

Remarks by the President to College Reporters

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/28/remarks-president-college-reporters

April 28, 2016

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

April 28, 2016

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

3:53 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: I hear there's some hotshot journalists here. Josh was speaking for me, and I wanted to make sure he was getting it right.

How's it going, everybody? Are you guys having an interesting time here?

AUDIENCE: Yes!

THE PRESIDENT: Was Josh thorough in his briefing? Well, I heard you guys were around today, so I wanted to stop by and say hello. I also have a bit of breaking news for you, and then I might take some questions.

I overheard Josh talking about student loans, and I know that's a big priority for a lot of your listeners and readers. And that's one of the reasons why my administration has spent a lot of time focused on college affordability. So we expanded Pell grants to make sure that more young people could access it. We created the Pay As You Earn program that ensures that people can cap the amount that they're repaying on their loans each month, so that young people who want to go into jobs that aren't as lucrative are still able to pursue their passions and their dreams while managing their debt load.

Today I want to announce that we're aiming to enroll 2 million more people in Pay As Your Earn by this time next year, and you can find out how at StudentLoans.gov/repay. That's StudentLoans.gov/repay. And we're also going to be making some additional announcements about how we're going to get our agencies coordinating so that, as young people are managing their student loan debt, there's one-stop shopping, they can figure out how to do it, and they can make sure that there are consumer protections in terms of how they're being treated in the repayment process.

While I have you here, I might as well mention a couple of other things. You may have heard that there is a Supreme Court vacancy. For those of you who have been studying our system of government, we have three branches, and one of the most important is the judiciary. And right now, our Supreme Court is absent one sitting member, with the

passing of Justice Scalia. I've nominated an individual named Merrick Garland, who's currently the Chief Judge on the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, which is the second most important court in the land. By all accounts, he's extremely well-qualified.

And traditionally, what's happened is, is that the Senate then, exercising its constitutional duties of advice and consent, will meet with the judge and then have a hearing for him, and then have a vote. In part because politics have gotten so polarized lately, and the importance of this seat, so far at least the Republican Leader on the Senate side, Mitch McConnell, has refused to have the Republican caucus meet with him and schedule an actual vote. Although, to their credit, there have been a number of Republicans who have broken ranks and gone ahead and met with Judge Garland.

I mention this because I think it's important for all of you, while you're in town, and many of you who are going to end up being journalists covering important national policy, to recognize that our system only works when, even when we have big disagreements, even when there are big policy disputes, there's still a willingness to follow the rules and treat people fairly -- especially those who are on the other side of the debate. That's something that's been lost a little bit in this town of late.

And I said at my State of the Union address, my hope is, is that despite some of the unusual rhetoric that we've been hearing during this presidential campaign, that it's young people like you who are going to restore that sense of us being able to work together and make this democracy function effectively. And journalists play a critical role in that. Sometimes both Josh and I probably have our disagreements with the press corps, and feel picked on or misunderstood, but the truth of the matter is -- and I've said this before -- what separates us out in part from a lot of other countries in the world is we've got this incredible free press that pokes and prods and calls into account our leaders. And that is how we can make sure that leaders are accountable to the people who elect them. And that's how we make sure that you don't see major abuses of power. And when you do, that, in fact, the American people know about it and are able to make changes.

And so you guys are going to have a critical role, those of you who end up following journalism. I hope many of you do. I want to thank the White House Press Corps, because I understand they gave you a lot of time today. And some of the best journalists in the country operate here. I normally don't say nice things about them in front of them -- (laughter) -- but I figured since they took the time to work with you, I wanted to make sure to acknowledge the great work that they are doing.

All right? So with that, I'm going to take a couple of questions.

Let's see. We'll start with that young man right there, in the black suit -- or blue, I guess. Right here, in the red tie. But I may get to you, too.

Q Mr. President, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Dan Corey, and I'm the Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Targum, the second-oldest college newspaper in the United States. And it serves the Rutgers University-New Brunswick community.

THE PRESIDENT: Outstanding.

Q We recently ran a student referendum to keep our presence on campus. We've asked and we're allowed to continue publishing. And we're actually going to reach a historic 150 years of publication.

THE PRESIDENT: Congratulations.

Q Thank you very much. I'm also very nervous right now. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: You're doing great so far. Just never admit that you're nervous. Just pretend like this is routine. (Laughter.)

Q Well, in light of the news of you speaking at our commencement, I was wondering, would you be interested in being interviewed by our newspaper?

THE PRESIDENT: That's a good use of your time right there. (Laughter.) I have to say that normally I coordinate carefully with my press team before we grant interviews, but I am favorably disposed towards giving you a little bit of time. It may not be a really long interview, but I figure we can give the college newspaper a little bit of play.

MR. EARNEST: That's a good idea.

THE PRESIDENT: All right. Young lady, right here.

Q Mr. President, it's an absolute pleasure. My question is, you announced the other day that you'll be visiting Flint, Michigan, based on a letter received from a young girl. What are you planning to do during your visit there? And have you heard from the girl in response to your visit? And if possible, after, may I take a photo with you? (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: The photo I can't do, because if I do, then I've got a long line. But I will be visiting Flint. And obviously, since the news of the terrible things that have been taking place there -- the lead in the drinking water and the potential health hazards, as well as the people who were responsible for the health and safety of those residents not carrying out their duties the way they need to -- I think it's important not only for us to have responded as we have, with FEMA -- that's the Federal Emergency Management Agency that responds to a lot of problems like this -- it's important not only that we are helping the city plan over the long term, but I think it's also important for me to shine a spotlight on the fact that Flint, although extreme, is not unique; that we have underinvested in some of our basic infrastructure that we rely on for our public health. And hopefully it will give me a chance to speak to the nation as a whole about how we need to ensure that our air is clear, our water is clean, and that our kids are safe. And I hope I get a chance to meet that young lady, as well.

All right, young man right here.

Q Hello, it's a pleasure. I'm Jesse Yamba (ph) from the University of North Texas, and I just had some questions for you. First of all, what is your proudest achievement you've achieved here in these eight years? And after January 20th, what are your goals or plans

after you leave the White House?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm proud of a lot of stuff: Providing health insurance to 20 million people who didn't have it, and setting us on a path where hopefully everybody has health insurance that's affordable and high quality. I'm proud about the work we did to save the economy. Because right after I came in, we were in freefall and could have experienced a worldwide depression. I'm proud of the reforms we've done on Wall Street to make sure that the recklessness that led to the crisis hopefully doesn't happen again.

I'm proud of the work we've done in education to make sure that millions of kids who previously couldn't afford to go to college can, and that in addition to the work we've done on student debt and reducing that, we've also been doing things to make the process of encouraging young people to go to college easier. And this is a good time for me to give a shout-out to the First Lady, who, as many of you know, just this week had her annual signup, getting young people to apply for the FAFSA form that is the gateway for you to be able to get financial aid. She was up in New York, but it was I think 1,000 participants nationwide who are helping to let young people know, if are willing to work hard and have a vision for your future, then nothing is preventing you from getting the kind of higher education that you need.

So I'm proud of all that stuff. Probably the thing I'm most proud of is, mainly as the assistant to Michelle Obama -- (laughter) -- I've raised two daughters who are amazing and I'm really, really proud of. And being able to do that while still focused on my job I think is something I'll look back on and appreciate.

I'm really busy right now, so I'm not thinking too much about after the presidency.

Typically, Presidents build libraries, but I'm more interested in the programming, not just the building. And I'm very confident that a lot of the programming that I do will relate to young people and how I can encourage them to get involved in civic life.

Let's see. I'm trying to alternate boy-girl-boy-girl here, just to be fair. The young lady right there, in the red. Yes, you.

Q Hey --

THE PRESIDENT: Hey! (Laughter.)

Q My name is Daniela Orteza (ph) and I'm reporting for Ole Miss at the University of Mississippi. And pending the Supreme Court's decision, will this administration take further action on immigration?

THE PRESIDENT: As you know, we took some initial steps to try to make a more rational, smarter immigration process. Our immigration system has been broken for quite some time. On the one hand, you've had some serious work by our administration and previous administrations to slow the flow of undocumented workers across the border, to strengthen border security, to improve how we manage the influx of folks who come in by air, and to make sure that they're not overstaying their visas and so forth.

On the other hand, we also want to remind everybody this is a nation of immigrants, and immigration has been a source of strength for our country, and that we have people here who may not have initially come here legally, but have since that time put down roots, raised families. They're our neighbors, they're our friends. They may be, in some cases, seeing their sons and daughters go off to war in our country's uniform, and that it doesn't make sense for us to simply pretend like we're going to send all those folks out, and instead we should bring them out of the shadows and give them a chance to earn legal residence and ultimately citizenship.

So we put forward a plan. Part of it we were able to implement -- the DREAM Act kids who we were able to make sure were treated like the young Americans that they are. We then had an additional program through administrative action that the Supreme Court put a stay on -- or the lower courts put a stay on, and is about to go to the Supreme Court. In part, the process takes a long time generally. With the Supreme Court one justice short, it will be interesting to see whether or not they can come to a ruling or whether they arrive at a tie -- a 4-4 tie. We don't know yet. That's pending.

In the meantime, we're still implementing a number of reforms and changes to make the legal immigration system smoother, not as expensive, fairer to people, to treat families with more respect. We have changed our priorities in terms of enforcement so that we're not deporting and separating families as much, and more focused on going after criminals and people who pose a security threat to the community. But our hands are a little bit tied on some of the bigger things until the Supreme Court rules.

Now, even if we do all that, it's critically important that we still push Congress to pass legislation -- because my executive orders can be overturned by the next President. And the only way to have a permanent solution to this problem is for the kind of legislation to pass that we saw the Senate actually pass on a bipartisan basis that would continue to strengthen border security, but also give a pathway to citizenship for those who had been here for quite some time. That way we can be a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants, and it is the right thing to do. I am not optimistic about us getting the legislation done before I leave, given the makeup of this Congress, but I think this is going to be a major issue in the election and people need to pay attention to it.

All right, I'm going to take two more. Two more questions. Let's see. You're all very good-looking people, I've got to say. (Laughter.) This gentleman over here. I haven't forgotten about you over there. Go ahead.

Q I work for the Indiana News Student at Indiana University. My question is about the Syrian refugees.

THE PRESIDENT: I thought you were going to ask about basketball wins. (Laughter.)

Q We can do that if you want. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: No, go ahead.

Q As the deadline for your pledge to let in 10,000 Syrian refugees gets kind of closer, starting to creep up on us, it looks kind of iffy whether that's going to be made. Do you have any plans to speed up that flow or encourage more Syrian refugees coming into the country?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're going to keep on pushing. And part of what has made this challenging is that we want to make sure that we can, as much as possible, provide the American people an assurance that everybody here has been vetted at a very high standard.

As you will recall, there was a lot of emotions around our initial announcement that we should be admitting some Syrian refugees, and people making claims that somehow this would be letting potential terrorists onto our shores. The truth of the matter is, is that the refugee process generally is much more rigorous in its screening and its vetting than the average tourist who comes in here. These are people who themselves have been victims of terrorism, and victims of incredible violence and suffering at the hands of the Assad regime in Syria.

It is the right thing to do. Our closest friends and allies, like Canada, like Germany and other European countries, as well as countries bordering Syria like Turkey and Jordan, have taken on an enormous burden. And as the most powerful nation on Earth, it's important for us to do our duty as well here, our humanitarian obligation. And it's important for us to send a signal around the world that we care about these folks.

So administratively, I think now we have the process to speed it up. There may be efforts on the part of Congress to try to block us, but our goal is to continue to try to make the case to Congress and to the American people this is the right thing to do. And we believe that we can hit those marks before the end of the year.

More broadly, one of the things we're going to be doing is, at the United Nations we're going to convene at the margins of the United Nations General Assembly, which takes place in September every year. We're going to try to make sure that we have an international conference around how we can deal with much larger refugee flows generally. Some of them, as a consequence of conflict, in some cases because of drought or other natural disasters -- there are about 60 million displaced people around the world. And I've met with some of them, not just those who are fleeing areas like Syria, but also in Southeast Asia and parts of Africa. A lot of these folks are your age or younger, have the same hopes, dreams, aspirations, and have just been dealt a very bad hand.

We can't solve every problem in the world, but we have to make sure that we take leadership in trying to help stabilize their lives.

All right, I'll take two more, because I promised that I was going to get that young man who thought I had called on him. Yes, go ahead.

Q Thank you, Mr. President, for joining us here today. In light of your Pell grant announcement today, it seems like a central tenet of your administration's strategy in addressing college affordability is increasing access to grants and loans. How sustainable

would you say the strategy is in addressing the long-term rising trends of the cost of college?

THE PRESIDENT: That's a great question. It is not sustainable if the overall cost of college keeps on going up as fast as it's going up. So one of the things that we have to do, even as we make sure that we're providing more access to grants, keeping loans manageable, interest rates at a reasonable level, we still have to work with colleges and universities to figure out new ways to reduce costs. And we've actually seen universities around the country begin experiments that are having some impact. I'll just give you a couple of examples.

I made an announcement a while back about our initiative for making the first two years of community college free. That's something that is affordable for most states to do, and we are prepared to help with federal support. If we are able to do that -- and we could just close a few loopholes that corporations currently use to avoid paying taxes to pay for it -- then for a large proportion of young people who either get their primary or secondary school education from a community college, or started at community college and then transferred to a four-year university for graduation, their costs are being cut anywhere from half to 100 percent, down to zero. And this is something achievable.

Now, Congress has not moved on our proposal. But what we've also seen is that there have been 27 jurisdictions around the country that have taken us up on this challenge and are doing it themselves, are figuring out ways to make this happen. So that's one example.

A second example. Some of you, because I can tell that you guys were high-achieving, type A folks -- (laughter) -- unlike the kind of slacker kid that I was -- (laughter) -- some of you, I suspect, were taking college-credit courses while you were in high school. And what we've seen is a number of high school systems, or public school systems partner with community colleges and universities so that they make arrangements. You start taking your college credits while in high school, and you extend your -- what seems like high school for an extra year, and when you graduate you now have an associate's degree, so you have the equivalent of a community college degree. When you then go to a four-year institution, you have enough credits that you can graduate in three years instead of four. That, again, by eliminating one year, means that you've just reduced your costs significantly.

There's been discussion of how can we use technology to cut costs -- are there ways in which we can take the best practices of online learning and make that more accessible for young people who may not have the luxury of being on a campus for four years with room and board; might have to work part time because they need to help their families or support themselves, are there ways that we can make that work.

And we have to be careful about that because there have been some for-profit institutions that, frankly, haven't done a very good job. They take the money, but the young person who is taking classes with them doesn't end up getting a degree that's useful for them

getting a job, and then they have problems repaying their loans. But there's no doubt that, if done well, that technology potentially can reduce costs.

And then we're talking to colleges and universities about what are the contributors to these higher costs. And this may be sensitive to some folks, but I've said this before -- if you have the option of cutting your college costs in half but your dorm rooms aren't quite as nice, or the sports facilities or the student center or the cafeteria aren't as good, is that a deal you're willing to take? And can we figure out how to empower more parents and more students to demand a lower-cost option that still gives you a great education but maybe doesn't have all the bells and whistles to it.

And that's part of the reason why we've put forward this college report card. The idea is just -- it provides you online data so that as you're selecting a college or university that you're able to see, all right, what are the costs, what are the graduation rates -- all the indicators and benchmarks of getting good value for what you're spending.

And this has been a long-term trend of ever-rising college costs. The good news is, is that through the work that we've done over the last several years, we've started to see some good trends. Delinquencies, hardship deferrals, defaults on student loans have started to go in a better direction. They were skyrocketing. Some of that is the improvement of the economy generally; some of it is some of the policies that we've engaged in. But we're going to have to keep on working with universities to make sure that we're doing a smarter, better job in order for the people who are coming behind you to be able to afford college.

Last question. The gentleman right there.

Q Hi, Mr. President. Earlier today, we spoke about --

THE PRESIDENT: What's your name?

Q Patrick Forrest (ph) from the Fresno City College Rampage.

THE PRESIDENT: From the what?

Q Fresno City College, the Rampage.

THE PRESIDENT: Fresno City College. Fantastic.

Q Earlier today, one thing we talked about was civic engagement, and a line was used in the State of the Union address of "don't give into the cynicism of the day." A poll released by Reuters yesterday shows that nearly half of Americans feel that the elections are rigged in some way. Is there any goal or plan of the administration to help revitalize the faith in democracy that seems to be lacking?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know what, this is something that I've tried to do ever since I got into public office. As you know, I came into this work as a community organizer and strongly believed that our democracy only works when people participate.

There are a lot of forces that feed cynicism. And there's no dispute that our democracy is not working as well as it should. I can tell you some of the reasons for that. One of it is that we have set up a system for electing state legislatures and members of Congress that involve the drawing of district lines that are gerrymandered. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the phrase, it basically means that those who are already in power draw the maps in such a way where they can be assured that these are either going to be Democratic seats or Republican seats. And what that's done is it's made very few seats competitive.

So, for example, in the last election, in 2012, Democrats actually cast substantially more votes in congressional elections, but ended up with substantially fewer seats. And the reason for that is, in 2010, when the census was done and re-districting of congressional and House legislative seats were drawn, Republican governors and Republican majorities were responsible for drawing most of the seats.

Now, I want to be clear, Democrats aren't blameless on this, either. But California, for example, has gone to a process of nonpartisan districting. The advantage there is not only do you make more seats competitive, but it also means that politicians have to compete for everybody's votes because they're not in safe seats, they're not in a safely Republican district or a Democratic district. And what that does is it means they've got to not just appeal to the extremes of their party.

Part of the reason we've seen polarization and gridlock here in Washington is because there's been this great sorting, and Democrats have moved much further -- have moved left. Republicans have just gone way to the right. And it's harder, then, to compromise, because members of Congress -- and the same thing is true in state legislatures -- are always looking over their shoulder seeing if somebody in their own party might challenge them. And then the system doesn't work.

So that's a big chunk of why people are cynical -- because they feel like their votes don't count. And if you draw districts that are ironclad one party or another, then they're not entirely wrong.

Another reason that people are cynical is money in politics. The Supreme Court issued a ruling -- Citizens United -- that allowed super PACs and very wealthy individuals to just finance all these ads that you guys see on TV all the time. Half the time nobody knows who's funding them. And that makes you cynical partly because most of this money is spent on negative ads. So you're just hearing constantly how horrible everybody is. That will make you feel pretty bad about the political process.

And I'm a strong believer in finding ways in which we can make the financing of campaigns more democratic. Now, we've seen some interesting work being done. You've got to give Bernie Sanders, for example, credit, building off some of the work that I did. I, in turn, built off the work that Howard Dean did for smaller donations, grassroots donors to be able, in small contributions, to allow candidates to be competitive.

But I think that -- we don't want to leave that to chance. And that's much harder to do for members of Congress who are lower profile so they don't get the sort of viral presence that allows them to raise that kind of money to compete. So we're going to have to solve money in politics.

You as journalists are going to have a role to play in reducing cynicism. It is very hard to get good stories placed. People will assign you stories about what's not working. It's very hard for you to write a story about, wow, this thing really works good.

And just to take the federal government as an example, every day I've got 2 million people who work for the federal government -- whether in our military, our law enforcement, our environmental protection, et cetera -- and they're doing great work. And you rely on it in all kinds of ways, including when you check the weather, because you can thank the National Weather Service for putting satellites up so your smartphones tell you whether to bring an umbrella or not. But we just take that for granted.

And if, out of those 2 million employees, one person screws up somewhere -- which every day you can count on somebody out of 2 million people probably doing something they shouldn't be doing -- that's what's going to get reported on. Now, that helps keep government on its toes and accountable. But one of the things we have to think about is how do we tell a story about the things we do together that actually work so that people don't feel so cynical overall.

But look, here's the bottom line, is that -- let's take the political process. As cynical as everybody is, and everybody is always trying to come up with these radical new plans to try to fix our democracy, and we need to do this and we need to do that -- the truth is, is that part of the reason why our government doesn't work as well is because in a good presidential year, slightly more than half the people vote who are eligible, and the other half don't. And during an off-year election, when the President is not at the top of the ticket, and people aren't getting as much attention, 40 percent of the people vote.

Now, this system doesn't work if people opt out. And the easiest cure, the simplest cure for what ails our democracy is everybody voting. Now, it's true that there are some states that purposely make it hard for people to vote. We're the only major democracy in the world that actively makes it hard for people to vote. And so you should be, particularly in your student newspapers, as you go back to your home states, you should be asking why is it that we have laws that are purposely making it harder for people to vote, purposely making it harder for young people to vote.

And there's a political agenda there. The people in power don't want things to change. They want cynicism, because obviously the existing system, as frustrating as it is for everybody else, works for them. Well, if you want to upend that, we've got to vote.

But even in those states that purposely make it harder to vote, the truth of the matter is, on your college campuses, half the folks, maybe two-thirds of the folks who don't vote don't vote because they're just not paying attention. They don't consider it important.

And they're not willing to take the 15 minutes or half hour that it takes to make sure that you're registered and make sure you actually vote.

Well, if you care about climate change, you care about college costs, you care about career opportunities, you care about war and peace and refugees, you can't just complain.

You've got to vote. And what's interesting is, is young people as a voting bloc are the least likely to vote, but when you do vote, have the biggest impact on elections.

During a presidential year, young people account for like 19 percent of the total vote.

During an off-year election, when folks aren't paying as much attention, they account for 12 percent. And that means that the kinds of candidates that get elected and the priorities that they reflect are entirely different, just based on whether or not you guys are going to the polls.

So don't let people tell you that what you do doesn't matter. It does. Don't give away your power. That should be the main message that you deliver all the time. And it doesn't matter whether you're a Republican, Democratic, independent; whether you're conservative on some issues, liberal on others. If you participate and you take the time to be informed about the issues, and you actually turn out and your peers turn out, you change the country. You do. It may not always happen as fast as you'd like, but you'll change it.

So I'll keep on talking about this even after I leave the presidency. You got me started. I went on a rant, didn't I? (Laughter.)

All right. So I'm counting on you guys. Don't let me down, all right? Don't let the country down. You guys are going to be delivering the message to your peer group that this is the greatest country on Earth, but only because we have great citizens who are willing to invest their time and energy and effort to become informed on the issues, to argue about it in a respectful way, and to try to collectively solve the many challenges that we face.

The good news is, is that there are no challenges, as JFK said, that "man creates that man can't solve." I would add women to that. (Laughter.)

All right? Good luck, guys. Bye-bye. (Applause.)

END

4:31 P.M. EDT