

# Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki

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## Briefing Room

### • Press Briefings

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:20 P.M. EST

MS. PSAKI: Hi, everyone. Okay. I know also there's a time limitation today, so we will make sure everybody is where they need to be when they need to be there.

Good morning. I just wanted to note at the top: I'm wearing red today in honor of National Wear Red Day and American Heart Month.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, claiming the lives of 650,000 people every year, with a disproportionate burden on communities of color.

The President is committed to supporting Americans in their efforts to achieve better heart health and closing the racial gaps in cardiovascular disease. That's why we're taking a whole-of-government approach to reduce diet-related chronic diseases and encourage every American to live a healthy lifestyle.

The President has also called on Congress to launch his ARPA-H initiative, which would invest billions of dollars in preventing, detecting, and treating cancer, cardiovascular conditions, and other deadly diseases.

And there are a number of other red-wearers today in here, too. I don't want to — I don't want to speak to what you picked out of your closet, but maybe you're recognizing the same thing.

Also wanted to note that a new competition and supply chain announcement that came out today — yesterday, I should say — sorry — from the Justice Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They launched FarmerFairness.gov — a new online tool that gives farmers and ranchers a one-stop shop for reporting potentially illegal practices in agricultural markets.

As the President noted when he met with farmers and ranchers last month, the meat-processing industry is highly consolidated. Just four companies control most of the markets for beef, poultry, and pork. That gives meat processors enormous power over farmers and ranchers. And too often, they use that power to exploit and underpay them.

The launch of this new tool is a critical part of the Biden-Harris administration's Action Plan for a Fairer, More Competitive, and More Resilient Meat and Poultry Supply Chain.

This is a one-stop shop to report potential violations, and it will allow the Justice Department and the USDA to better address anticompetitive actions and create meat and poultry markets that are fairer to American farmers and ranchers.

Finally, wanted to note this — shortly, the President will sign an executive order to improve timeliness, lower costs, and increase quality in federal construction projects. The order presumptive — requires the use of project labor agreements on federal construction projects, which will help the management and coordination challenges that can stymie progress on major construction projects.

Federal construction projects span the country, as we all know, from the maintenance of nuclear sites, to the upkeep at our military bases, to waterways and flood projects.

Based on the FY2021 figures, the order could affect \$262 billion in federal government construction contracting and improve job quality for near — for the nearly 200,000 workers on federal construction contracts.

Additionally, as directly in the previous executive order, starting January 30th, federal contractors will be paid a \$15 minimum wage.

And briefly, the week ahead — last thing: On Monday, as you all know, the President Biden will welcome the Chancellor of Germany to the White House, Chancellor Scholz. They will affirm the deep and enduring ties with — between the United States and Germany, and discuss their shared commitment to ongoing diplomacy and joint efforts to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine.

They will also discuss our close cooperation on everything from COVID-19 — the COVID-19 pandemic to addressing the threat of climate change and promoting international security based on our shared democratic values.

They will then participate in a joint press availability following the bilateral meeting.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the President will participate in events at the White House, providing updates on his economic plan to lower costs for the American people and create more good-paying jobs.

And on Thursday, he will travel to continue promoting his agenda. I expect we'll have more details on that in the coming days.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. So yesterday, you and State Department Spokesman Ned Price both took issue with reporters asking for evidence of your statements with respect to the Syria strike and the Russian false-flag operation. Do you really believe that journalists are repeating Russian and Islamic State propaganda in pursuing those questions, first of all?

And second of all, will you be offering evidence of your claims with respect to what happened in Syria when they become available?

MS. PSAKI: Absolutely. And I will — let me just start by saying that we welcome tough questions and good-faith scrutiny, otherwise I wouldn't come out here — I wouldn't have come out here almost 180 times and engaged with all of you and your tough questions and good-faith scrutiny.

As I noted in the response to a question from your colleague yesterday, which wasn't in all of the context of what was put out there, we are less than 48 hours from the end of the mission, so the Department of Defense is still conducting after-action assessments. That's a natural part of the process that occurs.

I also conveyed in my answer to the question: The President directed his Department of Defense to take every precaution to minimize civilian casualties and that we would release all of the information we could. And we absolutely remain committed to that, to answer the other part of your question.

While I did not go into this level of detail during the plane gaggle, we also did a number of briefings a number of you participated in yesterday to brief out a number of the specific details, including the fact that we sent out special operators, at significant risk to themselves, to minimize the risk of civilian casualties.

Of course, that's different than doing a strike, which would not be as much risk to individuals involved. But obviously, these individuals were on the ground for a couple of hours, as we briefed out. It would have been easier to do an airstrike.

But as a result, we have firsthand reports from our elite service members who are on the ground and risked their lives to kill a terrorist responsible to — for the slaughter and enslavement of the Yazidi religious minority in the north — in Northwestern Iraq in 2014, who bears responsibility for a recent set of attacks against the Iraqi Security Forces — and who took a terrorist off the battlefield who seeks to harm Americans.

But of course, we respect and value the role of the press — otherwise, again, I wouldn't be out here with all of you every day — and welcome the scrutiny, welcome to tough questioning. And as I said yesterday, of course we will do everything we can to provide as many details as possible.

But I think it's important, as people are trying to understand this, to note it is different having operators on the ground than an airstrike where it's a different assessment after action.

Q And then on the jobs report, both administration officials and outside experts expected a worse jobs report than we saw.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q Do you have any sense of why those expectations were off and what exactly that means for your future, sort of, policy with respect to the recovery and the economy?

MS. PSAKI: Well, what is also true: As much as we had a very encouraging jobs report today and as we look back to the revisions made as a part of the report this morning, the largest year of economic — of job creation ever in American history.

Those are certainly things we are proud of, the President is proud of, and we attribute that in part to the actions he took to implement a number of important policies.

It is also true — and this is one of the step — one of the facts that we have been pointing out over the course of last couple of days — that Omicron forced around 8 million people to take time off of work. And that was during a period of time where it was measured. So, that is also true.

So, some of these people who were sick were not — would not have been counted in these job numbers. And that was a fact we just wanted people to understand as we were leading up to the jobs report.

It is also clear that it's very challenging to collect, analyze, adjust the data during this time of the pandemic. We are very grateful to the BLS team that does that. And it's just incredibly challenging during an ongoing pandemic. But we think they've continued to deliver timely information. They've obviously continued to provide updates on a monthly basis when the — when their assessments change.

Go ahead.

Q President Xi and Putin met on — today, I guess — and released a pretty lengthy statement after that meeting.

Just moving a little bit further back from the meeting itself, how does the President view the relationship between China, Russia — Xi and Putin — through the lens of his broader foreign policy goals, agenda items, relationships?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we — the President views it — views it as we have our own relationship with China. Secretary Blinken spoke to China's Foreign Minister Wang and underscored — just recently, last week — and underscored the global security and

economic risks posed by further Russian aggression against Ukraine, and conveyed that de-escalation and diplomacy are the responsible way forward.

We've also conveyed that destabilizing — a destabilizing conflict in Europe would impact China's interests all over the world. And certainly, China should know that.

So, certainly, we have our own relationship where we engage directly at a very high level, as you all know, but our focus right now is continuing to unite with Allies and partners to respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine.

Q Are there any concerns about that relationship — if it gets closer, if it becomes more intertwined — in terms of U.S. posture and role in geopolitical spheres?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, what we have control over is our own relationships and the projection of our own values, and also looking for ways to work with countries, even where we disagree, and that is part of diplomacy.

I would note that — because some of the reporting has accurately assessed or, you know, raised the question of what took place in these conversations — we don't have anything to update on that, I don't think you would expect.

But the size and the scope of economic measures on the table that we're talking about, as it relates to Russian aggression or the potential of invasion, are unprecedented; would pose massive consequences for the Kremlin; and the inputs to — and I think it's important for people to understand that the inputs to the major foundational technologies of the world still come from the West.

And so, there's an enormous amount of power we have as we work to continue to strengthen our diplomatic efforts with our partners around the world.

Q And just one more quick one. And obviously, I'm not going to try and repeat what Matt did yesterday with Ned, because I know you've experienced it times in a past life.

But when it comes to —

MS. PSAKI: I do. I do. I had many engagements with Matt Lee in my time.

Q The idea though — and you've done this a couple times of times — and the British have, to some degree, as well — of getting out in front.

I think almost giving insight into intelligence that perhaps past administrations, including past Democratic administrations, would not have done.

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q Can you explain, kind of, the thinking in that, strategically, and why you guys have decided to get out front on these types of things in this moment in time?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. So, over the past several months, we — but also a number of our Allies — have developed a significant amount of credible intelligence about Russian efforts to use a false pretext to justify an invasion of Ukraine. And this evidence mirrors both public reporting and Russian accounts in past conflicts.

And I would note: A number of your outlets, obviously, have reporters on the ground — right? — who are seeing for themselves what is happening.

What is also true that — is that we've seen Russians' actions — the Russians' actions — over the past few years. You know, if you look just back at past precedent, it doesn't mean it's guaranteed to repeat, but it is — it is important for people to understand contextually what they're capable of and what tactics they've used in the past. And sometimes you see — you do see repetition of that.

So, a few years ago, for example, Russia's Defense Ministry falsely claim- — accused the United States of running a clandestine biological weapons lab in the country of Georgia, enabling Russia's efforts to destabilize the Georgian government.

Russia also used to fabricate stories in Syria about how attacks on international aid convoys were undertaken by rebels or terrorist, instead of the Assad regime, to enable Russia's continued support for the Assad government.

If you look back at 2016, the Russian media manufactured a false claim of sexual assault against a Russian émigré named Lisa by German refugees in order to stoke hysteria against Syrian immigrants throughout Europe.

And there's more. Russian state television aired a false report that claimed the Ukrainian army had crucified a three-year-old Ukrainian Boy. That is even more recently.

So, our objective is to deny Russia the opportunity to use these lies to justify an invasion of Ukraine and to convey clearly these are actions we're seeing that are straight out of their playbook. We've seen them run false-flag operations in the past and use confusion to launch military action many times in history.

Of course, we would prefer to make as much underlying information available as we can. And in fact, the — what we conveyed yesterday and was conveyed by my colleagues at the Defense Department and State Department was a result of declassifying information.

We can't do — there are limitations because of compromising intelligence sources and methods. But what we're trying to do is take steps to deny Russia the opportunity to use lies, to use past tactics to justify an invasion of Ukraine, essentially, to avoid war.

Q Thanks, Jen.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. If Putin decides to make a move into Ukraine, how long does the U.S. believe that the Ukrainians could hold off a full Russian takeover?

MS. PSAKI: Jacqui, it's a great question. I would really point you to the Department of Defense to make any assessment, if they can. And obviously, some assessments they might not be in a position to make publicly.

Q That they would not want to share publicly or that they don't know?

MS. PSAKI: Again, I'm just conveying that there are some assessments and, obviously, you — the Department of Defense does a range of contingency planning. I'll let them speak for themselves on what they could — what they could lay out publicly for you.

Q Okay. And then, we've known about the reality of this threat since October. Putin began amassing troops on the border in April. So, why have we waited so long to send the kind of aid that we're seeing now? Why haven't we sent, for instance, anti-aircraft weaponry? Because if Russia does an airstrike, wouldn't they be able to obliterate what we've sent to them so far?

MS. PSAKI: Well, remember, the President met with President Zelenskyy back in — I think it was September, but you can correct me if that's wrong; it was sometime early in the fall — and committed to a large aid package.

That is something that we've been implementing and delivering since that point in time. So, actually, it's been continuous security assistance that we've been providing to the Ukrainians — an enormous package that we've been providing over the course of the last year.

In terms of weapon systems, I'd again point you to the Department of Defense.

Q So the feeling within the administration is that we have responded in a timely manner to Ukraine's concerns?

MS. PSAKI: I think what's important for people to understand is that this has been continuous. It wasn't that we had never provided aid, whether it's humanitarian or security assistance, and all of a sudden we did recently. We — that has been a continuous process. We've provided hundreds of billions of dollars in aid, security assistance over the course of not just the last year, but long before that, and including a commitment the President made and was announced around President Zelenskyy's visit.



Q And then, moving on to energy: I mean, gas prices are at a seven-year high here in the U.S. right after OPEC, again, snubbed requests to increase production. And then there's this energy crisis in Western Europe brewing. Is there any point where the President would consider opening up domestic production in order to mitigate some of this? The inflation and, you know, assist our allies in Western Europe?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there's a couple of important questions you raised there. Let me start by saying that, as it relates to Europe and the shortage — or potential, I should say — it doesn't exist currently. Everybody is experiencing high gas prices, but I think you're asking as it relates to a potential invasion. That is something we've been very mindful of and in touch with our European partners and also suppliers about what can be done and how we can ensure or take steps to increase capacity out there to meet those needs, should they raise; some of them is natural gas, some of them is gas, as you know. So, that is something we've been quite mindful of.

I'd also note that the President has been — has taken a number of steps in recent months to address the gas prices, including tapping the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, of course conveying clearly to OPEC member countries and suppliers that it's important to meet the demand on the market. And we'll continue to — to look at options that can be done to lower gas prices for the American people.

In terms of whether or not there could be more oil drilling, you know, I'd point you to the oil companies on what available places they have and if they're maximizing that. My understanding is they're not.

Q Is there any consideration for increasing, for instance, LNG export licenses?

MS. PSAKI: You know, I don't have anything to preview for you in terms of additional steps. I can — can just reiterate to you that the President raises and talks about the importance of taking every step we can to lower gas prices for the American people.

Q And then real quick on the Johns Hopkins study on the lockdowns. It was this meta-analysis that came out of several studies. Lockdowns during the first wave of COVID in the spring of 2020 found that it only reduced COVID mortality by 0.2 percent in the U.S. and Europe, and suggested that they have little to no public health benefit but severe

consequences for the economy. And it suggests that lockdowns shouldn't be a part of a future pandemic response. Is that the shared view of the administration looking in the rearview mirror?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say — I would, sort of, first, of course, point to our health and medical experts for specifics on this specific — scientific study.

I would note that the President has been clear we're not pushing lockdowns; we've not been pro-lockdown. That has not been his agenda. Most of the lockdowns actually happened under the previous president.

What our objective has been is to — conveying that we have the tools we need to keep our country open, thanks to the President's leadership, and focus on fighting the virus. And that's reflected in the fact that 98 percent of schools are open, over 210 million Americans are fully vaccinated. We have the tools to avoid lockdowns, and we're not moving back. And that's our intention at this point.

Q So, you guys do believe then that the lockdowns were more harmful than helpful?

MS. PSAKI: Again, I would point you to our scientific experts on the specifics of a study. But the President's agenda, the President's approach has not been lockdowns. It has been using the tools we have to prevent that.

Go ahead.

Q On the Supreme Court nomination, Senator Ben Ray Lujan's office is saying, today, he's going to be out for four to six weeks. I know you've obviously wished him well. Hopefully it's shorter than that. But, you know, sometimes these recoveries don't always go as planned.

So, is the White House thinking at all about timing, given the senator's potential absence? Is that affecting at all how the President is now thinking about this nomination versus how he would have been thinking about it a week ago?

MS. PSAKI: No.

Q Okay, so everything is still on track for a pick by the end of February?

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q And I know you've been asked before whether the President is considering Republican votes and whether he can get any Republicans on board. Is the response still: "The President is looking for the best candidate and not thinking about which votes that candidate can get"?

MS. PSAKI: Yeah, but I would say it's important to note that the President's commitment, above all else, is to nominate a qualified woman — a Black woman — to serve on the Supreme Court with impeccable credentials. And he thinks anyone he chooses should have the kind of credentials and be as — and be so qualified that they should be considered by Democrats and Republicans.

Q And then, just a couple things on COVID: We've hit the 900,000 death mark, or we're quickly going to approach it depending on your tally, but is the President going to do anything to mark this — for the grim milestone of 900,000 deaths?

MS. PSAKI: We will have more on this soon, but I don't have anything to preview today.

Q Okay. Do you have any updates on the testing efforts — the shipping out of the free COVID tests? How many have there been shipped out now? Do you have an update on that? Are they still being shipped out every 7 to 12 days from the order?

MS. PSAKI: So, I don't have an update on numbers. It's changing constantly. I know we confirmed — I think it was last Friday, so I'm sure it's changed since then — that we had about 60 million orders. And we had sent out tens of millions of tests. And you've certainly seen on social media people receiving their tests, which is always good news. But I don't have — I don't have an update on that.

And this program, of course, is just beginning to ramp up. We'd said at the beginning we wouldn't start sending tests until the end of January. We obviously did it ahead of time.

But what we're really relying on right now is as soon as testing manufacturers deliver tests to the U.S. government, we will get them out to the American people. And the Postal Service is doing their job packing and shipping efficiently. And I expect we'll have more updates in due time — a short time, I hope.

Q And just a real quick one on Russia. The Senate has left town without passing a sanctions bill. How important does the White House think it is to get the Senate to pass a Russian sanctions bill?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we're in close touch with them. But I — it's not essential for us to implement sanctions. Right? It's not required.

And so, we have had — we have prepared a devastating package of sanctions — economic sanctions that would have an enormous impact on the Russian economy. It doesn't require congressional action, but we are, of course, working closely with them.

Q Jen, we need to gather.

MS. PSAKI: Oh, okay. Sorry for it to be so short today. I'll be around for a little bit. If people have questions, come on by.

Thanks, everyone.

Q Jen, can you say anything about the Russian oil deal with China?

MS. PSAKI: I don't think I have any additional comments about their meeting. I will see if there's more we can offer. I'm happy to do that for you, Andrea.

Q Would that undermine any potential U.S. sanctions?

MS. PSAKI: I'm happy to get back to you if there's more we can offer, Andrea.

12:41 P.M. EST