

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 4/11/2013

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good morning, everyone. Thanks for being here. I will go straight to questions as I have no announcements.

AP, Josh.

Q Thanks, Jay. I'm sure you saw just a few minutes ago that the Senate voted for the filibuster on gun legislation. Any reaction to that?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as you saw on the President's statement yesterday and as you've seen all week from the President and the rest of us, we have been encouraged by bipartisan progress on this very important package of proposals. There is still work to be done.

This was simply -- while very important -- a first stage in an effort to get sensible, common-sense legislation that would reduce gun violence in America while protecting Americans' Second Amendment rights signed into law. But we certainly welcome this development.

Q And now that everybody has their cards out on the table in terms of the budget, is there going to be -- do you think that there will be some kind of push for negotiations in the short term on a grand bargain? Or will this kind of linger until this summer when we have to raise the debt ceiling again?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the President is interested in reaching a bipartisan compromise built around the principles that are clear in his budget proposal as soon as possible. There is regular order at work now. The House has passed a budget. The Senate has passed a budget. The President has presented a budget. And there is an opportunity to move forward and find common ground.

The President has been engaged in a process of having conversations with lawmakers of both parties; in this case, reaching out directly to Republican lawmakers to find out if they are open to the general principle that we should approach our deficit challenges in a balanced way so that we can protect seniors, secure the middle class, allow our economy to grow, and reduce the deficit in a responsible way.

That's the President's approach that's embodied in the budget that he presented yesterday.

Q So whose court is the ball in now? Is it incumbent upon Republicans to -- he said in the Rose Garden yesterday that he wants to see Republicans in the coming days show that they're serious about deficit reduction. So do they have to take some action now to get things going?

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to what the President said. We believe that the President's budget proposal, which incorporates the offer that he made to Speaker Boehner at the end of the year -- which by any definition represents a good faith effort that meets the Republicans at least halfway -- that therefore the Republicans ought to examine that and let the American people know whether or not they are too interested in finding common ground rather than embracing ideological purity.

I mean, there's only one way to do this in a responsible way that protects the middle class, protects seniors, that makes the necessary investments in our economy that will allow it to grow now and in the future, and that is represented by the President's budget -- a budget that I think you've seen in commentary has been recognized as a compromise

proposition. It's not his ideal budget. It's not a wish list. It's an attempt to find common ground so that we can deal with our fiscal challenges on behalf of the whole country and move forward.

Q And the immigration Gang of Eight has agreed that before anybody that's here illegally can be on a path to a green card, that we need to have 100 percent surveillance of our border in Mexico, and I think it's 90 percent apprehension rate, which seems like a pretty high bar to meet. Is that requirement in line with the President's vision for what a real path to citizenship is?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the President believes, as he made clear in his blueprint that has been available publicly for a long time now, that there has to be a clear pathway to citizenship available; that comprehensive immigration reform must include both that and must continue the focus that he's placed on border security.

I would note that there are a variety of ways to measure improvements and progress when it comes to security. And we can point you to a number of facts, which are that apprehensions are down by nearly 80 percent since 2000 and down 50 percent since 2008. And, at the same time, we have increased boots on the ground along the border to more than 21,000 personnel. That's more than at any time in our history. This is progress that has been broadly recognized by Democrats and Republicans, and demonstrates the President's commitment to border security.

When it comes to the actual legislation, we wait for that legislation to be produced, and we will assess it when it is. We absolutely commend the progress that has been made, but the President remains committed to the proposition that the result has to be a bill that can earn bipartisan support as well as his signature. And we hope that process moves forward.

Jeff.

Q Jay, you saw the reaction yesterday, probably from many reporters, on the chained CPI inclusion in the budget. Even one Republican congressman called it an attack on seniors. Is there any concern at the White House that this is something that will make it - - that Republicans will use to avoid the grand bargain and even to hurt Democrats politically?

MR. CARNEY: The President's budget represents a compromise. The inclusion of entitlement reform, specifically chained CPI and means testing of Medicare, comes at the specific behest and request of Republican leaders, as you know. Back in December of 2012, Speaker of the House Boehner said that he wants to use a new method of calculating benefits for entitlement programs known as chained CPI.

Again, a Republican congressionalist is citing another news source, Bloomberg. A Republican congressional aide said that Boehner is pressing harder for the CPI revision than for other entitlement changes. Mitch McConnell, Senate Minority Leader -- this is quoting the Wall Street Journal -- said "bipartisan agreement on higher Medicare premiums for the wealthy and increase in the Medicare eligibility age, and slowing cost-of-living increases for Social Security could move both parties closer to a budget deal." And by that, a budget deal he meant and everyone meant in December of last year, a budget deal that would be balanced and include revenues, which obviously was part of the President's approach. Mitch McConnell said again that chained CPI was something that he wanted as part of a broader deal.

So this is a Republican proposal. And cynical attempts to make it otherwise by some represent I think dissonance within the Republican Party, and we've seen plenty of condemnation from conservatives and Republicans of that sort of flagrantly ridiculous and cynical attempt to disown a proposal that emanated from Republican leaders.

It is the responsible thing to do to try to find common ground. To find common ground you need to meet the other side halfway. You need to accept you're not going to get everything you want. You need to accept things that the other side wants. The three proposals I mentioned that Republican leaders said they wanted as part of a bipartisan deal that would include revenue as well as entitlement reforms -- of those three, the President has included two in his budget. By definition, two out of three is more than halfway.

So the President expects and hopes that members of the common-sense caucus will recognize the common-sense nature of his proposal, how it demonstrates a seriousness of purpose that should infuse everyone's efforts here in Washington when it comes to addressing our budget challenges, and that we can move forward.

This is the spirit in which the President had dinner with a dozen Republican senators last night, the second such dinner in recent weeks. And it is the spirit in which he will approach his conversations with Republicans going forward.

Q Let me throw two other quick issues at you. Why is the President meeting with CEOs from the banking industry today? And what is the purpose of their meeting?

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's a meeting, a roundtable, that is being held with other members of the administration, and that's part of our ongoing engagement with the financial sector and with the business community. This is a regular occurrence. As you know, we engage with the business community all the time.

Q Any particular agenda, though, for that meeting?

MR. CARNEY: I would have to take the question. Not that I'm aware of.

Q All right, and last quick issue. The President met yesterday with the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, who today expressed their opposition to the forced feeding of hunger strike inmates in Guantanamo. What reaction did the President give to that opposition in their meeting yesterday?

MR. CARNEY: First of all, what I can tell you is that you know our commitment to close Gitmo. It is a commitment shared by the former President, by military leaders, and other Republicans, including Senator McCain. And we continue to be committed to closing that facility in our national security interests. I don't have any specific response to what's happening now, except to say that the President remains committed to closing Gitmo for national security reasons.

Q But is he aware of this hunger strike? Is he following it?

MR. CARNEY: The President obviously is updated on a number of issues. I haven't had a specific conversation with him about this.

Jessica.

Q In the 2008 campaign, the President, then-candidate Obama, issued a statement saying, I will not touch Social Security. So a number of Democrats are now accusing the President of breaking his word. They feel betrayed. You just said it was a Republican proposal, so why is a Democratic President issuing a Republican budget?

MR. CARNEY: Because he's President of the whole country, and he believes we need to reach a budget compromise that's balanced, that allows the economy to grow, that secures a rising and thriving middle class, and invests in the economy of the future while reducing our deficits in a responsible way.

His budget is proof that you can do that; that you do not need to take the path embodied by the House Republican budget, which would dramatically slice investments in education; would block grant Medicaid, cut it dramatically, harming families who have children with disabilities; would voucherize Medicare, shifting costs onto seniors at an average of thousands of dollars per year, all the while giving a massive tax break to wealthy individuals and the most well-connected.

Q But is it getting the nation anywhere closer to a deal?

MR. CARNEY: Well, he believes he is because it represents compromise and an attempt to find common ground. It is incumbent upon Republicans to do the same -- to, in the spirit of compromise and a desire for progress, to meet the President halfway and to accept that they will not get what they want, that the document they passed in the House is maybe satisfying in an ideological way, but it is not in any way representative of either what the American people broadly support or what could ever become law here in Washington, and that instead, they ought to embrace the idea of balance.

It's not the President's ideal approach. There's no --

Q But is this who he really is, and progressives are misunderstanding what he truly believes in?

MR. CARNEY: The President believes that it is in the overall interest of the nation's economy and middle class that we reach a budget deal of the kind the he presented yesterday. And the reason that is, is because we need to continue to grow the economy and create jobs. That is the best thing we can do for middle-class families and for the people he fights for every day.

In order to achieve that deal, he recognizes he will have to make some tough choices and that Democrats will have to accept things that they would not otherwise want to do; but so, too, will Republicans. Republicans who suggest that the only way to move forward in deficit reduction is to put the burden entirely on seniors and the middle class are wrong, and it won't be accepted and it's not an approach that this President will accept. And it's an approach that, by the way, was the center of debate for an entire year in a presidential election and the American people roundly rejected it.

So it's not his ideal budget. He has accepted as part of his offer to the Speaker of the House, which is included in his budget proposal, a compromise position and entitlement reforms that he can accept as part of a broader deal that asks everybody to participate in the effort and that invests in our economy, and secures and enhances the middle class.

Ann.

Q Thank you, Jay. The cloture was invoked with a pretty strong margin. Does the President have any sense of whether the voices from Newtown, whether public attitudes really did make any impact on the Senate? Did he raise it with the senators last night? And is it premature to think that the NRA's voice in Congress is not as strong as it used to be?

MR. CARNEY: I would say a couple of things. The President has no doubt whatsoever that the voices of the Newtown families and the voices of Americans across the country that were raised this week as part of an effort to urge the Senate to move forward, and not block procedurally the progress on this legislation, had a positive effect and may well have been decisive.

The President has said all along, and you heard him in Hartford on Monday, that Congress will do the right thing if the American people speak up, if they raise their voices, if they make their views known. And as he said then, it's not about him; it's about the

American people and what the right, common-sense thing is to do when it comes to taking action to reduce gun violence.

On the second part, as I said to Josh, this is an important milestone, but it is an early milestone. And there is no question that challenges will continue to be placed in the way of making progress on passing common-sense legislation that would reduce gun violence. But we are obviously very pleased with today's vote.

Q Does the President have real concerns about the assault weapons ban, the size of ammunition clips, as being things that will not be able to move forward?

MR. CARNEY: The President believes that those are common-sense proposals. Reinstatement of the assault weapons ban makes eminent sense. Making sure that military-style assault weapons are not available on the streets of the United States is a common-sense approach. It does not infringe upon Americans' Second Amendment rights. Limiting the size of ammunition clips will save lives, and it is not an infringement on the Second Amendment rights of the American people.

The President strongly supports Second Amendment rights. So he insists -- as the American people insist, as the families of the victims of Newtown and Tucson and Aurora and Oak Creek and Virginia Tech, and so many other places across the country insist -- that the United States Senate on each of these holds itself to account, that senators vote on these aspects of the legislation, that they do not filibuster or use other procedural measures to avoid being held to account. And if they have to vote no, they should vote no and explain why, rather than hide behind procedure and other parliamentary tricks to obscure what's really happening.

Major.

Q On the question that Josh asked about immigration, do you want to state a position on this apparent agreement the Gang of Eight has come up on border security?

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's an apparent agreement that -- I mean, if you have the bill to show me, I'd be interested to take it with me and bring it back here. But we will await legislation and we'll evaluate it when it emerges. We are encouraged by the process. The President's commitment to border security is evident not just in his blueprint, which makes clear that border security --

Q So you don't want to weigh in one way or the other, whether they should include it or not?

MR. CARNEY: Again, border security absolutely must be part of comprehensive immigration.

Q But I mean, this particular metric.

MR. CARNEY: If you have legislation that demonstrates what's in it, I'd be interested in seeing it. My understanding is that legislation has not been produced. They're still working on it. When it emerges, we'll evaluate it.

Q What's a take-away from the dinner last night? A different group of senators -- do you think this is something that's gaining momentum? The President feels like it is a worthwhile exercise and it's not just a sort of for-show thing?

MR. CARNEY: Well, it's certainly not for show in the President's mind. The President believes that both dinners and all of his engagements with Republicans have been constructive and useful. He is very much of the mind that exploring the possibility of finding common ground is in the interest of the American people and the American economy, and it's in the interest of trying to find bipartisan solutions to a whole range of issues, not just our budget and fiscal challenges -- but immigration reform, reducing gun violence, taking steps to enhance America's energy independence and security, making sure that we continue to invest in education and research and development.

So there are a variety of arenas here where the possibility of bipartisan compromise exists. In spite of the polarization that does pertain here in Washington, it is also the case that whether it's on gun violence and the vote that we've talked about that happened today, or on immigration reform, or within the context of at least the discussions that the President has been having, there is at least evidence of the potential for bipartisan cooperation. And the President believes that's important.

Q Did either one of the dinners in of themselves propel what we saw on the Senate floor today on gun control or the progress being made on immigration?

MR. CARNEY: I wouldn't presume, on the President's behalf, to suggest that any single meal he had with lawmakers led to a specific result. The work that's been done on reducing gun violence in the Senate is to the credit of those who have been engaged in that work on Capitol Hill. We have obviously been engaged with them in that work. The same holds for progress being made on immigration reform.

As the President made clear when he talked about it from the beginning after the election, he wanted to see progress emerge from the Senate through the Gang of Eight process because he believed that would produce the best opportunity for bipartisan legislation that reflected his principles and that he could sign. And that progress is being made.

So the credit is widespread, but we should not be assigning credit yet. We're not at the finish line in any of these areas yet. We need to keep pressing so that Congress keeps moving and hopefully produces legislation that the American people will support, that Congress will vote for, and that the President can sign.

Q I want to talk to you about North Korea before I let you go. Has it been the President's intention -- because we have not heard him speak to this issue directly for some weeks -- to not, by staying out of public eye and staying out of this in an audible sense, avoid anything that can be either misinterpreted or just not engaged to suggest to the North Koreans that he is rising to their level? I mean, even analysts who are very accustomed to this cycle of provocation and rhetoric do feel that this looks, sounds, and appears different than other cases. And the average American, they're hearing a lot of things that may unnerve them, and yet they haven't heard from the President of the United States. Is he intentionally staying out of this for some strategic communication reason?

MR. CARNEY: The President has been directing his national security team to take necessary precautionary measures that will ensure that we can both defend ourselves and our allies -- defend ourselves and our allies, defend the homeland.

And I think that represents the fact that he is concerned about the stepped-up rhetoric and the provocative behavior by the North Korean regime. It is also the case that what we have seen of late from Pyongyang represents a familiar pattern of behavior. And as you refer to it as cycles, and I think that's an appropriate way to describe it, we have seen this kind of cycle in the past.

It is always unhelpful. It is always destabilizing, and it is never in the interest of the North Korean people. It only serves to further isolate North Korea and to undermine any hope the North Korean regime has of reentering the community of nations and assuring the international community that it intends to abide by the obligations that it has made.

So we are taking necessary steps --

Q But is it in the interest of the President not to talk about it and talk to the country about it?

MR. CARNEY: I think the President has made clear through the actions of his administration and this government, through the variety of means that have been reported on and the steps that we have taken, the seriousness with which we take this. It is also important to note, as I said, that we have seen a pattern of -- this is reflective of a pattern of behavior that has been going on for quite some time from North Korea.

Q Is this a top issue with Ban Ki-moon later on today?

MR. CARNEY: I believe there will be a number of issues discussed with the United Nations Secretary General. This is certainly one of them. It is an issue that the Security Council took up not very long ago, passing a resolution condemning North Korean behavior and sanctioning North Korea that was unanimous, that included affirmative votes from both the Russians and the Chinese.

And we are working with our allies in Seoul and Tokyo, as well as with Moscow and Beijing to try to bring about a change in behavior from the North Koreans, asking especially the Russians and the Chinese to use the influence they have, the unique influence they have with the North Koreans to prevail upon Pyongyang to ratchet down the rhetoric and the behavior, because it is in the interest of every nation in the region that there be stability in the region, and that there ultimately be a Korean Peninsula that's denuclearized.

Q Following on the Ban Ki-moon meeting --

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q On another topic, Syria, which obviously is likely to come up -- been a lot of reports the last couple days suggesting that the U.S. is increasing its aid to the rebels. And obviously, there's an important distinction about nonlethal aid, lethal aid. Can you be direct with us about how significant you see this increase in aid? And what does it mean?

MR. CARNEY: I appreciate the question. The President himself has said that we are constantly reviewing possible options that could help end the violence and accelerate a political transition in Syria. We have provided more than \$115 million in nonlethal assistance to the Syrian opposition thus far and have been steadily increasing that assistance to help the opposition become stronger, more cohesive, and more organized.

And as Secretary Kerry announced in Rome, soon we will be providing food rations and medical kits to both the coalition and to the opposition's supreme military council in order to feed the hungry and tend to the sick and wounded.

The President has directed his national security team to identify additional measures to continue increasing nonlethal assistance to assist the operation -- the opposition, rather. So I think that addresses your question.

The President -- we have continued to ratchet up. We are on an upward trajectory with our assistance, both humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people and direct assistance -- nonlethal assistance -- to the Syrian opposition. And we will continue to step up that assistance. The President has directed his team to identify additional measures that we can take to increase that assistance, and we'll have a decision to announce in the future. I don't have an announcement to make today.

Q Quick related question on that. DNI Clapper was on the Hill today, and in some important testimony he said directly that if Assad falls, he said, it's a "tough call whether or not the chemical weapons stockpile can be secured." How worried are you about that? It sounds like a pretty dramatic statement from the DNI.

MR. CARNEY: Well, there's no question, as we've stated all along, that the disposition of chemical weapons in Syria is a matter of concern to the United States and our allies and partners -- a matter of great concern obviously to countries in the region. And we have made clear, as the President did I believe from this podium, that the use or proliferation of chemical weapons is a red line as far as he's concerned when it comes to the Syrian regime.

I would point you to what Director Clapper said. I will not engage in hypotheticals about the welcomed day when Assad is finally -- or when Syria is finally rid of Assad and what will happen. But you can be sure that the disposition of those weapons will be a matter of focus and concern for this nation, as well as many others.

Q Two other quick topics. ACLU has released some documents that they obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request with the IRS, where IRS agents claim they can go through people's emails and text messages without a warrant. Is the White House concerned about the IRA making that claim in terms of people's privacy?

MR. CARNEY: I would have to take the question. I'm not aware of the story or the documents that were obtained, and I would certainly refer you to the IRS as a starting point.

Q Last thing -- and this may be in the same boat on. There's a German family, came to America in 2008 seeking asylum because they didn't like German public schools. The reason why it relates to the White House is they got asylum, it was then overturned, and there's a chance they're going to be deported. And there's a petition at whitehouse.gov, an online petition, and it's gotten over 100,000 signatures saying they want the President to intervene so that this family doesn't have to go back to Germany. They think the public schools -- they've been home-schooling their kids here in America, and they don't like the German public schools. It's reached over 100,000 signatures. What's the process for reacting to something like that? And are you aware of this specific case?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not aware of it. I will certainly take the question. We do have a threshold beyond which we respond to We the People= petitions, and if that threshold is crossed, I'm sure we will respond. But I don't have a specific comment on this case.

Kristen.

Q Jay, thanks. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said of North Korea that it is “skating very close to a dangerous line.” Does the President share that assessment? And has he identified a red line, a line by which North Korea crossing that would be unacceptable?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I won't engage in hypotheticals about what red lines there are. It is unacceptable to flagrantly violate your international commitments, as North Korea continues to do. And the result of that behavior has been increasing international consensus around the proposition that North Korea's flagrant violations of its obligations must stop. That has resulted in increased isolation and sanctions. It has resulted in all the range of actions that we've taken in response to the recent series of provocative acts and statements.

There's no question that North Korea -- because of its development of a nuclear weapon, because of its violation of its commitments, its development of missile technology -- represents a danger and a threat. And that's why we address it the way that we do.

So I think that the words of Secretary Hagel are reflective of the administration's view of this problem. It's why we have taken the actions that we've taken to ensure that we can enhance both the security of both the homeland and our allies. And we'll continue to take necessary, prudent measures as the situation demands.

Q Well, I guess getting at it from a different angle, the President has identified a clear red line when it comes to Syria, for example. So why not lay down a similar marker in this instance, given the provocations?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure what you're asking, because the President identified a clear red line about chemical weapons -- the use of or proliferation of the chemical weapons that the Syrian regime possesses. North Korea is already in flagrant violation of its international obligations. It is engaged in the development of nuclear weapons. It is engaged in development of missile technology that is in contradiction to its commitments. And that's why you see the international response that you've seen.

And we'll continue to work with our allies in Seoul and Tokyo, as well as with partners in the region and around the world, to attempt to prevail upon North Korea to choose a different path. That path, by the way, is open to North Korea. There is an opportunity for

North Korea to give up a path that has resulted in isolation and impoverishment for North Korea, and rather to abide by its obligations and therefore enter the international community or rejoin it, and improve the lot of its people. And we hope that North Korea takes that path.

Q Going back to the budget -- if the budget is a first offer of sorts and the President has already put chained CPI on the table, where does he go in negotiations? Is he willing to offer anything more when it comes to entitlements?

MR. CARNEY: It has been asked in the past whether this is a starting point. It is not a starting point. It is a sticking point. The President's budget represents a fair-minded, serious offer at trying to find common ground with Republicans. The American people expect and support a balanced approach to deficit reduction. The American people expect their leaders in Washington to protect senior citizens, to protect the middle class. They certainly don't expect or support an approach that would put the burden of deficit reduction on seniors and the middle class.

They support investments in education and innovation, in infrastructure that the President has within his budget. They support universal access to pre-K for America's children, because that's good for the children now and it's good for the development of our economy in the future. The President's budget is a common-sense document that represents a sincere attempt to compromise with Republicans on behalf of the whole country.

The fact is it is not an à la carte menu, as I think Gene Sperling said yesterday in our briefing. When the Republican leadership said during fiscal cliff negotiations that when it came to entitlement reforms, that they wanted the President to go along with chained CPI and means testing of Medicare as part of an agreement that would include revenues, the "as part of" part is very important. That's what the President believes.

It has to be not just revenues on the one hand and entitlement reforms on the other, but the whole approach has to be embraced -- a balanced approach that allows for investments so that our economy can grow, that allows for the kind of security for the middle class and seniors that's so essential. And it allows for the guarantee that those programs represent to our seniors to continue into the future.

So the Republicans have to decide -- and there are rank-and-file Republicans who believe this already, but Republicans including leadership has to decide whether they want to find compromise or they would rather stick to positions that are at odds with where most of America is, and are certainly at odds with where the President is.

Q Is the President confident he can get his own party on board with this, given the backlash? Does he need to start having dinner with them?

MR. CARNEY: The President is confident that -- as he was during the fiscal cliff negotiations, as he was in previous negotiations with the Speaker of the House -- that Democrats will support a bipartisan compromise that ensures that our assistance programs to our seniors are safeguarded, and that that guarantee is provided; that ensure that investments in education are made, and investments in innovation and research and development and infrastructure are made. So the answer is yes. The budget represents tough choices, there's no question. But it also expects from the other side that they make tough choices.

Roger, and then Peter.

Q Back to the CEO meeting this morning -- I know Jeff had asked a question -- but I was wondering, did the President plan to bring up unemployment with the executives, and did he talk up his budget a bit with them? Do you know?

MR. CARNEY: I wasn't in the meeting. I don't have a readout of it. We have a strategy of engagement with the business sector that is ongoing and this is part of that strategy. I certainly wouldn't be surprised if some of these matters came up. The need to deal with growing the economy and creating jobs is his number-one priority. So I'm going to go out on a limb and say that this is something that he would want to talk about. And it is certainly his belief, as you saw embodied in his budget document, that we need to reduce our deficit, but do it in a way that allows our economy to grow and secure the middle class.

Q A readout on that?

MR. CARNEY: I'll take the question and we'll see. Yes, Peter.

Q Thanks, Jay. Just staying with the business meeting for a moment, can you talk about why it's important for the President -- or if the President believes it's important to do this outreach to business? And also, do you think that the outreach in the second term has stepped up or we're seeing more of it than we did in the first term?

MR. CARNEY: I think the outreach that we've seen has been ongoing. And our outreach includes not just obviously to business, but to a whole range of sectors of the American economy and a variety of groups with different interests. And that is as it should be and continues.

I think what you've seen from the White House is an engagement with business around the simple proposition that we need to take steps to reform our immigration system because that's good for the economy and good for the middle class. We need to take steps to reduce gun violence, and there are some business leaders who are very much interested in that effort. And we need to take common-sense steps to grow our economy and reduce our deficit, and that's obviously of interest to the business sector.

Leslie, and then Donovan.

Q Thanks. Jay, on drone strikes, I wanted to ask you about -- the President has said that the only targets of drone strikes are senior operational leaders of al Qaeda and associated forces whom you know are involved somehow in some plotting of attacks against the U.S. Can you explain why classified U.S. intelligence documents that McClatchy has reviewed suggest otherwise?

MR. CARNEY: I, as you would expect, am not going to talk about classified documents that others would have obtained. I can tell you that our strategy in dealing with counterterrorism is to utilize the tools available to us. When it comes to the means with which we do that, the President has addressed it and we have been, as an administration, very transparent through a series of speeches by John Brennan, the Attorney General and by others, as well as comments by the President, about the approach that we take in that effort.

Q But can you explain -- some of the documents suggested that there --

MR. CARNEY: Again, Leslie, you're not going to get me to comment on classified information.

Q Any legal justification, though, for strikes that suggest you've been working with Pakistan and targeting their insurgents --

MR. CARNEY: Again, I don't have any comment on what you are representing as classified information.

Donovan.

Q Thanks, Jay. Returning to Beyoncé and Jay-Z -- Jay-Z released a rap today. I know the other day you said that Treasury was the one that cleared their trip. He suggested that he got White House clearance and that he personally spoke with the President. I'll just quote: "I turned Havana into Atlanta/ Boy from the hood got White House clearance/ Obama said, 'Chill, you gonna get me impeached'/ You don't need this [expletive] anyway/ Chill with me on the beach." (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: I guess nothing rhymes with Treasury. (Laughter.) Because Treasury offers and gives licenses for travel, as you know, and the White House has nothing to do with it.

Q So are you saying that he did not -- the President did not have a conversation with Jay-Z?

MR. CARNEY: I am absolutely saying that the White House, from the President on down, had nothing to do with anybody's personal -- anybody's travel to Cuba. That is something that Treasury handles.

Q You can't rhyme that? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: OFAC, Treasury -- these are tough words to rhyme.

Q Did he communicate with --

MR. CARNEY: It's a song, Donovan. The President did not communicate with Jay-Z over this trip.

Q Jay?

MR. CARNEY: Yes. Laura, do you have something? Oh, good.

Let me read this while I have it, which is in answer -- or part answer about our response to the cloture vote. I wanted to let you know that following the Senate's cloture vote, President Obama spoke by phone with family members of victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy who are here in Washington, D.C. to ask Congress to pass common-sense measures to reduce gun violence. The President congratulated the families on this important step forward, noting that the bipartisan progress would not have been possible without their efforts. He reiterated that much work remains, and pledged to continue fighting for the votes they deserve.

Laura.

Q Just to follow up on Syria, al Qaeda in Iraq released on Monday a statement saying they were joining in Syria some opposition groups. What's your reaction? And how can you make sure that the money you're going to provide to some opposition groups are not going to end up in those al Qaeda supporters?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we work with the Syrian Opposition Coalition, and we obviously are interested in helping and assisting in their consolidation and organization and their overall efforts -- the opposition in Syria that is committed to democratic principles and that is committed to a brighter and more democratic future for Syria.

There is no question, and this is a concern around the region, that extremist elements try to take advantage of, in a variety of areas, including Syria, the kind of upheaval that you've seen in a tragedy like Syria. And that is obviously of concern to us, and we monitor it regularly. But we are focused on assisting the opposition, the Syrian Opposition Coalition, and the members of the broader Syrian opposition that are committed to a more democratic future for Syria.

Q And I just have another question related to huge breaking news in France and Europe at this moment. The budget minister of François Hollande lied to the people in France about a hidden Swiss account when he was trying to do something about the tax evasion. What's your reaction to that? And what will you say for public officials in terms of probity?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not aware of that and I won't comment on what seems to be an internal matter in France. So I really don't have a response.

Q Jay?

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Goyal.

Q I have two questions. Thank you, sir. One, yesterday, hundreds of minorities from Bangladesh, including Hindus, Buddhists and Christians, were demonstrating outside the White House. What they were saying, a message for the President that it should read that they are being targeted in Bangladesh because of their race and religion and their beliefs. And whenever there is a problem in Bangladesh and minorities are under attack by the extremists and groups. Any comments on their --

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a specific response to the demonstration. Obviously, the administration and the President support the civil rights of peoples around the world, but I'm just not aware of the specific demonstration or the issues in terms of a presidential response.

Q And as far as guns are concerned, yesterday hundreds of Sikhs were at the Indian Embassy celebrating the Vaisakhi, their national holiday. And talking to them, what they are saying that among them were the families of the victims from Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

What they are saying is that guns kill -- it doesn't matter how many rounds, and it should be banned at all completely, because as long as guns are in the wrong hands of the people, there will be -- people will be killed. And that's the message they were telling me to send to the President and to the Congress.

MR. CARNEY: The President's approach is one that embraces common-sense measures to reduce gun violence that do not infringe upon the Second Amendment rights of the American people, Second Amendment rights that the President supports.

And you've seen that reflected in the legislation that he supports up on Capitol Hill and in the set of proposals that he made and announced together with the Vice President earlier this year.

Sorry, let me move on.

Q Just a question on the Middle East. You were asked last week about the series of leaders coming to visit and talk with the President. Can you talk about the importance the President attaches to having President Morsi here? Will that happen possibly before the G8? He's a major Arab Spring leader. Just, generally, the importance of that? I know you're not going to read out any visit plans.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I have no announcements to make beyond -- about visits beyond the ones that we already have announced, and which you made note of, and that's that the President will be hosting his counterparts from the UAE, from Qatar, Jordan and Turkey in Washington over the next several weeks. There will be a variety of topics. Syria will certainly be one of them.

Our relationship with Egypt is and has been very important, and we continue to engage with the Egyptian government. I just don't have any particular next engagement to announce to you at the presidential level.

Q The information also of the \$200 million in aid for Jordan that was announced in Amman, can you take that question and get it to us?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I have to take it. I'm sure the State Department would be a good place to go for more details about it.

All the way back, yes.

Q Back to the budget, if the President's deficit reduction plan is enacted, how many jobs would be lost under his plan as opposed to sequestration?

MR. CARNEY: The President's budget will increase job growth in the United States. It includes, in stark contrast to alternatives, investments that will create jobs. It includes tax cuts targeted to small businesses, for example, who hire veterans or small businesses who increase the size of their payroll, for example. It includes investments in infrastructure that will lead to immediate job creation as well as future economic growth and job creation because of the improvements in our roads, bridges, ports, and airports.

So the President's -- it's an excellent question because the President's budget proposal, which contains within it his deficit reduction offer to the Speaker, has to be looked at as a whole because it is the President's number-one priority to take measures that help the economy grow, that help it create jobs, that secure and grow the middle class, and reduce our deficit in a responsible way.

And the whole point that he was trying to make, and I think he made very well in the Rose Garden, is that you can do that. You can, if you go about it in a responsible way -- and responsible is certainly not what the sequester represents -- but if you go about deficit reduction in a responsible way, you can do it and also invest in our economy in a way that allows it to grow and create jobs.

Q But do you have a number? Because I don't see how you can cut \$1.2 trillion and it not cost some jobs despite the infrastructure.

MR. CARNEY: The fact is you can, as we have seen, reduce the deficit in a responsible way. If you do it in a responsible way and do not embrace extremist positions or absolutist positions that would do harm to economic growth and job creation, as well as

compound that harm by slashing investments that the middle class depends on, or voucherizing Medicare in a way that harms seniors, you can reduce our deficit in a responsible way that ensures that the economy will continue to grow and create jobs.

And if you do it in a balanced way, in a responsible way, if you build on the \$2.5 trillion in deficit reduction the President has already signed into law, and you add to it the \$1.8 trillion that his deficit reduction plan represents, you will have cleared the \$4-trillion threshold of deficit reduction that economists say is key to getting our fiscal situation stabilized and reducing the deficit-to-GDP ratio by 2023 to below 2 percent. You can do that and continue to grow the economy.

And the President made clear that it is much harder and in some cases impossible to reduce our deficit if the economy is not growing. That's why we cannot take action that would do the kind of harm to the economy that, for example, the sequester does because the sequester's negative impact is due in part to its arbitrary nature, that it was written in a way that was designed purposely never to become law. You need instead to do it the way that the President has presented in his budget.

Q Thanks, Jay.

MR. CARNEY: Thanks, everybody.

END

12:40 P.M. EDT