordered military action against ISIL targets in Iraq and in Syria more than a year ago, he acknowledged that this would be a process that would take some time, principally because the President was not going to commit U.S. ground troops to a sustained ground combat operation inside of Iraq and in Syria.

And as the President described yesterday, or last night, this is one of the lessons that we hopefully have learned from our recent history, that our victory -- and we will prevail -- but our victory will be more long-lasting and enduring if we pursue the strategy that the President has outlined, which is building up the capacity of local security forces to fight for their own country.

Q Just one last one. That's another part of this. I think we heard a lot about the military part of this in Syria and the coalition, Special Ops, so on and so on and so forth. The attack in San Bernardino, though, as the Attorney General and others have said, signals this new phenomenon, this new problem -- it's really not that new, but it's different -- the self-radicalization of people by what they're reading on the Internet and cyberspace. I don't think we heard a lot about exactly what the strategy is to deal with that, to stop exactly what seems to have happened in San Bernardino, an American citizen, his wife reading this stuff on the Internet and then deciding to go out and arm themselves and kill their coworkers. What is the strategy to deal with that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President did spend some time, and I think this is one portion of the speech where he did talk at length about the things we have to be sure we don't do in terms of making sure that the United States as a whole, both our government, our law enforcement and the community at large, seeks to work with the Muslim community in this country. Again, American Muslims serve in our military and put their lives on the line to protect the country. They serve in law enforcement. They are our teachers; they are our coworkers; they are our neighbors; they are our friends. And continuing to strengthen the role and the place that those Muslims have in American society is critical to our success.

Because ultimately, it will be Muslims in this country that will have to stand up and speak out against the extremist radicalizing forces inside their own community. And they will be more effective if they are working in close partnership with the federal government and with law enforcement and with our counterterrorism professionals, and with our neighbors to fight those kinds of forces.

But there are some additional steps, there are additional steps that the federal government has taken to pursue this effort to counter violent extremism. And some of this is our efforts that are underway overseas. I mentioned this a little bit last week -- the

creation of international CT and CVE clearinghouse mechanisms. These are essentially resources located in countries around the world -- Muslim countries, as you'd expect, in most cases -- that are responsible for countering the effort of extremist organizations to radicalize people around the globe.

Here at home, the federal government has supported pilot projects in cities like Boston, Los Angeles and the Twin Cities where law enforcement both at the federal and local levels have worked with community leaders in the Muslim community, but in other communities, too, to build strong connections, to counter sort of radicalizing messaging of extremists, but also to reach out to those who are at risk of being radicalized, and giving them an alternative opportunity.

And there are no easy answers to this, but there is a strategy that we can implement that we are optimistic will succeed in making the country safer.

Q I'm familiar with the program in Minneapolis. To follow up on this question from earlier, what more is there about this law enforcement tech industry, not just on the issue of encryption -- what does the President foresee happening -- monitoring Twitter? Monitoring YouTube? What exactly is the extent of that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is a question that tech companies I think are largely going to have to answer for themselves. They will do that in the context of a conversation with law enforcement and with government experts. But, obviously, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter recognize that their tools were created in the context of an open society, and the kind of atmosphere that allowed them to innovate and to create new technologies that have allowed people to establish relationships even if they're divided by time and space is powerful, and is successful only in the context of an open society.

So they, at the same time, have their own interest in not seeing these tools be used to incite or radicalize or call for people to carry out acts of terrorism. Of course, they have a responsibility that they obviously believe strongly in, which is protecting free speech. But these are the kinds of discussions that the Obama administration and technology companies, particularly social media companies, have been engaged in for some time now.

Major.

Q Josh, going back to your opening statement, just to be clear, will the President veto a CR if the congressional Republicans are not -- completed their work by the end of this week?

MR. EARNEST: The President has made clear -- and he said this when he signed the last CR -- that he would not sign another CR like the one that he did earlier this fall, which is to say the one that he -- the continuing resolution he signed this fall was to give Congress additional time to negotiate a bipartisan budget agreement, and that's why the CR wasn't just a couple of weeks, but it was actually a couple of months, to give them ample time to sit down -- Democrats and Republicans -- and hammer out the topline

numbers, and then work through the individual numbers below that. And the President was quite clear at that point that he would not sign another one like that. And that continues to be his position today.

Now, there might be a scenario --

Q -- one that is consistent with the spending levels that are currently understood and negotiated, but you don't have \$1.1 trillion in spending. You are moving in that direction, but they need three more days. It's consistent with that larger envelope, if you will, of spending, but it's not the full deal. Will he sign that to avert a shutdown?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I hadn't heard anybody float that proposal.

Q I'm not floating one, I'm just asking. I'm not in a position to float something.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. (Laughter.)

Q I'm trying to figure out, if Friday midnight is the deadline, absolutely end of story, and you have your work done by then or there will be a government shutdown.

MR. EARNEST: It is the deadline. The one thing that I would hold out is that if there is some sort of negotiation that yields a breakthrough and an agreement is reached at, say, 11:30 on Friday night, and House and Senate leaders say --

Q Just a matter of drafting and enrolling and all that, procedural only.

MR. EARNEST: Exactly. So the way that I'd describe this is, the President is not going to sign a CR that will give members of Congress additional time to negotiate. That's essentially sort of where we are.

Q Thank you. You've mentioned ideological riders. Can you stipulate what those are? What falls into that category and what does not?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess this is one of those things that when you see it, you know it.

Q Syrian refugees -- yes or no?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not going to walk through all of the -- there are dozens of proposals that are floating around Capitol Hill.

Q Dodd-Frank changes?

MR. EARNEST: So we've made clear that the President is not supportive of targeting Syria refugees, orphans or widows. The President has made clear that he is not going to sign legislation that undermines the effective implementation of Wall Street reform legislation. So our position on all of these matters is quite clear and hasn't changed.

But ultimately, what we would like to see is Republicans in Congress engage in a process that is genuinely bipartisan. Because this is the thing about that, Major -- if Republicans do insert a rider that undermines the effective implementation of Wall Street reform, I recognize that that is something that is strongly supported by the biggest contributors to the Republican National Committee, but it's not something that's going to pass the United States Senate because Democrats are not going to go along with it.

So that's the other reason here. It's not just the President's objection to ideological riders; it's that if Republicans try to pass a budget bill along party lines, it's not going to work. And there's nobody who can testify to that better than former Speaker of the House John Boehner.

Q The President, last night, described the actions he would like Congress to take on gun control as a "matter of national security." There was a lively exchange last week about whether or not any of the President's initiatives would have stopped or prevented what happened in San Bernardino. You could see that there's no evidence that there would have. So I'm wondering why the President chose to place those initiatives in the context of national security when the preceding incident that is most on the minds of the country has no relevance to that argument.

MR. EARNEST: Those who might levy that criticism, are they suggesting that we should wait for somebody who is on the no-fly list to go buy a gun and kill a bunch of innocent Americans and then we should pass a law? Is that what we're waiting for?

Q That's not the question I asked. The question I asked is why the President described this as a matter of national security in a speech built around an episode, a massacre that has raised concerns and a sense of anxiety in the country? So it's a national security context, and yet there's --

MR. EARNEST: Major --

Q I'm just asking.

MR. EARNEST: And I'm trying to answer. The country is not just concerned about what happened in San Bernardino. The country is concerned about the potential risk of terrorism in this country. And right now, we do not have a law on the books that prevents people who are on the no-fly list from being able to walk into a gun store and purchasing a gun. And the President believes it is in our national security interest to make sure that people who the government has determined are too dangerous to board a plane, to stop them from buying a gun.

Q And how would you respond to those who believe that there are if not serial inaccuracies on that no-fly list, there are enough inaccuracies on that list that that must be corrected before you can have a law of the kind the President is now suggesting? And I understand the Bush administration also proposed -- it's not a new idea. I would just like you to address that.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I would say that the United States government has made enhancements to DHS's Traveler Redress Inquiry Program. This is essentially the way that if people believe that they are wrongly included on the no-fly list, that they can go through the process of having their name cleared. So there is a process established here.

But here's the other thing about this. If the government has determined that in the interest of national security that we're going to deprive you of your rights to board an airplane just like anybody else, then I think it follows and is common sense that we're also going to deprive you of your right to buy a gun just like everybody else until such time as you've been able to satisfy any concerns that the federal government has about your links to terrorism.

Q Back to Julie's question -- and you were talking a little bit to Ron about this -- when the President brought up encryption, he wasn't talking about monitoring YouTube and Facebook and Twitter. He's talking about something new, a different topic about dark apps and things that are undetectable under current methods, right? That's the conversation you would like to open and at least get tech companies engaged in offering either suggestions or openness, correct? That's what he's driving at?

MR. EARNEST: The truth is, he's talking about both. And there is this concern that essentially relates to our ability to investigate and prevent acts of terrorism that there are some terrorists or potential terrorists, would-be terrorists, who are exploiting encrypted technology to prevent essentially the government from being able to --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. EARNEST: Yes -- to determine what it is they're talking about in apps to prevent them from carrying out an act of violence.

The point that we have made here is that the President believes strongly in good encryption and strong encryption, that that's important to protecting our civil liberties. At the same time, the people who have designed these communications tools certainly didn't design them to aid and abet a terrorist. So there should be some common ground that the government and technology companies can find to address this concern and to make sure that the American people are safe.

Q Last thing -- is there anything in the investigation that suggests to the President that the K1 visa process was not fully carried out in the case of Tashfeen Malik?

MR. EARNEST: The way that this woman entered the United States is something that is still under investigation.

Q Right, but to mention -- because it is an exhaustive process. It's six months to two years, there's a lengthy questionnaire; a follow-up in-person interview. I'm just curious if there's anything that he's learned in all the various briefings he's had that that process wasn't carried out to its fullest extent and, therefore, the existing procedures need to be tightened up? Or does this need to be -- do there need to be more procedures added on to the substantial ones that already exist?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I understand it, both of those are questions that are still being asked about what were the circumstances, what was the screening to which this individual was --

Q To order the review, something must have tripped that, the need to have this reviewed.

MR. EARNEST: I think in the President's mind, he saw that this individual entered the country -- and I think it raises legitimate, common-sense questions about whether or not that program needs to be changed as a result. And I think that's what he's asking the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security to consider.

Mara.

Q To the extent that the President did talk about some new strategies to confront this new kind of threat, he said two things. One is this idea of denying terrorists this online space to recruit. And you just said that this is a question that tech companies are going to largely have to answer for themselves. I mean, aren't you demanding something? Don't you want something specific from these tech companies? I mean, isn't there some kind of urgency? Don't you have something in mind?

MR. EARNEST: Well, yes. And that's been the subject of extensive conversation. I think that's what the rest of the answer that you quoted from there underscored. But the point that I'm trying to make here, Mara, is that YouTube and Facebook and Twitter and these other social media tools, they didn't design their tools expressly so that terrorists could carry out acts of violence against innocent people; they don't want their tools used in that way. And so they have their own interest in making sure that these tools are used properly, consistent with both the First Amendment right of Americans, consistent with the privacy of their users, but also consistent with the national security of the country that created an environment where tools like this could be invented.

Q Right, I understand you're saying why it should be in their interest, too, but what specifically do you want them to do?

MR. EARNEST: Well, this is the subject of ongoing conversation among law enforcement professionals, among academics and others about how to resolve these questions about rights -- about free speech rights, about personal privacy, but also about protecting the country.

Q Hillary Clinton gave a speech the other day where she said we have to deny them online space. Do you want these websites and chatrooms shut down?

MR. EARNEST: What we want is these companies to continue to play an active role in working with the government to, again, as the President described, to deny them a safe haven in cyberspace.

Now, this raises a bunch of thorny questions. And we're going to resist the urge to go and trample a bunch of civil liberties here, but there are steps that we believe we can work through with the technology companies to take some common-sense measures that would enhance public safety.

Q Okay. And the other new thing was where he talked about the responsibility of the Muslim community to confront this ideology, he said, "without excuse." This was the sharpest language he's used to date about Muslims' own responsibility to counter this ideology. It sounds like -- have you been getting a lot of excuses from the Muslim community about why they're not doing this? And what exactly do you want to see coming from the Muslim community in terms of countering this ideology?

MR. EARNEST: I would concede, Mara, that this is probably the -- it probably is the sharpest language that he's used on this. But the President gave a news conference in Turkey three weeks ago today where he spent quite a bit of time talking about this precise issue. So this is not a new statement on his part. But I would readily acknowledge that this was the most direct way in which it was phrased.

And I think, frankly, what we would like to see is we would like to see leaders in the Muslim community stand up and speak out more forcefully in terms of condemning these hateful, radicalizing messages that we see from extremist organizations, and to continue to work effectively with law enforcement to protect those members of their community that are most at risk and most vulnerable to being radicalized.

I cited the experience of a couple of pilot projects, where the Department of Justice and one of their community outreach offices has been able to work effectively with leaders in Boston and the Twin Cities and Los Angeles to pursue these kinds of ideas. And so we've made some important progress, and there are some best practices that have been learned. And this was the subject of the conversation here at the White House at the Countering Violent Extremism Summit that we hosted here. But there's obviously a lot more important work to be done.

And I think the President's message that he delivered in his speech last night, it's important for that to be read in a way that reflects the full message here, both on the responsibility that non-Muslims in the United States have to resist the temptation to stigmatize and to marginalize and to target Muslims, and to recognize the incentive that we have to work with the Muslim community to strengthen all of our communities in this country. At the same time, the President was trying to acknowledge the responsibility that leaders in the Muslim community have to speak out against sort of those hateful and radicalizing messages that extremist organizations are seeking to propagate primarily on social media.

Jim.

Q A lot has gone on since February when the President went to Stanford and had this conversation with the folks there. And now it's generally conceded we are at war with terrorists. In a time of war, isn't it time to trample some of those civil liberties perhaps,

and for the President now to change his tone about privacy in this particular issue, and to call for, in fact, these chatrooms to be shut down; for the government to have more access to find out who is plotting against the United States and may be incited by these groups overseas? Isn't it -- has the President changed his mindset from when he was expressing concerns about civil liberties in February to now because of what's happened?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, the President continues to be a strong believer and defender of civil liberties. And his view about the importance of doing that has not changed. I think at the same time, there is clearly additional work that can be done -- technology companies are sort of a good example for all of this -- where we can have a conversation about how we can both ensure strong encryption to protect people's civil liberties while at the same time making sure that our law enforcement and national security professionals have the tools and access they need to keep us all safe.

At the same time, the President believes in the free expression of ideas and free speech, but at the same time --

Q Even ideas that incite attacks on this country?

MR. EARNEST: At the same time, it is -- well, look, there are limits on First Amendment rights, right? The famous legal truism about shouting "fire" in a crowded theater -- that incitement is certainly something that we want to counter online. And the President was blunt about that. And there is an obvious interest that the technology companies have in countering that incitement.

And again, there is a way for the government and our law enforcement and our homeland security professionals to work effectively with technology companies essentially to do both -- to protect free speech, but at the same time, prevent and counter the efforts of extremist organizations to use social media to incite people to carry out acts of violence.

Q As you say, there are, in fact, limits on free speech, especially during times of war. And while this is not a declared war, certainly the American public believes that we're at war now with terrorist groups.

MR. EARNEST: Well, let's just talk about that for a second. We've been at war with al Qaeda since September of 2001. I was asked back in September of 2014 point-blank -- Bill Press is in the back today. Bill, you were the name that popped up on the transcript of the person who asked -- no, I give you credit for this. You asked me directly, September --

Q Are we at war with ISIS.

MR. EARNEST: Yes. Yes. And I said, yes. Where's the transcript? I said --

Q What year was this?

MR. EARNEST: This was September 22, 2014.

Q It was before that. It was September 12th.

MR. EARNEST: Oh, wow. (Laughter.) Michelle did her homework today. The point is, for more than a year, I have been asked and other senior administration officials have been asked about whether or not we're at war with ISIL. So some of the coverage last night sort of seemed to have forgotten about that, and I was surprised.

So the fact is, we are at war, because ISIL has declared war on the United States and the rest of the world. There's a reason that the United States is leading a global coalition of 65 nations to degrade and destroy them.

Q But the threat appears now not to only be on the war you're talking about, with the coalition fighting ISIL in Syria and Iraq, but more pointedly now, here in the United States, with homeland terrorists who are being incited on the Internet. And my question - - and I think some of the public's question -- is why is the President asking the technology companies to do their civic duty instead of coming out and demanding that this stop?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me also say that for years before ISIL ran across the desert in Iraq and established a safe haven inside of Syria, the counterterrorism professionals here in the United States, both in the Obama administration and in the previous one, were active in disrupting plots here in the homeland -- plots that's were inspired by terrorist organizations overseas.

The way that this threat has evolved is that ISIL has proven to be a particularly effective radicalizer and inspirer of violence -- certainly not the first one, but they are the latest iteration of it. And they do have an effective strategy for propagating their hateful ideology in a way that seeks to inspire people to carry out acts of violence.

So this isn't -- the point is, this isn't new. But it is more serious because we have seen that ISIL is more effective than some other organizations that have attempted to do the same thing. So we're mindful of that threat. And I think -- again, this is the reason the President ordered military action in Iraq and in Syria in the first place, is to prevent ISIL - - or to kick ISIL out of the safe haven that they've established in this part of the world. By having a safe haven, it makes it easier for them to devise these online strategies. And if we can apply additional pressure to them, take out ISIL leaders, we can be effective in countering their ability to spread that ideology online.

Let me give you one example. Three or four weeks ago, the United States took an airstrike that took out "Jihadi John." This was an ISIL leader who had worked hard to cultivate his online personality by appearing in those disgusting, violent execution videos. That certainly is going to be disruptive to their strategy. It can't be the only element of our strategy, but applying this military pressure that has been underway for more than a year is part and parcel of our effort to counter them online.

Q Just to tie it up, just to -- maybe you can understand the criticism, or get -- what I'm trying to get at is, out there, there is a great deal of people who are saying the President is holding meetings, talking with technology companies, and while they're

talking about it this is still going on. Why isn't something being done? Why isn't something being announced as this is what we're doing now, we're going to do this, instead of saying we're going to talk to technology companies about it?

MR. EARNEST: Again, Jim, as I tried to describe earlier, there is a specific strategy that we are pursuing to counter all of ISIL's efforts to use social media to radicalize people around the world and here in the United States. And there are a variety of strategies for doing that. One is to apply intense pressure to them overseas. The second is to shut down their financing efforts -- that will prevent them from being able to fund their ongoing efforts. The third is to make sure that we're building a stronger relationship with the Muslim American community here at home, that we can do a better job of figuring out which people are most likely to be vulnerable to radicalizing ideology and to try to get to them before they carry out an act of violence.

We're also working with the technology companies to deny ISIL or other extremists essentially a safe haven by using encryption. And we certainly are working with technology companies to reduce the ability of extremist organizations to use social media to spread their hateful ideology.

So it's not just one thing; in fact, it is a comprehensive strategy. And it's one that's going to require vigilance and determination, but it's one that the President is confident if we continue to implement it effectively, that it will work and we will prevail.

Alexis.

Q Josh, I have a couple quick things. Five weeks ago, the President said that he had authorized up to 50 Special Ops to go into Syria, and, as you know, Secretary Clinton yesterday said that it's urgent to get them on the ground as soon as possible and assess what's needed, maybe expand their number. Can you update us on when the President's Special Ops team that he ordered is expected to be on the ground, and whether he agrees that he can assess then, based on how they're doing on the ground, to perhaps enlarge their number?

MR. EARNEST: Alexis, I think for obvious operational security reasons, I can't talk about the travel plans of our special operators in Syria. So I'm not in a position to --

Q The Secretary seemed to know that they were not on the ground. Is that correct?

MR. EARNEST: Again, you'd have to check with the Department of Defense. If they have the ability to describe to you more about where those forces are operating you can check with them, but I'm not able to give you much information on that, unfortunately.

Q To follow up on the President's initiatives on guns, the President has been reviewing executive orders that -- order or power that he might exert. He made no mention of that last night. What's the status of the review that's ongoing?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an update for you beyond confirming for you that it is ongoing.

Q All right. And then third -- because I'm striking out here -- (laughter) -- the President also mentioned a summit on extremist financing, December 17th. Can you explain what is new about that, whether that's a Treasury Department initiative, how that will work?

MR. EARNEST: This is actually a summit that is going to be convened at the United Nations at the United Nations Security Council. Finance ministers from the countries that are serving on the United Nations Security Council will come together to engage in a discussion about intensifying the international community's strategy for shutting off ISIL's financing. We know that, right now, ISIL benefits significantly from selling oil on the black market and other strategies that allow them to fund their operations.

But it's not just the United Nations that needs to have this discussion. The United States Senate needs to have this discussion. For more than a year, the United States has been waiting on Republicans in the Senate to confirm Adam Szubin to the position at the Treasury Department to fill the office that's responsible for leading the U.S. government's work in this area. Mr. Szubin is a financial expert. He's an attorney who served not just President Obama, but also President Bush. There is nobody that I've seen that has quibbled with his credentials or his ability to do the job.

All we've seen is Republican partisan obstruction in the United States Senate that, frankly, makes it harder for us to implement this element of our counter-ISIL strategy. So I'm not really sure how Republicans look themselves in the mirror when they continue to do this. Maybe they don't. Maybe they can shave in the dark. But the fact is, there is no excuse --

Q Or not shave.

MR. EARNEST: Or not shave. There is no excuse for this. And we're hopeful that Republicans will act to confirm Mr. Szubin as soon as possible.

Q Just to clarify, Secretary Lew will represent the United States government at that --

MR. EARNEST: That's correct. So this is a meeting that will be convened at the finance ministers' level, so Secretary Lew would be -- and even if Mr. Szubin were confirmed, Secretary Lew would be responsible for representing the United States at that particular meeting. But when it comes to our ability to work with the international community to shut off ISIL's financing, it would certainly aid our efforts to have a confirmed individual in that position.

Q The President won't attend?

MR. EARNEST: He will not. This is a finance-level -- finance ministers-level meeting. Kevin.

Q How about Secretary Kerry? Will he be there, as well?

MR. EARNEST: Again, this is a finance ministers' meeting, so I don't believe Secretary Kerry will be there.

Q Do you have an update or reaction to the apparent killing of the ISIS leader in Libya?

MR. EARNEST: I do. This is something that was confirmed by the Department of Defense just today. I believe it was two or three weeks ago that the Department of Defense announced that they were carrying out this action against the top ISIL official in Libya. And the Department of Defense did confirm today that they had taken this individual off the battlefield.

I would also note that the Department of Defense also confirmed today that a U.S. military airstrike in Somalia resulted in the death of Abdirahman Sandhere. He's also known as "Ukash." This is a senior leader of al Qaeda -- I'm sorry, a senior leader of the al Qaeda-affiliated group, al-Shabaab in Somalia. And I think this is testament to the ongoing efforts of the administration and the Department of Defense to apply significant pressure to extremist organizations around the world who are seeking to do harm to the United States.

Q Senator Lindsey Graham this morning said, "There's nobody left in Syria to train." The people that we're training are Kurds, the YPG. He says they have no ability or desire to go into Raqqa, for example, and take down the caliphate, or to take it away from ISIL. Where does he have that wrong?

MR. EARNEST: Well, what we have found, Kevin, is that in some place in northern -- primarily in northern and northeastern Syria, we have been able to coordinate with a variety of groups in that region who have been effective in driving out ISIL. So we've talked a lot about this statistic that ISIL is no longer able to operate in about 20 to 25 percent of the area that they previously controlled. That's evidence of the success that we have had in pushing back ISIL.

Certainly, the Kurds have been effective partners with our coalition. But there have also been Turkmen fighters; there have also been some Arab fighters in that region of the world -- or that region of Syria that have been effective in fighting ISIL. And we're going to continue to support all of those groups in that effort.

Q Does the President believe that ISIL, or ISIS, will be destroyed while he is in office?

MR. EARNEST: The President has been clear from the very beginning that this is a longer-term proposition. And I would not envision a scenario where the United States has completed the mission of destroying ISIL in the next 13 months. But we certainly would expect that we're going to continue to make progress in degrading that organization by taking out its leaders, by further restricting its financing, by taking out its infrastructure, and by taking more territory that they -- continuing the progress of taking back territory that they'd previously controlled.

Q Just a couple more. You said -- or the President said last night that special operators would obviously continue to go in and do the work of the United States. Is the President satisfied with the equipping of Syrians and Iraqis to take the fight to ISIL?

MR. EARNEST: Well, part of our strategy has been to equip fighters on the ground both in Iraq and in Syria.

Q How is that going?

MR. EARNEST: Well, obviously those are two different situations. Inside of Iraq we have a central government with whom we can work, and there are Iraqi forces that have been mobilized by the central government that are operating under the command and control of the central government that are receiving some equipment from the central government there and that can be augmented by contributions from the United States and our coalition partners.

For example, there are a number of other countries, aside from the United States, that are engaged in training efforts there. So that's just one example of how other coalition partners are assisting that effort.

In Syria, it's a little bit different because there's obviously no central government with whom we can coordinate. So these are groups of fighters that are less well-organized. They have less support. They have less access to formal training. They have less access to equipment. And so they need greater assistance. So that's why, frankly, the challenge in Syria is even greater than the significant challenge that we face inside of Iraq.

Q So we could expect less progress in Syria, given the parameters on the ground?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm hesitant to make that kind of prediction. I think that the challenges that we face in Syria are different and more significant just because we don't have a central government with whom we can closely coordinate.

The Abadi government, to their credit, even in the face of some very difficult circumstances, has worked to try to govern that country in a multi-sectarian way and to unite that country to counter the threat from ISIL. We have seen no indication that the Assad regime is prepared to do that, and so that makes it a little bit more difficult as we try to mobilize and support a fighting force on the ground inside of Syria.

Q Is it realistic to expect the Turkey-Syria border to be sealed?

MR. EARNEST: It certainly is doable. It will require a commitment on the part of the Turks to do it. We have seen, because of the investment that the Turks have made in other sections of their previously contested border, that they have been able to secure significant portions of their more than 500-mile-long border with Syria. But there continues to be this corridor, this 98-kilometers-wide corridor along their border that remains unsecure. That's a problem because through that corridor flows oil on the black market. We know that there are foreign fighters moving back and forth through that corridor. There are other items that are being bought and sold along that corridor. And shutting down ISIL's financing is an important part of our effort to degrade and ultimately destroy them.

So there is more that we would like to see the Turks do to secure that border. And, frankly, we've seen the Turks already act effectively to shut down large portions of their border. We just need them to finish the job.

Q Last one. I want to ask you about the ongoing negotiations, looking for a ceasefire or some sort of a transition of power in Syria. Where are we on that? Would the President like to see that process, especially here, over the next several weeks?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kevin, as you know, there is this January 1st deadline where we hope we would be able to at least get a ceasefire in some parts of the country and begin to have the kinds of talks that would lead to an eventual political process in that country.

So I don't believe that there have been any meetings on this in the last couple of weeks, but there certainly is potential for a meeting in the next couple of weeks. And this is something that Secretary Kerry and his team continue to work on every single day. Even if there aren't formal meetings, I know that Secretary Kerry is in touch with his counterparts around the world on this.

For a more detailed update, I'd check with the State Department. They may have some more details for you.

Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. Just before you came out, Michael McCaul, the Chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, said that intelligence officials have determined that Islamist extremists in Syria have explored using the refugee program to enter the United States. That's not something that the administration has said publicly. So I'm wondering if you can confirm whether that's true, or was Chairman McCaul off base?

MR. EARNEST: I am not able to confirm that piece of information, so I guess I'd refer you to Mr. McCaul's office to explain where he got that information.

I do think it does, however, give me the opportunity to remind all of you that those individuals that seek to enter the United States through the refugee resettlement program do so only after undergoing the most intensive screening of anybody who attempts to enter the United States, to say nothing of the screening that takes place by the United Nations to determine whether or not these individuals should be included in the program in the first place.

So once they are determined by the U.N. to be eligible for this program, these individuals, if they are referred to the United States, are, while they are outside of our borders, interviewed by national security professionals, biographic and biometric information about them is collected. It is then run through a variety of databases maintained by the National Counterterrorism Center, by the Department of Defense, by Interpol, by other elements of our intelligence community, and then only then, a process that typically takes upwards of two years, are those individuals allowed to enter the United States.

Francesca.

Q A couple on the topic du jour, Josh. We talked about the radical Islamic terrorism thing, and I don't mean to beat a dead horse here, so to speak, but one Republican yesterday specifically came up with what I'd call a new line of attack on that, comparing it to Pearl Harbor, as today is the anniversary, and I'm not sure if you're familiar with the comment I'm referring to specifically. Okay, I'll go ahead and read it for you. "Could you imagine FDR going before Congress and saying we were attacked yesterday on Pearl Harbor, I really don't want to talk about who did it, but you know, we just want to say that they were terrible people and they were thugs." And so I was wondering what your reaction was to that, and do you think that that's a fair comparison?

MR. EARNEST: I do not. And I think to make comparisons like that only serves to inflate ISIL and to buy into their fantasy that somehow they're leading a war against the West on behalf of Islam. They're not. That's a fantasy.

This is a dangerous organization that the United States and the other 65 members of our coalition have mobilized to counter. So the President and the leaders of countries around the world certainly takes this threat seriously. But it's also important for us to recognize it for what it is. And I think that's why the President has taken the approach that he has.

Q And next on that, you mentioned earlier in the briefing that some of the Republican presidential candidates who are getting a little heated with their rhetoric, it may be because they are running for President. But they would put it back on the White House and say that last night the President was partisan in what he had to say about guns and some of those other issues. And do you think that that's fair? Do you think specifically as pertains to guns that the President has sort of I guess contributed to that strife with the Republicans in Congress and running for President by bringing up topics like gun control during a speech that's a national address to the nation?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Francesca, I would note that there are at least a couple of Republicans that agree with the President's view, that if the government has determined that it is too dangerous for you to board an airplane that you should not be able to buy a gun. So I don't think it is partisan. We wish there were more Republicans who were willing to speak up and show some political courage in that measure. But again, the President didn't bring it up because of his interest in politics; the President brought it up because of his interest in our nation's security.

And it does pose a threat to our national security to continue to allow extremists to exploit the easy access to guns in this country, particularly when you consider that, as I just mentioned, individuals who are on the no-fly list are not prevented from purchasing a gun -- at least the way the law is written on the books -- that there are also significant loopholes in the background check process that allows individuals to go to a gun show or even purchase a firearm over the Internet without undergoing a background check.

That has led to too much innocent loss of life, this easy access to guns. And that's something that the President is concerned about, again, not because of politics, but because of the impact that it has on our national security.

Q But I think that they were mostly referring to the assault weapons -- not as much the no-fly list.

MR. EARNEST: And there are some Republicans that support reinstating the assault weapons ban.

Q Yes, but the last thing -- last night, the President stood before a lectern in front of the Resolute Desk to give his address, and that was a bit unusual only in the sense that it's rarely done that way. Typically, the President sits behind the Resolute Desk instead of standing at a lectern before -- I did my homework on this a little bit. And I was wondering if there was a specific reason that he approached the speech last night that way.

MR. EARNEST: Well, in doing your homework, I'm sure you saw the pictures of President Bush standing before a podium in the Oval Office when he made a few announcements in there.

I think in general what we have found is we've reached the same conclusion that many of your colleagues in the television industry have found, which is when they go to the South Lawn, they call it a "stand-up" for a reason.

Toluse, I'll give you the last one.

Q Thanks, Josh. On guns, a couple different questions. The Supreme Court today refused to take up a challenge to a local government's law basically banning assault weapons. I'm wondering if the White House has a response to that decision and whether or not the President may be more willing to look at cities as places where he could get his proposal for banning assault weapons since it's not seeming to move forward in Congress.

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a reaction to the specific decision by the Supreme Court in that regard. As it relates to other jurisdictions of government, either state or local authorities taking steps to prevent those who shouldn't get their hands on guns from getting one, we obviously have seen a number of local jurisdictions take those steps with the goal of trying to make their communities safer.

I think what many people have concluded is that broader legislation is required; that it's too easy to move guns across those local jurisdictions; that when a large city, even Chicago, for example, puts in place measures that are pretty effective in keeping guns out of the hands of those who shouldn't have them, that it's too easy for those individuals -- criminals or those who are the subject of a restraining order -- to just drive out to the suburbs, to drive across the county line, and purchase a gun and bring it back into the city. That only underscores the need for broader legislation that would keep our communities -- at least make our communities safer.

Q -- legislation include an assault weapons ban and a federal one sort of reviving that? Is that something the President would push for?

MR. EARNEST: It's not a matter of reviving it. The President has long supported reinstating the assault weapons ban.

Q -- make a case for bringing that back up in the national discussion?

MR. EARNEST: The President continues to believe that that's important. I believe the President mentioned it in a recent interview.

Q And I also have a question sort of about the gun industry. I think today, Smith & Wesson saw their stock reach an eight-year high. The day after Black Friday was one of the biggest days for gun sales. I'm wondering if all this discussion is sort of having a negative effect in the President's mind, that he's bringing up this discussion and not getting any action in Congress, but when it comes to sort of the dollars and cents of it, the gun industry is doing probably the best that it has in a very long time -- whenever we see shootings, whenever we see the President make statements about gun control. Is there a frustration on the President's part? Is there sort of an assessment about whether or not this is the right strategy?

MR. EARNEST: I guess if I can harken back to high school English, I guess this is the definition of tragic irony. And I've seen the same statistics that you just cited, and I do think it underscores the need for Congress to finally take some common-sense steps, again, that don't undermine the protected, constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans, but do make it a little harder for criminals, for people who are suspected of having links to terrorism, for people with mental problems from being able to purchase a gun. And congressional action in this regard is the most powerful antidote to that problem and also long overdue.

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

END 3:17 P.M. EST