

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 2/3/14

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Happy Monday to you. I don't have any announcements to make at the top of this briefing, so we'll get right to questions.

Josh.

Q Thanks, Jay. I wanted to ask you about the President's upcoming trip to Saudi Arabia. As you know, this is coming at a time of some tense relations with Saudi Arabia and some concerns that the Saudis have about how the U.S. has handled the situation in Iran and Syria and some other countries in the neighborhood. So is one of the goals of this trip to do some damage control and to reassure the Saudis that we're still on the same page with them?

MR. CARNEY: Josh, Saudi Arabia is a close partner of the United States and we have a bilateral relationship that is broad and deep and covers a range of areas. And the President very much looks forward to the visit where all of those areas will be discussed in his meetings. And whatever differences we may have do not alter the fact that this is a very important and close partnership.

Q And I wanted to ask you about some comments that Secretary Kerry reportedly made to some senators about Syria, suggesting that the current U.S. policy in Syria is not going to work and may need to be adjusted. So I guess the question for you is, is President Obama still confident in our current policy on Syria?

MR. CARNEY: I think the stories you're referring to actually appear to be a reflection of what Senators McCain and Graham think of our Syria policy, not what Secretary Kerry thinks.

Q They we're talking about what Kerry said to them about --

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, it's a characterization, I think, that reflects how Senator Graham and Senator McCain view our policy, not how Secretary Kerry views it. As you know, the State Department has already responded to this, and as they said, it's no secret

that some members of Congress support arming the rebels, but at no point during Secretary Kerry's meeting in Munich with members did he raise a lethal assistance for the opposition. He was describing a range of options that the administration has always had at its disposal, including more work within the structure of the international community, and engaging with Congress on their ideas is an important part of that process.

As the State Department said, this is a case of members projecting what they want to hear and not stating the facts of what was discussed. And again, I think that the position that Senator Graham and Senator McCain have vis-à-vis our policy has been clearly stated and broadcast many times.

Q But does the President feel that the current policy that we're pursuing in Syria is the right one?

MR. CARNEY: Absolutely. We believe that it is absolutely necessary to press for a negotiated political resolution to this conflict. There is no other alternative. And you know the President has spoken about this issue on a number of occasions and his view that we should not be putting American troops on the ground in Syria and that we need to pursue a policy that presses both sides on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué to resolve this conflict through a negotiated settlement. There is no other path ultimately for Syria that does not include or is not driven by a negotiated political settlement.

Q And was there any reaction from the President to the death of Philip Seymour Hoffman? Was he a fan of the actor?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't spoken with the President about that tragic piece of news so I don't know. It's hard to imagine, if you are a fan of incredibly powerful acting, you weren't a fan of Philip Seymour Hoffman who was just a remarkable talent, in my view, although, again, I'm speaking for myself. I haven't spoken with the President about it. It's very sad news.

Q Jay, back on Syria, arming the rebels, forming a coalition against al Qaeda -- do those remain options that you could move toward?

MR. CARNEY: Again, that was not a discussion that Secretary Kerry had. We have a variety of forms of assistance that we provide to the Syrian people, to the opposition, and to the military coalition. But the policy that we have in place is the policy that we're pursuing. And as I just said to Josh, there is not an alternative here to resolving this conflict that does not come through a negotiated settlement. We saw small progress, but progress nonetheless, made when both sides sat down in one room across from one another for the first time in three years of bloody civil war.

And as the Joint Special Representative Brahimi has said, it's very important that this process continue. A date has been set for another round of negotiations. This is going to be a hard and complicated process. There will not be a straight line from here to the ultimate resolution that has to come, but there really is no other path. And the President is committed to providing the assistance to the international community that is pressing

for a negotiated settlement, to the Syrian people as the single-largest donor of humanitarian aid, and in our support for the opposition and the coalition that we've described many times.

Q Last week, the U.S. was insisting that Russia put pressure on Syria to speed up the delivery of chemical weapons. Do you know if that's happened or not?

MR. CARNEY: What I can tell you is that our view is that Syria must live up to its commitments and everyone involved in helping bring about the acknowledgement by Syria, by the Syrian regime, for the first time that it possessed chemical weapons, in fact, it possessed one of the largest stockpiles of chemical weapons in the world, and then their agreement to give up those weapons for destruction needs to help see it through. And we are going to continue to work with all our partners to make that happen.

Q And last thing, on Keystone, the President has insisted that the Keystone pipeline not significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution. Based on the State Department report, does it meet that test?

MR. CARNEY: Steve, as you know, and as I think we made clear on Friday -- both I in my briefing and afterwards -- the submission of the Environmental Impact Statement is a point in the process that now continues. It's an important piece of it, but it is only part of a process that must continue, and that process now includes a period -- 90 days, I believe -- in which the public and relevant Cabinet agencies weigh in on this process. And that's where we are now. So the President's view is we don't interfere with that process, we let it play itself out.

His views, I think you properly noted, were expressed last June, I think it was, in his speech at Georgetown, in which he said: "Allowing the Keystone pipeline to be built requires a finding that doing so would be in our nation's interest, and our national interest will be served only if this project does not significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution." So we have a piece of this process completed and now the process is moving forward.

Q Follow-up?

MR. CARNEY: Let me move around a little bit here. Jessica.

Q On Keystone, I caught the word "interfere" there in what you just said, that the President's view is that we shouldn't interfere with the process. As you probably are aware, the House has already passed legislation that would automatically permit Keystone. The Senate also has a bill. And over the weekend, Mitch McConnell said he would like to see that bill get to the floor. If such a bill passed both Houses of Congress, would the President sign it?

MR. CARNEY: Well, that's a big if, first of all. And secondly, I think we have seen interference, political interference in this process already, and that's helped delay a process that by tradition has been run out of the State Department through

administrations of both parties. And it's important that everyone let that process be carried out appropriately on the merits and not -- rather than allowing it to be subjected to ideological or political influence.

So we're going to let the process run its course and I think it's important to note, as we did on Friday, that this is a step along the way. It is not the completion of the process.

Q Is it fair to conclude from what you just said that the President --

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to speculate about -- I mean, I think our views on interference by Congress in this matter are pretty clear.

Jon.

Q Jay, in the President's interview with Bill O'Reilly last night, he said that there was "not even a smidgen of corruption," regarding the IRS targeting conservative groups. Did the President misspeak?

MR. CARNEY: No, he didn't. But I can cite -- I think have about 20 different news organizations that cite the variety of ways that that was established, including by the independent IG, who testified in May and, as his report said, that he found no evidence that anyone outside of the IRS had any involvement in the inappropriate targeting of conservative -- or progressive, for that matter -- groups in their applications for tax-exempt status. So, again, I think that this is something --

Q Jay, isn't there an active Justice Department investigation into this matter?

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to the Justice Department, but I think that every look at this, every investigation into this, and everything we've learned about this is that this is not something that in any way reached outside of the IRS. There's been a concerted attempted --

Q But, Jay, what the President said is there isn't even a "smidgen of corruption." He didn't give a qualifier outside the IRS --

MR. CARNEY: Right.

Q -- and there's an active Justice Department investigation -- unless it has been concluded without anybody telling the news media, I mean, there's an active Justice Department investigation. Doesn't the President prejudge that investigation when he tells Bill O'Reilly there's not a smidgen of corruption --

MR. CARNEY: -- learned through the independent Inspector General and through the testimony that we've seen completely backs up what the President said. And a lot of that has been well reported on by you and your colleagues and your news organizations over the course of the last several months. Some people must have missed those reports.

Q So the Justice Department should pull the plug --

MR. CARNEY: That's not -- obviously, we do not interfere with Justice Department investigations.

Major.

Q What in the President's opinion is working with the Syria policy?

MR. CARNEY: I think I just --

Q What's working? Not what is, but what's working? What's succeeding?

MR. CARNEY: For the first time in three years, the two sides sat down in the same room as part of the Geneva process. That is significant. It is not by any means a resolution to the conflict. It does not mean that we will not see enormous obstacles that still need to be overcome as negotiations continue. But it was a significant development. And we are hopeful, and we will press for that process to continue. There's no other avenue besides a negotiated political settlement.

Q Casualties keep going. The process could go on for a very long time. You correctly stated they sat down and talked, but you can't conclude that they've moved deep into an agenda toward resolution, can you?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I am certainly not suggesting, and I agree with Joint Special Representative Brahimi on this that there were not major breakthroughs. But our commitment to the process is unwavering. To state that the situation in Syria continues to be serious and dire is to reinforce the need for a negotiated political settlement.

Obviously others have different ideas about how this could be approached, including direct U.S. military involvement, but we reject that. We think the American people don't support that. But what we can do as the United States of America is bring our efforts to bear, together with other parties, to this matter to try to push forward on a negotiated political settlement, as we support the opposition, as we support the Syrian people.

Q The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister said today he believes that Syria will step up and accelerate the process of getting rid of its chemical weapons stockpiles. But he also said it's understood by everyone involved in this the June 30th deadline was unrealistic to begin with. Does the United States agree with that?

MR. CARNEY: We understand that the Syrian regime as a party to this agreement has obligations that it has committed to making. And we are -- "we" being the international community -- is poised and ready to remove and destroy Syria's chemical weapons as soon as the chemicals have reached the Syrian port of Latakia. And it is the Assad regime's responsibility to fulfill its commitment to make sure that those chemicals are transported.

As I noted last week, the suggestion that they don't have the capacity to move the chemicals is belied by the fact that they have moved the chemicals. They have demonstrated their ability to transport these chemicals already. So obviously these are

ambitious deadlines, but there are obligations here that can and should be met.

Q Can we be any more specific on the agenda the President will take to the Saudi Arabia trip and meetings? I mean, it's --

MR. CARNEY: I think it's wide-ranging.

Q Yes, but obviously there's some very important --

MR. CARNEY: Obviously, the Middle East peace process, matters involving security situations across the region, important economic issues with our bilateral relationship -- this is an important meeting between two close partners and I'm sure the whole panoply of issues will be discussed.

Q Why is it significant, why is it important for the President to be by himself with Harry Reid, the Senate Majority Leader? And how much will trade promotion and the disagreement between the two factor into that meeting?

MR. CARNEY: The President looks forward to meeting with the Senate Majority Leader. As you know, the President will be meeting with the full Senate caucus, Senate Democratic caucus later this week. And I'm sure the President and Senator Reid will discuss an agenda for that meeting. And I think that this is part of a process in which the President and Senate Democrats and House Democrats discuss a way to move forward on an agenda that is focused on expanding opportunity, rewarding hard work and responsibility, and the ways that we can do that.

And I think it shows that, while appropriately so, a lot of focus has been placed on the President's determination to use all of his powers to advance that agenda, including executive authority, including non-legislative means and methods, there's an important amount of business that can and should be done with and through Congress. So that will be part of the discussion, both today and later in the week.

Q Trade?

MR. CARNEY: Trade is an important issue on the President's agenda because of its capacity to expand American exports. If we can successfully bring to conclusion trade agreements with Europe and Asia, that's good for American workers, good for the American economy. Jobs that are related to exports in this country pay better than the average job. And the agreements the President seeks to reach are designed inherently to protect American workers and to protect the environment. So that's obviously something the President counts as among his priorities.

John, in your new capacity.

Q Moving up a little bit, moving up. Getting closer to you.

MR. CARNEY: Getting closer. (Laughter.) It's okay, I can take it.

Q With regards to Syria, you said there wasn't any direct U.S. military involvement on the table, and a couple times you talked about the structure of the international community. Will the United States push international partners to become more engaged in Syria's civil war militarily?

MR. CARNEY: Obviously, we have a lot of discussion with a

range of our partners internationally on this issue. And many nations assist the opposition in different ways. We have made clear the approach that we're taking. And let's be clear that, broadly speaking -- we've been clear about American troops on the ground. As a matter of principle on issues like this, the President doesn't take options off the table, but our firm belief is that this has to be resolved through a political negotiation, and we are unwavering in our support and commitment to that process.

Q Would the President support greater military intervention by our international partners?

MR. CARNEY: The President believes that we are not going to resolve this -- this is not going to be resolved through force; that the civil war, the conflict that is taking such a terrible toll on the Syrian people can only be resolved ultimately through a negotiated settlement. So that's what we're focused on. Obviously, other countries approach this challenge in different ways. We're focused on what we can do as the leading provider of humanitarian aid and a very leading -- in the very leading role that we play in helping press forward, the process started in Geneva.

Q A follow on trade. To our trading partners in Asia and Europe, Harry Reid's comments were taken as kind of a death blow for fast track, but Michael Froman seemed very positive that it would get done somehow. Does the President think the lame duck is a better place for this legislation, a better time?

MR. CARNEY: The President thinks that one way to create good, high-paying jobs in the United States and to level the playing field with our competitors like China is to open the fastest-growing markets in Asia and deepen our trade ties with Europe. That's why he's pursued the trade agreements known for aficionados as TPP and T-TIP.

Securing these trade agreements and increasing exports is key to promoting our economic recovery. It's key to creating better paying jobs here in the United States, the kinds of jobs that allow for the middle class to expand and for families in the middle class to feel more secure. Every \$1 billion in exports of U.S. goods and services supports between 4,000 and 5,000 U.S. jobs. And those jobs pay between 13 and 18 percent higher than the national average wage. So these trade agreements would significantly boost our exports, and the President is going to push hard for this because he believes it's the right thing to do for our economy, the right thing to do for American workers.

Q Is he okay with waiting until after the election?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I'm not going to -- how things play out in Congress is obviously something that is decided by leaders in Congress. The President's commitment to this is firm because he knows that and believes that it's the right thing to do for our economy and the middle class.

Peter.

Q I may have missed it and apologize, but did you say that the President will actually raise this with Senator Reid today?

MR. CARNEY: Senator Reid and President Obama speak and meet with great frequency. They talk about a range of subjects. There's no pre-planned topic, and I assume anything that either individual wants to discuss will be discussed.

Q There's not an agenda?

MR. CARNEY: Again, they meet all the time. They talk all the time.

Q When is the last time they met just without other members, other leaders?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have that date at the tip of my tongue, but I can tell you that they talk, just the two of them, frequently, and they meet frequently.

Q When was this meeting scheduled?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure.

Q Do you know if it was before or after his comments -- Senator Reid's comments last week?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure, Peter. But again, we've been pretty explicit about the fact that Senator Reid's expression of his views on this matter should not have come as a surprise to anyone familiar with his views. And the President's position is that we ought to press forward on reaching the kinds of trade agreements that can expand our exports and create jobs here in the United States that pay better than your average job.

Q Is it possible to find out when this meeting was scheduled?

MR. CARNEY: You can ask Senator Reid's office. We'll see what we can find out.

Brianna.

Q Thanks, Jay. A question about the ACA. There was a report over the weekend that tens of thousands of people are finding themselves in the position where the government is unable to fix errors in their enrollment -- some people who think their subsidies have been miscalculated; some people who think that they've been funneled into the wrong plan. Has President Obama been briefed specifically on this? And what direction is he giving to HHS to try to help these people who find themselves in this situation?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think you refer to the story about 22,000 appeals of determinations. And of the millions who have applied for coverage, only around 22,000 asked for help by filing an appeal, and we are going to get them help.

So we are talking here about a very small percentage of the number of people who have applied for coverage. We believe that many of the issues that caused people to file appeals are left over from when the website was not working well and many of those problems have since been fixed. CMS has been reaching out to people who have filed an appeal via phone and email, and so far have seen that many of the problems were related to those earlier system errors that have now been fixed. In many cases they've been able to help these consumers move forward with a new application, and without having to continue their appeal. I think CMS has more details on this issue.

So, again, it's a portion that's relatively small as a percentage of the number of people who have applied for coverage, and it is being addressed aggressively by CMS. And what we're finding -- or what they're finding, rather, is that a lot of the troubles are related to that period of time when the website was malfunctioning and that a lot of these issues have been fixed or are being fixed.

Q And I mean, that's the point in time when you would say that a lot of the people who were most in need were signing up, so are you saying that --

MR. CARNEY: Nobody could get coverage before January 1st.

Q Yes, for the actual trying to enroll. You're saying some of it has to do with the trouble -- the more troubled time period --

MR. CARNEY: Right, in October and November the website was significantly underperforming and was rife with errors, and there were a lot of troubles that that created, including, as it turns out, a number of the errors that are related to this issue.

Q But you don't think then that 22,000 is an accurate number? Or you think a lot --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would refer you to CMS for more details. What I'm saying is that overall, 22,000 --

Q Is a small percentage.

MR. CARNEY: -- roughly, asked for help by filing an appeal. So that's overall, since the -- I believe since the process was launched on October 1st. And what we're finding is that a number of these issues are related to the problems with the website, and have since or are now being addressed and fixed without having to continue that appeal.

Q But you have some people detailed in this Washington Post article who have had to go -- they have had surgeries they've had to go ahead with out of pocket; they really don't have the money to pay for it, but they do it anyway. They're in really particular financial straits because of it. Does this kind of thing mesh with what President Obama said over the weekend when he said that the program is working the way it's supposed to?

MR. CARNEY: I think he was referring to the website. We were talking about the website. Secondly, one of the commitments we have made -- and I think it was demonstrated through a very rocky rollout of the website -- is that where there are problems, we're going to address them. And where there are issues like --

Q But this is part of the website, the appeals process, isn't it?

MR. CARNEY: If I may, Brianna -- and I know the Washington Post appreciates you in their absence, speaking up for them -- but as I just said, this is a very slim percentage of the population of people who have applied. And what is turning out is that so many of the problems we've seen -- and this had to do with problems in other areas -- are related to the troubles with the website in October especially, and also November. And as the website has begun performing as envisioned, effectively, for the vast majority of those who seek insurance through it, we have been able to resolve a lot of these problems. And CMS is directly reaching out to individuals from that group whose issues haven't been resolved yet through email and by phone to help them resolve those issues.

Peter.

Q Thanks, Jay. What sort of input would you expect the President will have on the final decision on Keystone? Is this the President's decision, or is it Secretary Kerry's decision?

MR. CARNEY: Peter, as you know as a veteran of Washington who has covered these matters for many years, this is a process that's run out of the State Department because it's a pipeline that crosses an international boundary. And that's what we're seeing take place now. And with the release of an EIS, one stage in the process has been accomplished, and now we move onto other stages. The public gets to weigh in. There are other agencies and agency heads that weigh in. And then a recommendation is reached.

The President believes that we ought to and he ought to allow that process to run its course. And as I said last week, there's no question about the President's views on this matter. I even read the whole paragraph for Wendell, for you, from the speech at Georgetown in June. So the president's views are clear. And we're going to wait for the process to complete itself.

Q So ultimately it's the White House's decision?

MR. CARNEY: Again, if you look at the process, it is done at the State Department and a recommendation is reached. It's the President's administration; the President's views were clearly set forth in the speech in June. But in keeping with past practice, this is a process that's run by the State Department that includes input from the public, includes input from other agencies, not just the State Department. And we're not going to get ahead of that process.

Q And also, do you expect that this topic, Keystone, will come up today in the meeting between Harry Reid and the President?

MR. CARNEY: As I said, in answer to any question, I don't think there's a written agenda. These men meet frequently and speak frequently, so they decide what they talk about.

Peter.

Q Jay, can you give us a ballpark when -- obviously, the process has to play out, but a ballpark of when we can expect to have some resolution of the Keystone issue from this administration?

MR. CARNEY: I think I would refer you to the State Department for where they are in that process and when they expect it to be completed.

Q But after the report is done then basically we're just waiting for John Kerry, after the communication with other Cabinet members, as you just indicated, right?

MR. CARNEY: There's a 90-day period, I think, created by executive order -- 90, whatever it is. So that's not an insignificant part of the process, and it's not insignificant that it includes public comment as well as input from other agencies.

Q Following up on some of the other questions, Brianna asked about the Affordable Care Act and about the website problems. Acknowledging that some of the roughly 22,000 people who were indicating some errors and roadblocks they've run into are problems that you indicate come from the initial rollout of healthcare.gov, what problems still remain to be fixed with the website? How close to fixed is it?

MR. CARNEY: Well, that is a question I think you really need to ask CMS, because I'm not up to speed on every --

Q The President said it's fixed. But we also acknowledge there are still some fixes it needs, so I'm wondering what they are.

MR. CARNEY: I think what the President said is that the website is now functioning as it should have functioned from day one, which is effectively for the vast majority of people who use it to search for and sign up for quality, affordable health insurance. I think that the numbers we have seen of late testify to that fact. In fact, you see very little reporting on that precisely because everybody now acknowledges and agrees that enrollment has surged significantly in December and January. And we certainly are working every day to make sure that the site and all the other component pieces that go into getting the information that people need in making this choice are working effectively.

What is unquestionable is that the numbers prove the demand for quality, affordable health insurance around the country. And we're going to keep at this during this open enrollment period and beyond. As you know, open enrollment extends all the way to March 31st. So there's a lot of work to be done.

And I would never say, and nor did the President say, that the website is perfect. I doubt that there's any website that's perfect. So there are always going to be issues, and that's why we have a team of experts on top of it. We have a superbly qualified successor to Jeff Zients overseeing this process. And that, again, demonstrates the commitment that the President has made and others have made to ensuring that this works effectively for all those millions of Americans who are looking for the website as a means of reaching what they seek, which is affordable, quality health insurance.

Because the goal here isn't to make the website great; the goal is to make sure that people get what they're looking for and get what's available to them.

Q During the Bill O'Reilly interview yesterday, he quoted a viewer in asking why the President has chosen to -- I think the language was "fundamentally transform this country." Denis McDonough yesterday, the President's Chief of Staff, was defending at times what was described as a more modest agenda of the President's. So they're sort of opposite world views in some ways. I guess I'm curious, how would you characterize, how would the White House characterize the President's agenda at this time?

MR. CARNEY: The President's agenda remains one that is ambitiously focused on expanding opportunity and rewarding hard work. That was the objective he had when he took office, when the country was facing a catastrophic economic collapse. The President never had as a goal simply surviving the Great Recession for the country, but creating an economic foundation for the middle class that would allow for some of the stress that had been placed on the middle class over a period of 30 years, even prior to the Great Recession, to be reduced so that the middle class could expand and more and more American families could feel secure in their ability to have and maintain a job that paid them enough to get their kids educated and to allow them to put away savings for retirement. So this is part of a broad project that reflects the President's agenda from the day he took office.

Q Very quickly, Janet Yellen was sworn in today. The President didn't participate in today's swearing-in. Past Presidents have at times participated in swearing-ins. I'm curious why that was that he didn't participate.

MR. CARNEY: The President nominated Janet Yellen to be Chair of the Federal Reserve and is very pleased to see that she's been sworn in.

Q Jay?

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Wendell.

Q On the problems of the Affordable Care Act, as you point out, you have another couple of months of open enrollment. Is the President confident there will be an appeals process for these people who feel their subsidies were mistakenly calculated before the end of that?

MR. CARNEY: Again, CMS is already -- is and has been for some time reaching out to people who have filed an appeal via phone and email. And so far CMS has seen that many of the problems were related to those earlier system errors that have been fixed.

CMS is also working to implement fully an automated appeals system. Until they have that functionality, we put in place a manual review process -- again phone and email wherever possible -- and expect hearings to begin soon on the appeals process. So CMS is reaching out to consumers. They're finding that a number of the problems here are related to the earlier system errors that occurred because of the problems with healthcare.gov. But in every instance, they're reaching out and making sure that every individual or family that is part of this process -- appeals process -- is being taken care of.

Q Also on the Affordable Care Act, restaurant workers, some construction workers who are covered under what's called the Taft-Hartley insurance situation where their employer pays part and the union pays part are still upset with what they say is an unacceptable arrangement that leaves them out of subsidies for the exchanges. They're threatening not to support Democratic candidates in the fall. Does that concern you?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the Affordable Care Act, Wendell, provides great protections for all Americans and gives workers and their families the security of knowing that they will always have quality, affordable coverage available to them. The law also strengthens employer-based coverage by making it more affordable, by slowing health care cost growth, and providing new tax credits to small employers to help them provide coverage.

When it comes to multi-employer plans, which is what you're referring to, the Affordable Care Act does not make changes to the law for multi-employer plans. These plans like other employer plans are continuing to offer coverage.

So, again, the purpose of the Affordable Care Act is to provide greater protections to all Americans, those who have employer-based coverage, those who have multi-employer plans, and obviously those who were in the individual market or those millions who had no insurance at all.

Q I think what these union leaders are saying is that they want changes to multi-employer plans that would essentially reduce their costs.

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, you would have to address your question to unions in terms of what issues they have raised. What I can tell you is that the law strengthens employer-based coverage. And on multi-employer plans, the ones you're talking about, there are not changes to law for them. So the purpose here is to make sure that these protections are available to all Americans.

Q Some conservative groups, at least one, notes that OMBC figures show that roughly a 1.5 billion additional hours of paperwork for regulations went into effect between 2010 and 2012, right after the President signed an executive order that aimed to reduce the paperwork of regulations. Was the order a failure?

MR. CARNEY: The administration is committed to a regulatory strategy that maintains a balance between protecting the health, welfare and safety of Americans, and promoting economic growth, job creation, competitiveness and innovation. Our goal is to maximize the effectiveness and benefit of the rules we complete.

The administration has continued to make significant progress in the President's unprecedented regulatory retrospective review, or regulatory look-back initiative, where we are streamlining, modifying or repealing regulations to reduce unnecessary burdens and costs. Federal agencies have issued look-back plans detailing over 500 initiatives that would reduce cost, simplify the regulatory system, and eliminate redundancy and inconsistency. This effort is already on track to save more than \$10 billion in regulatory costs in the near term, with more savings to come. And I have a lot more detail on that.

One important thing to note, especially given the source of this analysis, is that the net benefits of regulations issued through the fourth fiscal year of the Obama administration were \$159 billion. This amount, including not only monetary savings but also lives saved and injuries prevented is approximately four times the net benefits of regulations issued through the fourth fiscal year of the previous administration.

Q The source of the figures is the Office of Management and Budget. And if the cost --

MR. CARNEY: The analysis of the figures is from a think tank affiliated with a Republican leadership PAC.

Q That is true. But if the cost increased by \$10 billion, how can you be on track to reduce the cost?

MR. CARNEY: We have a lot of data for you, Wendell, and I'll get it to you.

Mark.

Q Jay, on Keystone, is the White House responding in any way to public expressions of impatience from Canada?

MR. CARNEY: Mark, our answer to that question is the same as to other questions about the process, which is it's important to let a process that was established in the past, that has been used by administrations of both parties, to be carried out without interference from outside quarters. There is a period now where public comment is taken, as well as input from agencies and agency heads outside of the State Department. So that's where the process is now. And we're going to stand back and let the process move forward.

Q The Canadian Foreign Minister said the other day that he feels like his country is in a state of limbo waiting for indefinite periods of time for a decision to be made one way or the other. Do you understand his complaint?

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's no question that this process was prolonged in part by the political gamesmanship that we saw, the partisan gamesmanship that we saw around it earlier in the process. It was delayed in part also by the concerns of members of both

parties, including a Republican governor, about the pipeline and the direction it was taking at the time. So I think the history here is worth looking at. What I can tell you is the speediest way -- the way to a speedy conclusion here is to allow a process that's been in place for several -- many administrations now of both parties to take its course and not to interfere with it in any way, because that's the surest way to disrupt it.

Alexis.

Q I wanted to make sure I understand what you're saying. Senator Reid last week was saying that he was warning folks not to push it, and you're saying that the President does want to push it. I'm just trying to understand -- is the President eager to find a way, separate and apart from Senator Reid's objections -- because he's not the only one -- to find some middle ground to adjust fast track so that it would be more amenable to members of the Senate and then come to the floor? Or is he saying he wants to persuade opponents like Harry Reid and others to see things his way?

MR. CARNEY: The President believes we need to move forward on trade agreements that expand exports, that create jobs here for Americans, that pay better than other jobs. Trade Promotion Authority is a means to getting those trade agreements done, and therefore he believes it's important to pursue it in order to get the best possible deal and to play the leadership role that we should be playing around the world.

Now, he's going to work with members of Congress of both parties, members of the Senate of both parties in pressing for his view that we need to move forward on these trade agreements and expanding trade for the American economy and American workers.

Q But is your answer that he is open to the --

MR. CARNEY: I'm not -- in terms of renegotiating legislation, our view is that we ought to move forward on this agenda because it's the right thing for the American economy and the American people. Obviously, we're going to work with Congress to do that, work with the Senate to do that. And we understand that there are differing views here. That has always been the case on these issues. But the President's view is clear and his view that it's the right thing to do for the economy and for American workers is clear, and so he's going to continue to work with Congress to move this priority forward.

David.

Q Jay, thanks. The Washington Times has a report today that Homeland Security Secretary Johnson is choosing as his chief of staff a man called Christian Marrone, who was involved several years ago in a major corruption case in Philadelphia. He was not charged himself, but he was the right-hand man of a state senator who went to prison, and people have called his judgment into question in the case. Does the White House feel he is an appropriate choice for a highly sensitive government job?

MR. CARNEY: As you know, Dave, we do not get into our internal vetting process, A. B, but I can tell you that as the article you're asking about makes clear, Mr. Marrone was a Defense Department official in the Bush administration, and I don't remember any of

these concerns coming up or being raised then by your paper or others. And at that time, Mr. Marrone served as a special assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense, a very senior role. So you can be assured that the White House and Secretary Johnson have complete confidence and look forward to his service as chief of staff at the Department of Homeland Security.

Q And just to follow up, as I understand it, his involvement in this corruption case while he was a member of the Bush administration didn't come to light until his vetting process was through in the previous administration. So do you have any additional concerns --

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't remember these issues being raised then, and I can tell you that we're not going to get into -- as we never do -- our internal personnel vetting process.

Q Thank you. In Afghanistan, the presidential election campaign has officially kicked off now. Is the President willing to wait until the new president is elected for the PSA to be signed?

MR. CARNEY: We've been very clear that in order to move forward with planning for a post-2014 troop presence with NATO -- a presence that would be one envisioned after the end of the combat mission, one in which U.S. troops and NATO troops would be focused solely on two missions, training and supporting the Afghan forces and counterterrorism -- depends on the Bilateral Security Agreement being signed. And the longer there is a delay, the harder it is for NATO and U.S. military forces to plan for a post-2014 presence.

This is a matter of weeks, not months. And I think that that's a way of saying this can't wait for very long because it's impossible to ask our NATO allies or our U.S. military commanders to plan on a contingency -- this is a complicated piece of business and there cannot be and will not be U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 without a signed Bilateral Security Agreement.

Q Yes, but given the significance this agreement has, why to insist on a leader whose mandate is left for only two months now to sign the BSA rather than to wait for a new president who has a longer mandate, five years?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, you're presupposing that somehow that process would move quickly, both the electoral process and the process after. Secondly, you're missing the fact that this agreement was negotiated in good faith over a long period of time with the current Afghan government. It was endorsed by the loya jirga. We think the loya jirga was correct.

We're not renegotiating the Bilateral Security Agreement. It needs to be signed in a matter of weeks, at most, not months, because you can't hold in abeyance the need for NATO and U.S. military commanders to plan for a post-2014 presence in Afghanistan should there be one, and there will not be one absent of BSA.

Q The current week or few weeks, or how long this be --

MR. CARNEY: We'll let you know.

Thanks very much.

END

2:02 P.M. EST