

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 4/15/2016

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Happy Friday. (Laughter.) I have a 1:15 p.m. meeting today, so hopefully, Josh, you can help me get out of here on time.

Q Let's do it. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: All right.

Q We want to help you.

MR. EARNEST: Good.

Q We're here to help.

MR. EARNEST: And I'm sorry that Mark is not here because I can't tell my usual joke about how I know you're eager to get started on your weekend, so we'll go fast.

I do want to just do a short mention of some of the news coverage today about the President's focus on eliminating anticompetitive behavior. And we have seen the administration, over the course of the presidency, look for opportunities to actually promote competition in markets because we understand that competition is good for our economy. It promotes innovation and leads to positive results for consumers. There are a variety of ways to assess that; in fact, this is actually one of the core principles of the Affordable Care Act, is promoting greater competition in the health care market.

The President talked today about how the administration is supportive of an effort to try to promote greater competition when it comes to set-top boxes for television. This would also provide an incentive for greater innovation in a way that could save consumers money.

So I know that many of you have taken a look at this announcement today and heard the President talk about this a little bit in his interview with Yahoo! that he taped yesterday.

But I wanted to make sure that you all understood that this is a core priority of the administration, something that we intend to continue to move in the direction of over the course of the last nine months here that the President has remaining in office.

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

Q Great, thanks, Josh. Let me start with North Korea and the failed missile launch there. We understand from U.S. officials that this was a Musudan rocket which could eventually be capable of hitting U.S. facilities that are located in Asia. Is that the case? And does the threat that would be posed to having U.S. facilities in range of these rockets change the calculus at all in terms of the U.S. response?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, we are aware of reports that North Korea conducted a failed ballistic missile test recently. The United States will continue to monitor and assess the situation in close coordination with our regional allies and partners.

As we've done before, the United States strongly condemns this provocative act by the North Korean government. It is in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions that explicitly prohibit North Korea's use of ballistic missile technology. The United States is strongly committed to the defense of our allies, particularly our allies in Asia -- that includes the Republic of Korea and Japan. And we're going to continue to stand with them as they face these threats, but also reiterate our commitment to the defense of our allies.

As it relates to the threat to U.S. interests, we're obviously keenly aware of that as well. I have talked -- unfortunately, I've had the occasion to discuss several times over the course of the last three or four months the steps that the United States has taken to bolster our missile defense capabilities in the region. And these are defense capabilities -- missile defense capabilities that have been shifted to this region of the world in response to this threat. And this includes the deployment of some naval assets to the region, as well as the deployment of some assets to Alaska to ensure that the U.S. homeland remains safe.

The assessment of the President's military commanders is that we do have the capabilities necessary to protect the United States, but we obviously continue to work with the international community to make clear that North Korea faces the prospect of even further isolation as a result of their provocative acts.

Q The head of Iran's central bank is in town, along with a number of other heads of central banks. And he really went off on the U.S. this morning, saying that, you're not living up to your side of the commitment of the nuclear deal, and that if the U.S. doesn't take pretty significant further steps to restore Iranian access to the financial system, that this nuclear deal will just fall apart. Are you confident that at this point the U.S. is fully meeting its commitments under the JCPOA?

MR. EARNEST: To just answer your question bluntly, yes. The United States is fulfilling our commitments to the JCPOA consistent with the letter and spirit of that agreement.

You will recall that we only agreed to do so once we could verify -- the international community could verify -- that Iran had followed through on their commitments. They have. That's good news. They reduced their nuclear stockpile by 98 percent. They took thousands of centrifuges out of operation. They've taken steps to essentially make their heavy water plutonium reactor harmless -- or at least incapable of producing nuclear weapons material. And the United States -- as a result, the United States, along with the rest of the international community, is committed to living up to our end of the bargain.

Just to clarify one aspect of your question, that does not involve giving Iran access to the U.S. financial system. That is not part of the deal. It wasn't part of the deal. And it's not something that we are contemplating. But there is sanctions relief that's included in the agreement, and we intend to follow through on granting that -- we are following through on granting that sanctions relief as a result of our verification that Iran has complied with the terms of the agreement that they signed.

Q Going back to that final part of your answer, one of the specific things that the head of the central bank said in an interview while he was here was that Iran expects -- based on their understanding of what is part of this deal -- that the U.S. will begin to allow the U-turn transactions that they have sought for access to the dollar. So given what you've just said and what Secretary Lew and others have said, is the head of the Iranian central bank incorrect in his understanding of what was part of this hard-fought deal?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, this is highly technical, so I want to try to speak as bluntly as I can. The agreement that's included in the JCPOA does not include giving Iran access to the U.S. financial system or to allow the execution of so-called U-turn transactions. And we have ruled out giving Iran access to either of those two options.

But we are committed to ensuring that we fulfill our end of the JCPOA, and that involves following through with giving Iran the kind of sanctions relief to which they're entitled, as a result of them following through on the steps that they have taken to roll back significant aspects of their nuclear program and to make clear that they will not acquire a nuclear weapon.

Q And in the Democratic debate last night, Bernie Sanders repeated his whole thing -- if he becomes the nominee, that the President would pull the nomination of Merrick Garland. And he specifically said he's concerned that Chief Judge Garland has not shown that he would be committed to overturning the Citizens United decision. Given the amount that we've heard from the President lambasting that decision over the past number of years, how confident is the White House that Judge Garland would pursue that kind of an approach?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, what I can tell you is the President has complete confidence that Chief Judge Garland has demonstrated over his long career on the federal bench to fairly interpreting the law. In fact, he understands that the responsibility of a judge is to interpret the law, not advance a political agenda.

As we also discussed, the President did not have a specific discussion with potential nominees about how they would rule in particular cases. That raises some questions about a conflict because obviously there are some cases where the executive branch, represented by the Solicitor General before the Supreme Court, advocates for a particular position.

Rather, what the President has chosen to do is to consider the jurisprudence of individual nominees. Chief Judge Garland actually has a longer track record than any other Supreme Court nominee in history. He's got more experience serving from the federal bench than any other person that's ever been nominated to the Supreme Court. So there is an opportunity for us to consider his approach to the law, and the President believes that his approach to the law is consistent with what the Framers of our Constitution intended.

And look, the President is not the only person who feels this way. Republicans feel this way, too. Senator Orrin Hatch -- a conservative, a Republican, somebody who has served on the Senate Judiciary Committee for years -- also described Chief Judge Garland as a consensus nominee. So I don't know what that means for how he might rule in a hypothetical case at some point in the future, but I do know that the President has complete confidence that Chief Judge Garland would do what Supreme Court justices are supposed to do, which is interpret the law, not seek to advance a political agenda. And that's why the President nominated him in the first place.

That's why we've been pleased to see Republicans indicate, at least in their private conversations with Chief Judge Garland, that they are impressed with his credentials, with his character, and with his approach to his job. We simply believe that those conversations, many of which have now taken place in private -- which is entirely appropriate and consistent with the process that is typically pursued by the Senate -- we just believe that the next step should also occur, which is that members of the Senate Judiciary Committee should give the American people the opportunity to hear directly from Chief Judge Garland and get a better sense of how exactly he would approach the job of the Supreme Court justice when it comes to offering an opinion on issues like campaign finance reform that has significant consequences for our country and our democracy.

Roberta.

Q Turning to Egypt, there are huge protests in Cairo today with people calling for the downfall of the el-Sisi government -- concerns with human rights and the economy and the transfer of two islands to Saudi Arabia. So I'm wondering, how concerned is the United States about this unrest? Is this something that the President hopes to discuss when he meets with King Salman and other leaders next week?

And Senator Graham has called for emergency aid to help Egypt become more stable and bolster the country. Is that something that the White House is interested in exploring?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen the specifics of Senator Graham's proposal. I can tell you that the United States has an important security relationship with Egypt, or that the importance of that security relationship has not eclipsed the concerns that we have with some of the human rights policies that have been on display from the Egyptian government. And these are concerns that relate to the treatment of some political opponents of the government and, in some cases, even the treatment of journalists. We have not papered over those differences.

But at the same time, the United States does have an important security relationship with Egypt. And we spent a little time earlier this week talking about the MFO mission that the United States strongly supports on the Sinai Peninsula. Our support for that ongoing mission and promoting the treaty between Israel and Egypt is something that is critical to our closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, but it's also important to at least eliminating one potential element of volatility in an already chaotic region of the world.

So U.S. interests in Egypt are significant, and we'll obviously continue to watch the situation carefully.

Q Okay, just going back to North Korea for a second. I'm wondering what you make of the response from China to this latest failed test. The Chinese state media seemed a little pointed in its response. They called it the latest in a string of saber-rattling. And I guess I'm wondering what you make of that and what the U.S. is expecting from China in terms of a response to the latest incident.

MR. EARNEST: Well, as we have seen a number of provocative acts from North Korea over the last few months, we've been pleased to see the international community continue to stand with the United States in insisting that North Korea put an end to these provocative actions and statements. So we're going to continue to work closely with the Chinese government to apply pressure to North Korea.

We did succeed earlier this year in imposing sanctions against North Korea that will have an impact on certain industries in North Korea that we know are critical to financing some of these military activities that are inconsistent with U.N. Security Council resolutions. Passing those kinds of sanctions and forcefully implementing them would not have been possible without the constructive diplomatic relationship between China and the United States. So we certainly value that relationship, and it has significant consequences for U.S. national security.

China and the United States are going to continue to work with the rest of the international community in a way that has important security benefits for our allies in South Korea and Japan. And we're going to continue to apply that pressure, and we're going to continue to work with China to make sure that the North Koreans understand that going down the path of repeated provocations is not in the best interest of the region or the citizens of their country.

Michelle.

Q The problem with North Korea and its behavior has always been what sanctions, what action can you take that would actually change behaviors. So with these unprecedented sanctions being passed, obviously that hasn't changed the behavior yet. So what do you see as the best bet moving forward for that behavior to actually change? Is there something more that China is going to have to do?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think at this point it's too early to assess the complete impact of the sanctions that were only put in place I believe a month or so ago. But I would acknowledge that the premise of your question is not insignificant, which is, it's not clear exactly what will succeed in compelling the North Korean government to pursue a different approach. And the good news is that we know that there's no country that has more influence over the North Korean government than China. And China fully shares the concerns that we have expressed. So we're going to continue to rely on that relationship, but we're also going to continue to lead the international community in this response. And we do so because of the significant consequences for U.S. national security, but we also do so because of our concerns about increasing destabilization in Asia. And that is what these kinds of provocative acts do, they only destabilize the situation, and that's not good for our allies in Japan and South Korea.

And so that's why this continues to be a priority and one that we're going to continue to address.

Q It was pretty surprising yesterday to hear Susan Rice put numbers on ISIS's activity. And she said in the last year and a half there have been about 150 attacks that ISIS has attempted, all of these outside of Syria and Iraq. So that's one every couple of days. Where have most of these been? Can you shed a little more light on those attempted attacks? And also, every day we talk about how the coalition is pounding ISIS, that they're losing territory, they're having trouble gaining more territory. But when you see numbers like this, do you expect that pace of attempted attacks to continue? And that shows that after a year and a half of pounding ISIS, the desire to attack doesn't seem to have diminished at all outside of Iraq and Syria.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have specific information to provide in addition to those numbers that you heard from the National Security Advisor. What I can tell you is there are a couple things that we know about ISIL.

The first is, we know that they have attempted to establish a safe haven in Syria because that is the best way for them to try to plan and export their brand of hatred and extremism around the globe. That's why the President has always made a priority of increasing the pressure against ISIL leaders in Iraq and in Syria.

And the most high-profile of the attacks that we have seen outside of Iraq and in Syria have been in Western Europe. And there's been extensive reporting about the likely ties between the plotters in Western Europe and the leading ISIL figures in Iraq and in Syria.

So that's why it's important for us to continue to ramp up the pressure in Iraq and in Syria. You've heard me talk about this in different contexts. If the leaders of that organization are feeling intense pressure to protect their own safety and security, that's less time and attention that they're devoting to their external activities.

That being said, I think a potential consequence of increasing pressure on ISIL in Iraq and in Syria is that they will become more focused on activities outside of that region, even if their capacity to carry them out is diminished. That's why we remain vigilant. And that's why, even as we're ramping up the pressure in Iraq and in Syria -- and Ambassador Rice documented some of the progress that we've made there, too -- that's why, even though we've made important progress, and even though we do expect that that will have some impact -- positive impact in diminishing their capacity to carry out external attacks -- we're going to continue to be vigilant about protecting and countering those external attacks, because as they face more pressure in Iraq and in Syria, they're going to be more desperate to undertake operations in other places.

Q So what you're saying is you expect to see even more of these as the pressure --

MR. EARNEST: I think what I'm trying to say is that's why I think that while those numbers are an illustration of the threat that ISIL poses outside of Iraq and in Syria, they're not a good way to measure how dangerous ISIL is. Because even as they face more pressure and even as their capabilities are diminished, they're still going to seek to carry out external plots -- in fact, because they're under so much pressure in Syria and Iraq.

And so that's the complicated dynamic that exists. And it explains the strategy that we have pursued, which is to continue to ramp up the pressure in Iraq and in Syria, and to continue to seek to enhance our ability to work with our partners in the region and around the world to counter their activities outside of that region.

Q Okay. Just quickly, did the President watch the Democratic debate last night?

MR. EARNEST: I have not spoken to the President about the debate this morning, but I do not anticipate that he watched it.

Q Did you watch the debate last night?

MR. EARNEST: I saw parts of it, but I certainly did not watch all of it.

Q Does the White House feel that Hillary Clinton should turn over the transcripts of her speeches that she gave to Wall Street?

MR. EARNEST: I can confidently tell you that the White House does not have an opinion on this.

Q I mean, you're always talking about transparency and how important it is. And she, being the leading candidate to be the next President right now on the Democratic side --

MR. EARNEST: I certainly do believe in transparency, and I certainly do believe that when it comes to the government of the United States of America that is funded by taxpayers, that public servants do have a responsibility to be transparent about their official government activities. But obviously, none of that is an accurate description of the situation that was at the crux of a disagreement in the debate last night. So I'll let Secretary Clinton and Senator Sanders explain their respective positions.

Q So you don't feel either way whether she should release them or not?

MR. EARNEST: I don't feel the need to weigh in on it. Again, they can both have that argument and explain their positions, and the voters will decide who they believe is making the more effective argument.

Mary.

Q Back on Zika funding. Despite the answers that you've already provided to some of the Republicans' questions, we seem to be at a bit of a standstill here. Chairman Rogers says --

MR. EARNEST: Dangerously so.

Q -- this simply is not enough. He says he needs more specifics, and until then, they can't take any further action. Will you provide them with any more details?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I have indicated from the beginning a desire to engage in a conversation with members of Congress to take the steps that are necessary now to protect the American people from the Zika virus. And this is not a new position for the administration; this is actually a position that we've held since February when the President initially asked for the additional funding to fight Zika.

Since that time, there have been a number of senior administration officials who have gone to Capitol Hill to testify before committees on camera, under oath, answering questions from members of Congress, including the Appropriations Committee repeatedly, people like Secretary Burwell. She's obviously the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. She has testified before Congress on a number of occasions, including March 15th. She testified also on February 25th. And she testified before both the House and the Senate -- once on March 24th and March 25th.

And I can tell you that Tony Fauci, the Director of the National Institutes of Health, testified before Congress repeatedly to discuss this issue. In fact, there are 48 hearings over the course of this year where the Zika virus has come up. So there has been not just a willingness on the part of the administration to engage in this conversation, you've seen senior administration officials actually go up to Congress and make themselves available to answer questions on camera, under oath, about this issue.

The Republican explanation for not acting on Zika is that they didn't do their homework. They've had ample opportunity to collect information, to ask questions of senior administration officials, to read letters, to read the legislative proposal that was put

forward by the administration. But Republicans haven't done it. I don't understand really why.

I don't know if it's that they are concerned about the reaction from the extreme right-wing base of their party about additional government funding. I don't know if it's the need that Republicans for some reason feel to reflexively oppose everything that President Obama suggests. What I do know is that the Republican approach thus far to not take any action to provide the funding that our public health experts say is necessary is bad for the country, and it's dangerous.

Q So when Republicans, for instance, say that the details they're still looking for -- one of them is the exact dollar amount that they need right now in this fiscal year -- you say that they already had an opportunity to get those kinds of answers?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Secretary Burwell has testified on a number of occasions about the President's budget. She testified before the House Appropriations Committee on February 25th about the budget. There certainly was an opportunity for Republicans to ask her there. Why didn't they? Were they not prepared to do so? Did they not think of it at the time? I guess it would be worth asking them. She testified before the Committee on education and the workforce. Somebody presumably could have asked her there. That was a more recent hearing. That occurred on March 15th.

I think what is more likely happening is that we are seeing Republicans change their explanation for their inaction. They are grasping in the dark for an excuse. Several weeks ago, you heard Speaker Ryan say, "There's plenty of money in the pipeline right now that can go to Zika." That was the explanation from Speaker Ryan a few weeks ago. Earlier this week, he said -- Speaker Ryan said that funding for Zika should go through the normal process. Considering that today is the deadline for the House to pass a budget, and they're not going to meet that deadline, I'm not sure that pursuing the normal process for an emergency like this, given Congress's inept ability to handle the budget, is a particularly good idea.

So that's why I think it's a little curious after weeks of saying there's plenty of money in the pipeline, or there's plenty of time for us to act, that Republicans are now somehow saying that they don't have enough information. I don't think that really passes the smell test.

Q And given the fact that it's obviously getting warmer by the day, are you confident that this fight is going to get the funding that it needs?

MR. EARNEST: Well, our success to do -- well, let me say it this way, our public health professionals stood at this podium on Monday -- it seems like a while ago -- they stood at this podium on Monday, and they said that they don't have what they need right now, that they're not doing everything that we should be doing right now to protect the American people from the Zika virus.

There is a lot that can be done. It requires reprogramming funds from other core priorities. It required trying to extract loose change from the proverbial couch. But there is important work that's being done at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control to try to fight this disease, and to try to fight the virus, and to try to protect the American people.

But we're not doing everything that we should be doing. We're certainly not doing everything that we could be doing if Congress would fulfill its basic responsibility to ensure that these public health professionals have the resources that they need to protect the American people. This is separate from the kind of basic funding that we need to ensure that state and local governments can respond to the situation, too. After all, they're the ones that are going to be on the front lines.

We know that additional funding would help local governments fight the mosquito population. One of the things that we have heard that they're interested in doing -- and this is something that the CDC discussed with state and local officials in Atlanta a couple of weeks ago -- is that when there is someone who has tested positive for the Zika virus, one of the things that it would make sense to do is to go around that person's house in that neighborhood and try to kill all the mosquitos that are living there, to prevent that person from being bitten by a mosquito and transmitting the virus to someone else. But that's going to require a local government response that's very nimble and that has enough capacity to be able to dedicate a couple of people to go a couple of hours and spray around one house.

That requires resources. That, of course, is not the kind mosquito eradication plan that's in place right now. So if we're going to be able to make those kinds of smart, strategic, and tactical decisions to fight this virus, we're going to need additional funding. And that funding is not going to be available until somebody -- until Republicans in Congress begin to recognize that this is a basic responsibility that they have and that the safety and security and wellbeing of the American people depends upon them doing their jobs.

Justin.

Q Would the White House be willing to accept the version of the Puerto Rico legislation that reduced Puerto Rico's minimum wage?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess, Justin, I'd be hard-pressed to hear a Republican explain how exactly that's going to improve the financial standing of the Puerto Rico government. That sounds much more to me like Republicans engaging in a tactic that we've seen from them before, which is hoping that they can score an unrelated, ideological victory by holding something else hostage. In this case, it's the liquidity of the Puerto Rican government.

So there is no reason that we should let a longstanding political argument about the minimum wage have an impact on the ability of the Puerto Rican government to pay its bills. So just to be clear -- because there does seem to be some misinformation that's

being spread about this -- this is not a bailout. I've said many times the administration does not support a bailout of Puerto Rico. We don't. We haven't. We have never, and we don't now.

The irony is, is that refusing to give the Puerto Rican government authority to address their financial challenges right now only make a future bailout of Puerto Rico more likely. So if we actually are focused on trying to prevent a bailout from being necessary, then Congress needs to continue to act in a bipartisan fashion to find a solution that will just give Puerto Rico the kind of debt restructuring authority that cities across the country have. And that by using that authority in a way that does have some oversight to make sure that they're pursuing reforms, that's the best way to ensure -- to restore the financial situation on the island of Puerto Rico and make sure that U.S. taxpayers are not placed on the hook of ever bailing them out.

Q So is that a no?

MR. EARNEST: I think it is a -- well, yes, it's a no because it has nothing to do with --

Q We'll, get you to your meeting on time. (Laughter.) Have you guys been in contact with bondholders on this issue? I know you kind of mentioned them as part of the undergraduate political science class earlier this week. And so I'm wondering if -- you obviously have been in touch with Congress, and the Treasury Department has even talking to bondholders -- but has the Treasury been talking to bondholders?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any specific conversations that occurred. But I do know that when faced with public policy questions, it's not uncommon for the administration to be in touch with stakeholders on a variety of sides. So I wouldn't rule out that a meeting with bondholders has occurred at some point. But I'm not aware of any specific meetings.

Q Leader Pelosi said yesterday that she doesn't think that this legislation -- especially after the markup got kind of scrapped or pushed back -- has a chance of passing by May 1st. May 2nd, I guess, is when the \$422 million payment is due. Do you agree with that assessment that you don't expect this legislation to now pass by the end of the month? And if so, what are the ramifications that you see for Puerto Rico?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Leader Pelosi is certainly in a better position to assess the likelihood of the timely passage of this legislation than I am. I haven't heard that assessment, but I don't -- again, I don't have the standing or the knowledge to disagree with her assessment.

I think this is why the administration has been focused, since last year, you'll recall, in trying to get Congress to act to avoid a cliffhanger like the one that you're describing. I don't know what consequences this will have for Puerto Rico's ability to make that payment on time. But obviously it's a good illustration of why we're concerned about this situation.

Q And last one was kind of the debate last night. You've talked a lot about how the tone of the Democratic race and debate has been heightened relative to the Republican one. But last night we saw kind of some real scrapping between the Democratic candidates. I'm wondering if that bled into a territory where it raised any concern within the White House, or if there were any plans to maybe ask the candidates to cool things down to sort of maintain that perceived difference?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any plan to begin to communicate with the candidates about the strategy that they've chosen to pursue. I still feel confident -- well, I didn't watch every minute of the debate -- I do still feel confident in saying that the tone and tenor and focus on policy in the Democratic debate has positioned the Democratic Party to do well in the general election, particularly because we've seen a Democratic race that's been focused on a whole lot of things other than substantive policy issues. So I'm not aware of any conversations like that that are contemplated.

I do continue to believe, and I know the President continues to believe, that a robust debate in a Democratic primary is not necessarily a bad thing. It certainly is a way for Democratic voters across the country to become more engaged in the debate, and that will pay dividends in the general election. It certainly did in 2008, when we had a primary that lasted longer than expected. And there certainly is a potential that that would happen again in 2016.

Ron.

Q On the Clinton speeches issue, you won't take a position about whether she should disclose these transcripts. Is there concern at the White House that this issue could hurt her in a general election? The charge essentially is hypocrisy of her making these speeches, being paid a lot of money, but yet at the same time claiming that she is an agent of change and that she is against some of the practices on Wall Street, and so on and so forth.

MR. EARNEST: I think the short answer to your question is no. But obviously, it's possible that this is an issue that could come up for some discussion in the general election. But again, right now, there's a Democratic primary that's going on. And it's not clear exactly who the party's nominee is going to be. Obviously, Secretary Clinton, based on her success in amassing delegates, has the lead. But this process has not yet been resolved.

Q And just in terms of the administration's position on former employees, if you will, leaving and going out and making money, is there anything about what the Secretary has done that concerns the administration on this issue?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any concerns that have been raised. I know that there were a set of policies that were put in place on the President's first or second day in office that did limit the activities of former administration officials. That mostly related to former administration officials who might be interested in coming back and lobbying their former colleagues. We can certainly get you some more details around that, because

the kinds of restrictions to close that revolving door that President Obama put in place were the toughest in history. But I don't think that those regulations would apply to the situation that Secretary Clinton faced.

Q Something else in the news -- there's a lot of attention focused on a case in Atlanta involving a boy who's being paddled at an elementary school outside of Atlanta. Are you familiar with that?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen a little bit of the coverage but I've not looked at the details.

Q Aside from the details of that situation, what is the President's view generally about corporal punishment in schools?

MR. EARNEST: I have to admit, I have not heard the President express an opinion on this. We can take a look and see if the President has weighed in on it in the past. But I think it is certainly understandable that an issue like this would get a lot of attention, but I'm not sure that the President has weighed in on it.

Q And just lastly, one other thing about last night as well. Hillary Clinton said -- and I believe Senator Sanders said as well -- that they support the idea of safe havens in Turkey in the Syrian war theater. And I know the President has said he doesn't think that that's a way to go. But he's going there, he's talking to Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, who also, I believe, supports this notion. And I'm wondering if this might be a time to rethink that because, as you've said, you've taken back so much territory from ISIS, there is a cessation of hostilities in place that's somewhat fragile, that one of the big objectives now is to get more humanitarian aid into that environment. So why not look at something like that, that people like former Secretary Clinton and Chancellor Merkel, who, I believe the President both has a lot of respect for, support? Why not take a look at something like that now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, let me say this -- let me answer that question a couple different ways. The first is that the United States has worked hard with the United Nations and the rest of the international community to try to impose a Cessation of Hostilities. And this is a Cessation of Hostilities that went into effect two months ago now. It has proved to be more durable than I think most administration officials expected, that's for sure. And having that Cessation of Hostilities in place has reduced the violence and has allowed humanitarian organizations to do more of their important work in some communities that have been desperate for it for a while now. So we have made important progress in that regard.

The President's longstanding opposition to this concept of a so-called "safe zone" in Syria is predicated on the idea that while it sounds good, it's much more complicated in practice to implement it. It raises all sorts of questions about who exactly would ensure the safety of the safe zone. That presumably would require the deployment of thousands of military personnel in order to not just guard the perimeter, but also to screen the individuals and

equipment and vehicles that are entering the safe zone. And it also would require the deployment of security personnel inside the safe zone to ensure the security of all those who are there.

That, in essence, would require the kind of commitment of ground forces that the President does not believe is consistent with our national security interests. And some people have referred to this as a no-fly zone, and the reason that that's misleading is we know that ISIL isn't carrying out attacks from the air. So it's not the no-fly zone that we're concerned about. It's unclear exactly how much safety and security that would bring anybody, because the situation on the ground is where the security is so unstable. And trying to secure and patrol and, in some cases, be in the position of repelling attacks over such a large territorial area would not be consistent with our national security interests.

Q I guess the concern is that now would be a time, some would argue, for a very bold humanitarian gesture. And clearly, the U.S. military can sort that out, the logistics of doing it, and there may be coalition partners who are willing to -- I don't know the troop numbers -- but I think it's the concept that given what's happened in Syria and the horrific humanitarian disaster that it is, why not now when there seems to be a window, or seems to be some progress? I mean, I thought in terms of humanitarian aid, I thought your view was that not enough is getting in. There's some progress, but I thought the view of the administration was that there still needs to be more done on that front.

MR. EARNEST: Well, there certainly is more that can and should be done on that front. But more humanitarian assistance has been provided over the last couple of months than was provided previously because of the successful implementation of the Cessation of Hostilities. The implementation of that cessation has not been perfect by any stretch. We have seen violations, but it has proved to be more durable than was previously expected. And that has given humanitarian aid organizations greater freedom to provide much-needed relief to populations that have been caught in the crossfire for quite some time.

So that is the strategy that we have been pursuing. That also is a strategy that will move us more closely in the direction of our goal, which is ultimately resolving the political chaos inside of Syria. By reaching a Cessation of Hostilities, we can not just provide some humanitarian relief, but we can also give political opponents of the regime confidence that they can begin to engage in the proximity talks hosted by the United Nations to bring about a political solution inside of Syria. And that is ultimately going to solve our problem.

The creation of a safe zone doesn't move us in the direction of any of that, and in fact, actually, could move us in a direction of starting to partition Syria. And the United States and others who have been focused on the situation in Syria have made it a goal to try to preserve the current shape of that nation, even as they endure so much turmoil right now.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. The President said about this set-top box issue that he wanted to lend greater lift to the push to get more federal agencies to explore areas of possible competition. Sixty days seems like a pretty tight window. Has he issued a similar challenge to other federal agencies previously?

MR. EARNEST: Off the top of my head, I can't think of one that had a specific 60-day timeframe, but we can take a look at that for you. And obviously the goal here is that in some cases it might be pretty obvious to agencies that this kind of anti-competitive behavior is going on. And I think the President wanted to make clear that it's a priority to find a way to address it. And the consequences for doing so are significant. By trying to promote greater competition in the market, we can do things that have obvious benefits for consumers.

When it comes to set-top boxes, people are spending hundreds of dollars a year to essentially rent a box that cost less than that to make in the first place. And the only reason that they have to rent that box from their cable provider is because that's what the cable provider requires in order to get the signal. So if we can standardize the signal, allow other companies to provide the box, it then means that cable companies are just providing the service. That could cut costs. That could also enhance innovation. Those set-top boxes are occasionally clunky and have to be replaced in their own right anyway. So it probably is an area of technology where innovation would be good for consumers, to say nothing of the broader impact it could have on the economy if you can give other companies the opportunity to develop products that would allow them to compete with the big cable providers.

Q So then what would you say to the industry critics who suggest it could actually drive up costs in the short run on consumers? What's wrong with their thought on that? Are they being disingenuous when they make that suggestion?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't heard the justification for that claim. But again, it already is prohibitively expensive for many consumers, based on the way that it's currently structured.

Again, over the course of the year, you can often pay more to rent that box than it actually costs to build that box in the first place. So, yes, it's a pretty inefficient process, and it's one that allows cable companies to stifle innovation and collect significant sums of money. This is a place where innovation and competition can be good for the broader economy and good for individual consumers. It certainly is a way for us to be more fair when it comes to cable customers who are looking for a good deal.

Q What about the concern that this is another example of more government reach-in in an area where it shouldn't reach in?

MR. EARNEST: Again, I think this is an example of the government saying, we're not going to let you have a specific benefit anymore. Now, this is an independent decision that's made by the FCC, so they'll ultimately have to decide. But ultimately, I think this is about --

Q Will the FTC also be involved in that, too?

MR. EARNEST: My understanding is this is an FCC decision and not an FTC one. But the FTC obviously does have a regulatory role that in some cases does have to deal with combatting anticompetitive behavior in a way that's good for innovation and good for consumers. But in this case, it's the FCC that's involved.

But look, the question here is whether or not we're going to do more to empower customers and give them a choice. And when given a choice, there is obvious potential that they could save money and get better service. So this I think, on the scale of policy questions to be made by the government, this one seems like a rather easy one.

Gregory.

Q Following up on that, on Wednesday, the National Association of Broadcasters filed a petition with the FCC asking for permission to broadcast next-generation TV signals that would allow them to do things like interactive things, mobile TV, 4K video. Would you envision the White House would weigh in on that proposal as well? And if not, what's the difference between the one disruptive technology that you do support and the other disruptive technology that you don't?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen their specific proposal. I don't know at this point whether or not we'd weigh in on it. Obviously, it's something that will be carefully considered by the FCC. But at this point, I'm not aware of a plan to weigh in on that specific proposal.

Q Michael Powell, the former Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, said that this decision was political on the part of the White House. And he points out that the companies that would benefit the most from the set-box rule are companies like Google, Amazon, Netflix. Those are all companies that have participated in these private sector commitments on various initiatives the White House has with the President's pen-and-phone strategy. Care to comment on whether this is a political favor to those companies?

MR. EARNEST: I think the thing that I would simply observe -- and this is something that Mr. Powell obviously knows -- the people who stand to benefit the most are consumers, millions of them across the country who right now are being charged an unfair price for their cable service. That is what's driving the President -- that's what's driving the decision of the administration and the President to state an opinion on this.

But of course this decision will be made by the FCC, and they will do so without weighing what other policy areas the potentially affected companies have been involved in.

Q And then Kevin asked about the 60-day deadline for the executive order today. In January, the President issued a presidential memorandum on smart gun technology that had a 90-day deadline for departments to get back to the White House on what they could do on smart gun technology. It's been two weeks since that deadline. Has the President received that report? And why hasn't it been released?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't been briefed on that particular executive order. We can certainly look into it. I would be surprised, given the priority that the administration has placed on that executive order, if any agencies were late. But we'll take a look, and if there's information we can provide to you on it, we will.

Bill.

Q There is a report said to be from reliable sources that next week Secretary Lew plans to announce that he will leave Hamilton on the \$10 bill, put some women on the back, and leave Jackson on the \$20. Have you heard?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there's been substantial reporting around this. I don't have any secrets to reveal from here. What I can tell you is that --

Q Does this sound reasonable?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess the reasonableness of a proposal like the one you described is probably in the eye of the beholder. I think what I would say is that Secretary Lew has demonstrated a seriousness of purpose in taking a look at what the next generation of U.S. currency would look like. Obviously, there are updates that are made to our currency based on security requirements. And the question that he has considered is when those security updates are required, should we make some changes to our currency to make sure that it better reflects the country, and certainly the role that women have played in contributing to the development of our country.

And he has indicated that that look will result in changes being made not just to the \$10, but to the \$5 and the \$20. But beyond that, we'll have to wait for an announcement from the Treasury Department.

Q So what do you think, women on the currency would make it more secure?

MR. EARNEST: No, what I'm saying is that -- I guess that's possible, but that's not the decision. The decision is that every 10 years or so, there are updates that are made to the features of our currency to counter counterfeiters. And so that often involves the redesign of the currency, and Secretary Lew has suggested that in the context of that redesign, that ensuring that our currency better reflects the country could be a worthwhile thing.

But for the details of what that could look like, we'll have to wait for an announcement from the Treasury Department.

Fred.

Q Thanks, Josh. First of all, on the executive action -- or executive orders going forward looking at competition, first of all, why now in terms of looking at this? I mean, whatever report comes back, do you think that the President's successor will take all those recommendations and implement those?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think I would say two things about that. I think the first is, the President is hopeful that in the next 60 days, agencies may surface ideas that we could act on relatively quickly, including before the end of the administration. I don't want to prejudge exactly what agencies will turn up when they conduct this review, but if it's possible to make changes in short order that would better promote competition, we certainly would be supportive of moving forward with those.

If there are proposals that are put forward that would take longer to implement, we certainly will. In some cases, it's possible for us to initiate the process now and let the President's successor decide on how to implement it. In other cases, we may just use them to pass on recommendations of obvious steps that the next administration could take to promote better competition in a way that will provide more of an incentive for innovation and obvious benefits to our broader economy and to consumers.

Q And would you anticipate the findings are going to lean towards more regulation or less regulation? Or is it going to be sort of a combination?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the question here is less about more regulation versus less regulation, and more about what can we do to provide the market with an incentive to pursue more competition and more innovation and more savings for consumers, and more economic growth and economic expansion?

That's the direction that we're headed in. And I think typically that does mean, in some cases, responsible decisions about reducing regulations. It's not always the case, but it often is. But again, I don't want to prejudge what the conclusions of the agency review might be.

Q And I want to talk about the story that came up on Fox News just. There are Marine officials who have said that the aviation corps is being stretched to a breaking point because of budget cuts, sequestration, and so forth, over the last five years. Is this a concern in terms of having enough planes that are ready to prepare to go to battle?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can't speak -- I can't provide an update for you in terms of the current condition of the air wing of the Marine Corps. I can tell you in general that we've been quite concerned about the approach that Congress has taken to funding our defense priorities.

There has been a willingness on the part of Republicans to champion the sequester that has had a negative impact on our ability to fund core defense programs. We have been concerned that too many Republicans have been tempted to use something like OCO funding to try to make up for those differences. When you're talking about ensuring the long-term strength of the aircraft that are used by the United States Marines, that requires a sustained investment and can't be funded on a six-month or 12-month basis. And that's why OCO funding is not an acceptable replacement for draconian, unwise, sequester-motivated spending cuts that Republicans have in some cases championed.

So the other thing that we have often been concerned about is there are legitimate places where defense spending can be cut from programs that the military has concluded that they don't need or are not particularly effective. And using those resources to increase our investment in those areas that we know are particularly effective is smart budgeting. Those are the kinds of budgetary decisions that middle-class families make around the kitchen table every day, or at least every month.

And it's unfortunate that too many Republicans have blocked those kinds of common-sense defense-spending reforms that would have obvious benefits for the readiness of our military.

Q And last question -- yesterday, you talked about being undefeated in the WTO against China. I know you love Trump questions. I mean, his constant campaign meme has been "U.S. always loses to China; China always wins." Do you think that blunts his point, or absolutely refutes his point?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll let you guys try to figure out exactly what his point is. It's not always immediately obvious.

I think what is true is that this administration's record of fighting for American businesses and American workers at the WTO is incredibly strong. And that's not just true when you take a look at the number of cases that the United States has brought against China at the WTO, it's true when looking at the results of those cases.

All of the cases that have been decided are cases that were decided in favor of the United States. And it is an indication that the United States can be effective and is effective in defending American businesses. That's why the President has made a strong case that what we should do is actually look for additional markets where we can level the playing field, where we can fight unfair competition, where we can force other countries to raise their labor standards, to raise their environmental standards, and to raise their human rights standards and give more American companies more access to their markets.

In some cases we're talking about countries that have dynamic economies, they're growing quickly, and they would benefit from American products. And they have a large number of customers who are hungry for American products. Why wouldn't we look for opportunities to provide that access to American businesses in a way that we know will be good for workers and good for our economy, particularly if we have demonstrated an ability to protect those American businesses and those American companies from the unfair practices that are used by other countries?

So this is a lot about common sense. And the facts of this case and the facts of this policy debate are often rather inconvenient to the most vociferous critics of this policy. And I'm not just referring to presidential candidates. I'm also referring to individual members of Congress in both parties.

Victoria, I'll give you the last one, then we'll do the week ahead.

Q I understand that your position is that the Republicans are posturing over the details that they want with regard to Zika funding. But why don't you just call their bluff and provide the details? Obviously, the officials at the CDC and everywhere else know exactly what it is that they need. Why don't they just go ahead and provide those details?

MR. EARNEST: I guess, Victoria, the case that I'm making to you is that we have. We provided --

Q Again.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'll give it to you. Do you want to pass it off to them? It's right here, dated February 22nd, legislative language, specific text. There have also been a number of hearings, 48 of them in which the Zika virus has come up. These are hearings, including testimony before the House Appropriations Committee. This includes testimony by Dr. Fauci, it includes testimony by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Sylvia Burwell. So there is ample information that's been shared. Many of you received a letter that the Director of the OMB, Shaun Donovan, sent up to Congress a couple of weeks ago. There is extensive information that's been provided.

Q Are you unwilling to send it again?

MR. EARNEST: I'm sorry?

Q Are you unwilling to provide it again?

MR. EARNEST: If necessary, we're happy to resend as many letters as Republicans claim got lost in the mail.

Q Because I've already killed mosquitos in my Maryland apartment.

MR. EARNEST: Yes. (Laughter.)

Q They're here.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, they are. And it is a risk that we are aware of and one that we have a unique opportunity to try to get in front of. There are a lot of preparations that we can make before the biggest threat arrives.

We know that there is a specific species of mosquito that carries this virus. That's the one that we're most acutely concerned about. We know that that an expansion of diagnostic testing would serve the American people well.

Right now, that testing has to be limited because our capacity is rather limited, to say nothing of how we could turbocharge the development of a vaccine that, while it probably couldn't be ready to protect people this year, certainly could be in place to start protecting people next year. Those are the kinds of basic actions that we'd like to undertake. But yet, we cannot do as much as we possibly can in pursuit of those goals until Congress actually provides the necessary funding.

Q Josh, quick question. This regards to your week ahead -- I don't think you may get to this in your week ahead. On Monday, a major case is coming before the U.S. Supreme Court. It's U.S. v. Texas. What confidence do you have that the administration will prevail at the Supreme Court-level when you haven't prevailed at both the district court-level and the appellate court-level?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I am not going to be in a position to predict outcomes. But I do feel confident in saying that we've got a lot of confidence in the strength of our argument that we'll make before the Supreme Court. It is quite clear that the executive authority that President Obama exercised is entirely consistent with the executive authority that President Reagan and President George H.W. Bush exercised in carrying out and enforcing our immigration policy.

It also happens to make common sense. We've got limited enforcement resources. We should target those resources at the most dangerous people. And that is exactly what our policy recommends. And there are significant economic and fiscal benefits to pursuing this policy. And we're hopeful that the power of these arguments will prevail, but we'll see.

Q Does it make it more difficult with just eight justices on the U.S. Supreme Court hearing that case?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it does mean that the Supreme Court is not going to function in the way that -- with the full complement of justices. It's President Reagan who talked about how that was a bad idea. We certainly agree with that sentiment.

Let me do the week ahead, and I'll let you go, and I'll get back to my meeting here.

On Monday, the President will be here at White House. I do not anticipate that he'll have much of a public schedule that day.

On Tuesday afternoon, the President will depart Washington, D.C., en route Ramstein, Germany, where he will refuel on his way to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

On Wednesday, the President will arrive in Riyadh. In the afternoon, the President will meet with King Salman of Saudi Arabia. The President will spend the night in Riyadh.

On Thursday, the President will meet with leaders and delegations from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. For those of you scoring along at home, that's Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In the afternoon, the President will depart Riyadh and travel to London where he will remain overnight.

On Friday, the President I know is eagerly looking forward to having lunch with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom at Windsor Castle. Next week is obviously the Queen's 90th birthday. So the President was looking forward to the opportunity to wish her a happy birthday then.

In the afternoon, the President will have a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom. Afterward, the President and Prime Minister will participate in a news conference. The President will spend Friday night in London.

On Saturday, the President will participate in a town hall discussion with British youth at the Royal Horticultural Halls. That should be an interesting venue. The President will spend Saturday night in London, as well.

On Sunday, the President will debate London and head to Hannover, Germany. In Hannover, the President will have a bilateral meeting with Chancellor Merkel. Afterward, the President and Chancellor Merkel will host a news conference.

On Sunday evening, the President will deliver remarks at the Hannover Messe Trade Fair opening ceremony. Later in the evening, the President will host a dinner with Chancellor Merkel and business leaders from both the United States and Germany who are attending the Hannover Messe. The President will spend Sunday night in Hannover.

The President does have a schedule in Germany on Monday, but will depart Germany on Monday afternoon and head back to the United States, arriving here Monday evening East Coast time.

All right, with that, I hope you guys all have a good weekend. Enjoy the beautiful spring weather, and we'll see you on Monday.

END

1:17 P.M. EDT