

# Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, August 11, 2021

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## Briefing Room

### • Press Briefings

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:25 P.M. EDT

MS. PSAKI: Hi, everyone. Okay, a couple of items for you at the top.

The President has said that the challenges of our time — the challenge of our time is to demonstrate that democracies can deliver by improving the lives of their own people and by addressing the greatest problems facing the wider world.

In keeping with this commitment, this morning we announced that, in December, the President will bring together leaders from a diverse group of the world's democracies at a virtual Summit for Democracy to be followed in a — in roughly a year's time by a second, in-person summit.

The virtual summit, to take place on December 9th and 10th, will galvanize commitments and initiatives across three principal themes: defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights. Following a year of consultation, coordination, and action, President Biden will then invite world leaders to gather once more to showcase progress made on their commitments.

I also wanted to note that, yesterday, Vice President Harris announced that 2.5 million Americans have signed up for health insurance during the Special Enrollment Period the Biden-Harris administration opened just weeks after taking office. That is 2.5 million more people who can now rest easy knowing they're covered, and who join the over 30 million people who have health coverage through the Affordable Care Act.

Thanks to the American Rescue Plan, health insurance is now more affordable than ever. Families are saving an average of \$40 per person, per month; that's nearly \$2,000 per year for a typical family of four.

And President Biden — and the President's Build Back Better agenda that passed the Senate would extend these savings, helping lower healthcare costs for millions of Americans.

There are just five days left until the Special Enrollment Period closes on August 15th, and now is the time for anybody that doesn't have health insurance to go to Healthcare.gov and find a plan that works for them.

Darlene.

Q Thank you, Jen. The President's meeting earlier with CEOs on vaccinations — can you tell us: Were there any decisions reached in there in terms of what else the administration can do to encourage people to become vaccinated?

And this meeting with, you know, companies who are requiring their staffs to be vaccinated — is that a sign that the White House is kind of shifting away from encouragement and, you know, supporting the mandates that corporate America is doing? Is that — in other words, is that a backdoor way of the White House trying to do the federal mandate that you all have said you can't do?

MS. PSAKI: It's a front-door way of lifting up private sector companies who are taking steps — through carrots and sticks, through incentives, and through mandates, in some cases — to get more people vaccinated and to make sure they're protecting their workforce.

I would note that this was intentionally a diverse group of industries. So, the airline industry, university systems, healthcare industry, small businesses. We wanted to share the work they are doing and support these efforts. And today is an example of us lifting up the private sector taking steps that makes sense — that show that vaccines are safe, effective, and are the best ways to — for people to reenter the workforce — workplaces safely and also reboot our economy. So that was the objective.

I wouldn't say it was meant to be a decision meeting as much as a discussion about best practices, what is working for these industries. And hopefully, they can be the models for others.

Q And then just a couple on the Senate. Is there a deadline for when the President would want to see the budget reconciliation bill passed?

MS. PSAKI: As soon as he can sign it into law. He looks forward to signing it into law. But we know, as was announced yesterday, the House is going to be coming back next week. They're eager to get to work. We'll be deeply engaged in conversations when they return as well.

Q And then just one more quick one. With reluctance from Senators Sinema and Manchin on the \$3.5 trillion, can the President envision accepting a smaller dollar figure than \$3.5 trillion? Or is —

MS. PSAKI: Look, I'm naturally not going to negotiate from here, not that any of you are expecting me to do that. I will say that what is vital to the President is that — and what Leader Schumer also reiterated in his press conference this morning, is that this reconciliation package includes the Build Back Better agenda, key investments in childcare, in — additional investments in climate change, addressing the climate crisis, additional investments to lower costs for people across the country.

He has certainly expressed a comfort with the \$3.5 trillion size, as you — as you all know, and obviously there's a lot of work ahead as we work to gather support for the — this package.

Go ahead.

Q Does the White House know who in Florida made the request for hundreds of more ventilators from the Strategic National Stockpile?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say, Kaitlan, I saw the remarks and comments by the governor and representatives of the governor.

I would note that, as a policy, we don't send ventilators to states without their interest in receiving the ventilators. I think the most important question here is: Why would you oppose receiving ventilators when you clearly need those in your state, given the percentage of hospitalizations that are occurring in Florida?

Q Do you think it's feasible the governor was unaware that those ventilators were sent to his state earlier this week?

MS. PSAKI: I think that's really a question for the governor and his team.

Q And one more question: What is the President's reaction to the jump in consumer prices? And what is his level of concern today now seeing those numbers with inflation?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Kaitlan, if you actually look at the numbers and the trends over the last several months, it shows that core inflation, one, was not only below expectations, but it decelerated from last month and even from the month prior. So, over the last couple of months, we actually saw it trended downward over the last three months, and that is an encouraging sign.

We also continue to believe that, as the economy turns back on and as people are — as businesses are starting to move, as the supply — as the demands start to change in the economy, that there will be transitory impacts in — as it relates to inflation. Those are projections that have been made, of course, not just by the Federal Reserve, but by CBO, Goldman Sachs, UBS, Moody's, and others. They've also all predicted that the — that inflation will come down next year, and that those are the projections that we have abide by.

Go ahead, Jeff.

Q Jen, a question about OPEC. The White House is pressing OPEC to produce more oil. Have you gotten a response from Saudi Arabia about that request?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first I would say this is just an outreach that's just happening over the last couple of days, but it's also ongoing and something that isn't new, as of today or even as of yesterday. We've had ongoing engagements.

I know we talked about this just a couple of weeks ago when we were especially concerned or where there — when there OPE- — discussions with OPEC-member countries happening, even though we're not a member of OPEC.

So the steps that were announced this morning, which include — as you referenced, Jeff — National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan putting out a statement about how White House officials are continuing their engagement with relevant OPEC members on the importance of competitive markets and setting prices and doing more to support recovery, it also includes a letter that was sent from our NEC Director, Brian Deese, to the FTC to consider — encourage them to consider using all of its available tools to monitor the U.S. gasoline markets.

So this is not meant to be for immediate response, necessarily. It's meant to be a long-term engagement — consistent, long-term engagement, as we work to address not just anti-competitive behavior in the United States, but in the global marketplace as well. And also taking steps that we feel are prudent to keep gas prices down for the American public.

Q I have a broader question on that theme. How do you square — how does this White House square a push for OPEC — or Saudi Arabia to increase production of oil, which is a fossil fuel, with your climate change agenda, which is basically to get away from fossil fuels?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first I'd say, Jeff, that experts have consistently debunked the notion that efforts we're undertaking to transition to net zero by 2050 and a clean power sector by 2035 are related to domestic production at home. I would just note. I know that wasn't exactly your question, but I wanted to get that in there.

Our view is, one, that there are steps OPEC can take. What we're — what we're raising here, as we've raised in the past: production and the need to increase production, as you've said, to make sure we have that available to help address the price of gas.

We also are talking though, most importantly, about — about competition and about ensuring that pricing on the global market is something that is aligned with what is fair and what is competitive as well.

So, we're talking about a number of steps, not just one. But I'd also note that we know that they have supply that's available, that can be accessed, and that's what we're really referring to here.

Q Just one other foreign policy question. Is the White House or the U.S. supporting Canada in any way with its back-and-forth with China about two people — one who's been convicted to death for drug smuggling and another who's been sentenced now to 11 years for spying?

MS. PSAKI: We have spoken out about this in the past, and I believe the State Department has. I would certainly point you to them on any particular comments — new comments, I should say.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. On Afghanistan, last month, the administration shared that the objective was to get individuals who are eligible relocated out of Afghanistan in advance of the U.S. troop withdrawal at the end of August. Given the speed of the Taliban offensive, is that still the timeline?

MS. PSAKI: It continues to be. We continue to work to expedite that, to ensure we get SIV applicants who are eligible out of the country, both to Fort Lee — our base here in the United States — and also to third-party countries. But there have been a number of flights that have already been conducted — already been implemented, and we're continuing to work to expedite moving these applicants out of the country.

Q Okay. And one more on that. The administration's view has been that the Afghan forces have what they need. They've got the equipment. They've got the forces to fight back. But the Taliban now controls about 60 percent of the territory in Afghanistan. Isn't it clear that the Afghans, at this point, don't really have control?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think our point here is, Stephanie, is that we have — we were — we are continued — we will continue to provide close air support, making sure the Air Force functions are operable. We will continue to resupply their forces with food and equipment, pay all their salaries, in addition to all of the assistance we've provided over the last 20 years.

I'd also note — and this is a question that came up yesterday — that the train, advise, and assist approach that we have been implementing and the range of assistance we've provided was done in coordination with military leaders — and the implementation and designing of that plan with military leaders and civilian leaders in Afghanistan over the last several years.

So our larger point here is: Ultimately, the Afghan National Security Defense Forces have the equipment, numbers, and training to fight back. They have what they need. What they need to determine is if they have the political will to fight back, and if they have the ability to unite as a — as leaders to fight back. And that's really where it stands at this point.

Q A quick question. That air support is supposed to end in the next few weeks — that U.S. air support. What — what happens after August 31st when those 600 troops are still there, trying to protect the U.S. Embassy and the airport, and that air support is gone? Will that be looked at again to continue it, or what happens from there?

MS. PSAKI: I don't — it's a good question. I don't have any update on that for you at this point in time. I will note that the President still made an extensive request for assistance — security assistance, humanitarian assistance — different from your question, but still relevant — for Afghanistan in his FY '22 budget.

So our assistance, our partnership does not end. I understand you're asking specifically about support — air support, but he made a significant request, and certainly will continue to work to get that money through and to the Afghan leadership.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you. The fact that this Summit on Democracies is virtual, in December, is that an indication that most global diplomacy this fall may be conducted virtually and not in person?

MS. PSAKI: Not necessarily. I think we're assessing and — as are other leaders and countries — assessing what steps are prudent to take, given we're still in a fight — in a global fight with the — with COVID.

This — we need to plan, of course. There are a number of leaders who will be invited. And this was a decision we made, also given — based on, also, engagements and discussions with a number of these leaders. But I don't think it's indicative of, kind of, everything going virtual at this point.

Q One other on COVID. The President has talked about the American “arsenal” of vaccines, but a group of public health experts, this week, wrote a letter to the President urging him to export the 55 million stockpiled vaccine doses abroad. Can you remind us of what the plan is for that stockpile? Is it to be booster shots, or are they just part of the donation stream that will go out to the rest of the world?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think, first, it's important to note that, one, we hit, last week, a mi- — an important milestain [sic] — milestone of sharing over 120 million — 110 million, sorry — vaccines to the world. We also started shipting [sic] — shipping doses today to CARICOM countries. And, every day, we're making progress against a once-in-a-generation pandemic.

We are still the world's largest provider of vaccines to the global community. We are still a huge advocate for TRIP [sic] — the TRIPS waiver, which would allow that information to be shared for manufacturing pergeses [sic] — purposes with countries around the world.

So — and we have also conveyed and we have done — and are — implement this already, to date — that when we have extra doses, we will share those.

So, I think the point here is that we are — the United States is the arsenal of vaccines to the global community. We are — by far and away, in terms of what we've donated; by far and away of what we've committed; by far and away in our partnership with Quad countries — we're on track to produce at least 1 billion doses of COVID vaccines in India for the Asia region by the end of 2022.

But it also requires other countries in the global community — other wealthy countries stepping up and doing more to contribute.

So, that's what I would note.

Q One other — and, look, the President — as President, wherever he is, we go wherever he goes. Is there anything to this — and we know that this week’s original work-from-somewhere-else or vacation plan was upended by the Senate. But this whole going back to Wilmington, then to Camp David, then back to Wilmington — is there something to that?

MS. PSAKI: Certainly not. It’s just a — just his travel logistics plans.

Q There’s no reason to leave Wilmington for the weekend and go to Camp David instead?

MS. PSAKI: You mean instead of — what do you — I’m sorry. He’s —

Q Why not just stay in Wilmington?

MS. PSAKI: He likes Camp David. It’s a place to be outside, spend time with family, and certainly has beautiful, beautiful scenery there.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. The President is saying now, “God willing, the FDA is going to be coming out in a reasonable timeframe to say this vaccine is totally safe.” What is the holdup in nominating someone to run the FDA after more than 200 days in office?

MS. PSAKI: I know, it’s like 204 at this point in time.

Q Two hundred and four days in office.

MS. PSAKI: Certainly, I will say — and the President was asked this question yesterday — that he wants to name someone who’s qualified, who’s ready to lead the FDA. It is a priority for him. He’s also not going to take a step to put forward a nominee before he’s found exactly the right person.

I will note that it is a place that is filled with talented, experienced scientists, data experts, career staff who are certainly running the FDA effectively.

Q Okay. And as the President tries to reach unvaccinated Americans, has there been any thought given — looking back — to the possibility that he may have created some vaccine hesitancy when, last year around this time, the previous administration was rushing to get a vaccine authorized and the now-President said, “I trust vaccines. I trust scientists. But I don’t trust Donald Trump. And at this moment, the American people can’t either.”

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think it’s safe to say he still doesn’t trust Donald Trump, so that hasn’t changed. But he does trust scientists. He does trust data experts. And he does trust the people leading the CDC, the FDA, which is the gold standard of approval for vaccines.

I'd also note, because this question often comes up, that the President has repeatedly given credit to scientists and experts from the prior administration, even as recently as just a few weeks ago, for their role in moving the vaccines forward.

Q Yes, but at the time when Donald Trump is out there saying, "We're going to have a vaccine in the next couple weeks, next couple months," and Joe Biden is out on the campaign trail saying, "Don't trust Donald Trump," did that create any kind of vaccine hesitancy?

MS. PSAKI: Not that we've seen in the data. I would note that at the time, just for context, the former President was also suggesting people inject versions of poison into their veins to cure COVID. So I think that's a relevant point.

Q And Joe Biden, then-Vice President, was saying we got to wait until something is fully authorized, and it's still not.

MS. PSAKI: Well, the FDA works on the timeline of science. At the same time, we've also seen tens of millions of people's lives saved who have gotten the vaccine. That data is clear across the country.

Go ahead.

Q Back on Afghanistan, Jen. The President made his view clear yesterday that he doesn't regret his decision, but a U.S. intelligence official is telling CBS News that Kabul could come under pressure in a month or two. And if that happens, the entire Afghan government could collapse in as little as 90 days from today. Does the President dispute that assessment? Or does he accept it as the likely outcome?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we don't rely on anonymous assessments. We rely on the intelligence assessments made by the U.S. government. They have put out public assessments which, certainly, we stand by.

We are closely watching the deteriorating security conditions in parts of the country, but no particular outcome, in our view, is inevitable.

We will continue to coordinate airstrikes with and in support of Afghan forces. And as the President made clear, Afghan leaders have to come together and the future of the country is really on their shoulders.

Q So, let me ask you: The Taliban is clearly on the march. Your objective is to have a negotiated political settlement. What gives you confidence that the Taliban is interested in that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the Taliban has to make an assessment — one, we have also said that there's no question that the Afghan National Defense Security Forces would be strengthened, as would the Afghan political leadership, if they were to have more success in fighting back. There's no question about that. We're not hiding from that in any way, shape, or form.



The Taliban also has to make an assessment about what they want their role to be in the international community. And I know that Ambassador Khalilzad made comments when he was at the political negotiations yesterday making clear that the international community is going to watch closely how the Taliban behaves. They have a range of tools in their arsenal, as well, to take steps should they choose.

Q Are you aware of any safeguards for American materiel that may fall into the Taliban hands if they continue to take over more land in Afghanistan?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we certainly take that risk seriously. It is a concern of ours, as it would be in any warzone where we provide assistance. We did take steps to retrograde some of the equipment over the past several months in preparation for that possibility. But we do take that seriously; we watch it closely, as well.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, across the country right now, as you know, a lot of companies are trying to make decisions on their return-to-work dates. What, if any, decisions has the President made about when the federal workforce needs to be back in the office? Where does that stand for federal employees?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we've already brought all of the White House employees in — on the executive complex back to work. And, obviously, agencies are implementing on their own timelines to do exactly that as well.

As you know, we announced, just a couple of weeks ago, steps we were putting in place — attestations that would be required of federal employees. If they're not vaccinated, they're going to have to be in a testing regime. It's going to take a little bit of time to have that implemented, even as agencies are hard at work getting it done.

Q So, there has been some dates floated as, like, early September by which some of these employees would be coming back. Is the expectation that employees will be coming back in the next several weeks? Or has this complicated the situation, given the surge of the variant?

MS. PSAKI: It has not complicated. We've put in place specific guidelines and specific requirements from the federal government. We also trust that each agency is going to have their own implementation plan for how they can have in place a testing regime in order to keep their workforce safe.

Q We'll follow up on this when we talk to the COVID-19 Response Team at the next opportunity, but what is the assessment that the White House has received in terms of projection for when this Delta variant would reach its peak? When should we anticipate that that would happen? What, if any, preparations are being made in anticipation of that time?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I certainly do encourage you to ask our scientists, as I know you will. Part of it is dependent on the actions and steps that the American people take across the country to get vaccinated, to wear masks, to protect themselves, to reduce the spread of the virus.

We have seen, in states where there was — where there was a rise in COVID cases, even a week or two ago, obviously, an increase in vaccination rates, but — and also a start to see a leveling off in some of those states. That's a positive sign.

I'd also remind everyone, as you all know, that when — if somebody gets their shot tomorrow, they're not — they're not protected the next day; they need to get their second shot, and then it's a couple of weeks after that.

So, it is going to take a little bit of time, even as we've seen an increase in vaccination rates in a number of states across the country.

Q But you receive assessments, obviously, from them. What is the assessment? When should Americans on this trajectory, or even if there is a best-case-scenario trajectory, when should we anticipate this surge to peak?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, I encourage you to ask our scientists and our experts who are tracking exactly that — an important question. But it's also dependent on the steps that we are taking and people across the country are taking to get vaccinated and protect themselves.

Q In the near term, are there conversations about the potential for field hospitals — much the same way that you produce mass vaccination sites in some places? Some of the states right now don't have sufficient resources to care for the number of hospitalized individuals. Are those conversations taking place?

MS. PSAKI: We are in touch with every governor, and we have offered assistance — federal assistance, strike forces. Every state needs something different. In states that have higher rates of COVID, obviously you need even more assistance. And we are prepared to provide any kind of assistance that's going to help stem the flow of — the rise of the virus.

Q Finally, I know you'll tell us — it's a simple question — has the President spoken to the soon-to-be governor of New York yet, Kathy Hochul?

MS. PSAKI: Not yet, but we expect him to do that in the coming days.

Q What message does he communicate? What message would he want to share publicly with the soon-to-be first female governor of the state of New York?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'm sure we'll do a readout after the meeting, but I will tell you that he would convey to her, "I'm looking forward to working with you" — with her — "to continue to get the pandemic under control, to put the people of New York back to work, and to move forward as a federal and state partners."

Go ahead.

Q Okay. Thank you. Can I go back to the OPEC announcement —

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

Q — this morning? The timing, of course, in the hours before the CPI announcement, kind of, lends an impression or a question of whether there's a domestic-political lens for you. What, if any, tools do you have to pressure OPEC, other than, you know, a letter from Jake Sullivan, to actually take steps to increase production? Or is it just the U.S. sort of doing it for political benefit? Because that might be how they view it.

MS. PSAKI: Well, we don't see it through a political lens. We believe that, one, the President's role in addressing competition doesn't stop at the border's edge. And while we encouraged OPEC, as you know — I know you cover this closely — to take steps, or OPEC countries to take steps to increase supply, back several weeks ago, we believe this needs to be a continuous and ongoing conversation and we need to elevate this issue in public and, certainly, in the global community. It's just one step in our toolbox to continue to keep prices down for the public.

Q Is there anything domestically that the U.S. would consider to do to incentivize increased production here?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would also note that — that our NEC Director, I should say, sent a letter to the FTC as well, encouraging them to consider looking at available tools to monitor the U.S. gasoline market.

As you know, what we've seen, this isn't the first time this has happened. But even as oil prices go down, gas prices take a longer time to come down.

Now, gas prices are still aligned with where they were back in 2018. But we know this is going to be — and they often go up in the summer; we've seen that trend over and over again. But this is a long-term issue, and we want to send a clear message that we are going to take steps, whether they are using the bully pulpit or otherwise, to make sure we are going after anti-competitive behavior.

Q Right. But that is a different question than increasing production. You're asking OPEC to increase production. Is there anything the U.S. — the U.S. producers can do to increase production or that you, as the administration, would consider doing to make U.S. — more U.S. oil?

MS. PSAKI: Well, that wasn't an ask we made. The point we have made in these communications is that we do have the sup- — we're not making a supply question here — or we're not posing a supply question domestically. Obviously, OPEC has its own unique role on the global marketplace.

We do also think that there should not be any price gouging at the pump when there is available oil, so that is what we are highlighting and marking out there.

Q Thank you.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Thanks so much, Jen. Ken Salazar was just confirmed as ambassador for Mexico. He's just the first ambassador, for a country, to be confirmed. Is this something that the President is concerned about? What is he, what is the White House doing about, kind of, the slow pace of confirmations of ambassadors?

MS. PSAKI: Well, while we are grateful for the important work the Senate did before recess by passing the bipartisan infrastructure bill and certainly taking an important step forward on the President's Build Back Better agenda, we are frustrated over the slow pace of confirmations, particularly for non-controversial nominees. A number of these nominees who are sitting and waiting are highly qualified. They have — a number of them have a lot of Republican support. So, what is the holdup?

And as you noted, it's important for us around the world to have qualified ambassadors who are confirmed by the Senate to lead our country and represent our country at this point in time. There are also a number of other positions at the Treasury Department, at other domestic agencies that could play a pivotal role as our country is continuing to deal with an economic recovery.

I would also note that, just for data purposes, the President has sent over more nominees at this point than his predecessor and a comparable amount of nominees to Presidents Obama and Bush. Right now, we have nearly 275 people we've nominated pending confirmation by the Senate — a number of them who have strong Republican support as well.

Q Now, a few of the recent nominations last week were donors. What — the President, during the campaign, promised to put diplomacy back in the hands of professionals. What is the makeup that the White House is kind of shooting for in regards to percentage of political versus career, diversity? How are you balancing that — those political (inaudible) of donors — especially after some diplomats feel after four years of Trump and the withdrawal from the world mean there should be more career people?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the President has made clear that he supports, advocates for, and will continue to press for the confirmation of career ambassadors, of course. But also that individuals who are in the private sector — that does not mean that they're unqualified. These are qualified nominees who can be excellent representatives of the United States overseas.

And we are also going to simultaneously continue to push for and press for and elevate career staff, Foreign Service Officers who've proudly served our country, through Democrats and Republicans, to serve in these posts as well. And those are all on the slate of nominees we're pushing to move forward.

Q Obama and Bush had about 30 percent political. Is that, kind of, a range that the Biden administration is seeking for?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have a percentage for you. I can tell you that — and I'm happy to check with our personnel department to see if there's anything they want to provide.

I will note that diversity has been a front-and-center priority for the President, for this administration, and for our personnel department as they look to fill key posts — not just ambassador roles, but roles to serve in high-level positions in agencies.

Go ahead, Michael.

Q Thanks, Jen. It's the 40th birthday of Austin Tice, a journalist who went missing in Syria nine years ago this week. And his family put out a statement today. I was going to read just a short portion of it for you:

*"We are now imploring a third President to communicate to his administration that Austin's secure release and safe return is a priority. There are many capable people working in our government who are eager to see Austin walk free; they must have President Biden's authorization for significant and relevant diplomatic engagement with the Syrian government."*

What has the President done, publicly or internally, to communicate that this is a priority? And when will we hear from him directly?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would note that, first, this week, as you noted, marks his ninth year in captivity in Syria. I talked about the detainment of Austin Tice when I was in a prior administration, two administrations ago, and that tells you how long his family has been waiting.

We'd certainly reiterate our call for Syria to help release — on Syria to help release Austin Tice and every U.S. citizen held hostage in Syria. We are committed to following all avenues and talking to anyone who can help with Austin's release and return home.

We don't speak about those publicly because that's not in the interest of the outcome, but we are committed to working — to doing — using every tool in our disposal to bring Austin and all hostages held in Syria home.

Q I just want to follow up because it seems as if there's a feeling that there needs to be an explicit directive from the President, whether it be publicly or privately, and —

MS. PSAKI: He is directing Syria to release Austin Tice, and we are using — and he has asked his government to use every tool and — tool of engagement available to bring him home.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. I've got two questions. One, domestic and —

MS. PSAKI: Jake, it's your birthday today. You noted that for me.

Q Yes, it is.

MS. PSAKI: Happy birthday.

Q Thank you. And let me wish you back, “Happy Infrastructure Week.” (Laughter.)

MS. PSAKI: Okay. Same, same. We all get cakes, so it’s good.

Q So, one quick question about infrastructure. With the infrastructure bill just having passed overwhelmingly in the Senate and headed for the House, is there anything the American people should anticipate in terms of the next big push for bipartisan legislation?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the door to the Oval Office is always going to be open to bipartisan work, bipartisan engagement. There is work that we expect to proceed in the fall, including work on CHIPS legislation, helping to address issues in our supply chain that are impacting American workers and American companies.

We certainly believe that Congress should follow historic precedent and raise the debt limit, as they have three times during the former President’s administration and 80 times overall.

And there is work — there are issues that have historically received bipartisan support, including on immigration, including on steps to make our workforce more competitive, address our competition with China. So, there’s a number of opportunities. We look forward to seeing what openness there is on the other side of the aisle as well.

Go ahead.

Q And then a follow-up on Afghanistan —

MS. PSAKI: I think we’ve got to keep going.

Go ahead.

Q On Afghanistan —

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Forty-six Republican senators have now signed a letter saying they will not vote to raise the debt limit. So what is the White House’s, kind of, plan? What conversations are you having with Congress to make sure the U.S. doesn’t default on its debt?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say we are making absolutely clear that raising the debt limit is something that has been done historically — 80 times — in a bipartisan fashion — the vast majority, more times under Republican Presidents than Democratic Presidents.

And when we’re talking about what debt we’re dealing with here, most of it — 99 percent of it, I believe — is from — existed before President Biden took office.

So, we understand what their public comments are to date. Congress will return in September. And certainly, we know the private sector — that former leaders from both sides of the aisle are eager to see Congress raise the debt limit and not face default.

Q So is passing this through regular order, not in reconciliation — is that a red line for the President?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not here to set red lines. I think there's a standard precedent we're looking for Congress to follow.

Go ahead.

Q Following up on that, Jen, what is the White House reaction —

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead. Go ahead. Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. I appreciate it. There are still roughly 2,000 inmates who were released to home confinement through the CARES Act. We've reported that the Biden administration deemed that the Trump administration was correct in interpreting that that authority would basically end at the end of the pandemic. Would the President prefer issuing clemency to those inmates, seeing a legislative fix that keep them on home confinement? Or is he okay seeing them returned back to prison — most of them?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I saw your reporting. We all did, of course. We are working hard every day to reform our justice system in order to strengthen families, boost our economy, give people a chance at a better future.

As part of this, the President is deeply committed to reducing incarceration, helping people successfully reenter society. And he has said too many people are incarcerated — too many are Black and brown. And he is therefore exploring multiple avenues to provide relief for — to certain nonviolent drug offenders, including through the use of his clemency power.

I don't have anything to preview for you today, but he is, again, looking at a range of avenues.

Go ahead.

Q Also, the gallerist managing — who has been tasked with ensuring the buyers of Hunter Biden's artwork remain anonymous — he said that Hunter will be attending his opening as well, next month. And he has said friends and family will be attending as well. Does the President and First Lady plan on attending that — that opening?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not aware of plans for them to attend.

Go ahead, Rachel.

Q Thanks, Jen. On the nominations again, I know that Secretary Blinken called for the nomination of Deborah Lipstadt as Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism last week on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. What kind of communications has the White House had with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on her nomination and on others as well?

MS. PSAKI: We've been in close touch with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as well as a range of leaders in the Senate about our desire to get qualified nominees confirmed.

I'd note that I gave the number earlier: 275 nominees — qualified, experienced — many of them former public servants who are eager to serve our country around the world and in the United States — are waiting.

They're ready to serve. They're ready to be in their roles. Some of them are international. Some of them are domestic. And many of them have brought Republican support.

I'd note there's also been a significant amount of outreach from the State Department on these nominees. I'd certainly point you to them to outline the specifics of that.

Go ahead, Patsy.

Q Thank you. I have a question on the Democracy Summit, but, first, before that, I have two foreign policy questions.

MS. PSAKI: Okay.

Q So Amnesty International released a report today documenting systemic rape and sexual violence against girls and women in the Tigray region in Ethiopia. How do you respond to that report? And does the administration plan to do more to help stop these atrocities?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we are closely engaged with countries in the region, leaders in the region, and certainly horrified by what we've seen as ongoing human rights abuses in Ethiopia. And that's something I would certainly point you to the State Department for more extensive detail about our work there.

We have put out a number of statements from administration officials on this particular issue, and we will continue to elevate it publicly.

Q And on Haiti: Senators Rubio and Menendez just sent the letter earlier this week to the President Biden, expressing concern about the political crisis in Haiti following the assassination. Has the President responded? And how does he plan to respond?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not sure we've seen that letter. I'm not — I'm not familiar with it.

Go ahead.

Q Okay. And the Democracy Summit, Jen?

MS. PSAKI: I think we got to keep going just to get to more people.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. Two quick questions — one domestic, one foreign policy. Domestically, you may have seen a statement put out by Senator Joe Manchin in regards



to the three and a half trillion dollar so-called “human infrastructure” bill. He seems very skeptical about the size of it. Do you view him as a team player?

MS. PSAKI: Absolutely. And a key partner to the President in moving our agenda forward.

I did see his statement — or we all saw his statement. I’d note that I think he’s conf- — he’s confounding a couple of things in there. One, the Build Back Better agenda could also be called the “cost-cutting agenda” for working families. “Build Back Better” sounds better.

But what it will actually do — and we have a report that just went out or should be going out from CEA and OMB — it makes clear that a big outcome, a big impact of the Build Back Better agenda is lowering costs — bringing down costs on childcare, healthcare, prescription drugs, preschool, costs of college, commuting, even household expenses. That’s what the long-term impact is.

This is also an eight-year investment to make us more competitive. It’s not about putting a huge amount of money into the economy over the next few months, but these are critical investments, and that’s also why a number of inflation hawks, I should note, are fully supportive of it.

Jason Furman, my old friend and colleague, said, “I don’t think the infrastructure bill or reconciliation plan would materially impact inflation over the next decade.” I raise that because I know that was something that he expressed.

It would also be fully paid for by raising — by asking the wealthiest Americans and companies to pay a bit more.

So those are some things I think were unintentionally confounded in the statement.

Q And then on foreign policy. As you know, seven provincial capitals in Afghanistan have fallen in just the past two weeks. National security hawks attribute that directly to the decision by President Biden to announce the withdrawal of U.S. forces by the end of this month. What’s your reaction to those critics who criticize the President’s plans for Afghanistan?

MS. PSAKI: I think our reaction is: The President — every Commander-in-Chief and President has to make difficult choices about what’s in the national interests of the United States.

And when he gave his speech, just a couple of months ago, delivered a speech outlining why he was making this decision, he touched on a couple of pieces.

One, we’ve been at war — at war in Afghanistan for 20 years, and it is far — long past time to bring troops home.

Two, our counterterrorism threats have changed. They are no longer emanating from — in the same capacity from Afghanistan. We need to have capacity and counterterrorism capacity to address threats from other parts of the world — Northern Africa, and others.

Three, because of the timeline that was set by the prior administration of May 1st, if we had left our troops there, the Taliban would be shooting at our troops. He asked his team for a clear-eyed assessment of what the impact is; we put out intelligence assessments. And we will continue to be partners with the Afghan governments militarily, humanitarian — from a humanitarian perspective moving forward.

I didn't mean to skip you. Go ahead.

Q No, you're fine. Back to the Senate, which recessed without taking any significant action on voting rights. And I think Mitch McConnell said something akin to, "You know, it's not going to happen tonight. It's not going to happen when we come back." What, if anything, is the White House doing to sort of push the issue forward over the next month?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say first that Leader Schumer made clear that he disagrees with that assessment, and he is the Leader of the Senate. So he has indicated that he wants to continue to press for voting rights, on legislation, and moving things forward.

I expect we'll — you'll see a comment from the President on this particular issue and his ongoing commitment to addressing voting rights and making sure we are protecting and defending people [sic] — people's fundamental rights as well.

As you noted, the Senate will return in September. We will stay at it in this fight. We will continue to work with officials around the country, with activists, and with legislators to move legislation forward.

Go ahead.

Q Just curious if the President is following the recall election in California, how concerned he is about the vote, and whether he has considered getting more involved to potentially engage Democratic voters that, polls show, are less enthusiastic about casting ballots.

MS. PSAKI: I don't — I wouldn't say he's following it particularly closely, in the sense that he's got a lot on his agenda. But we certainly support Governor Newsom and have worked with him on a range of key issues, whether it's the pandemic, addressing wildfires, growing the economy, and look forward to continuing to do so.

Q But will we see the President potentially make a statement or, you know, some other show of support for him in the closing final days?

MS. PSAKI: He — he supports him. I don't have anything in terms of additional steps to preview for you.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, what is the White House reaction to the Hyde Amendment being included in the \$3.5 trillion budget resolution?

MS. PSAKI: I don't think I'm going to negotiate from here. The President's position on Hyde is well known and we've stated many times publicly.

Q And let me follow up on that, please?

MS. PSAKI: I think we're going to move on.

Go ahead.

Q (Cross-talk.)

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead, Joey.

Q (Cross-talk.)

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead, Joey. Go ahead. I think we're going to move on so we can get some more people. Go ahead.

Q All right. Thanks —

Q (Cross-talk.)

MS. PSAKI: It doesn't help to scream over people.

Q Thanks, Jen. I appreciate it. Just going back to the Senator Manchin statement. You said he, quote, "confounded a couple of things" when he raised cost concerns with the \$3.5 trillion price tag. Does that mean, for now — and I know we've asked you about this a couple times — but your position, the White House position right now is that it needs to be the \$3.5 trillion price tag and that you're not budging on that figure and you're digging in on that figure?

MS. PSAKI: That's not what I was saying. I was responding to — although the President is certainly comfortable with that amount, he — his priorities are ensuring that the Build Back Better agenda; that additional investments in protecting our climate; making — bringing down the cost of childcare, of healthcare, of education for the American public is included. He's spoken to that before. There's going to be a negotiation, moving forward.

What I was speaking to is the fact that the Build Back Better agenda will actually bring costs down over the course of time. It's also a plan and a proposal that is fully paid for. It is different from the American Rescue Plan emergency funding that was passed in order to address dual pandemics. So, I was just clarifying some of the specifics that were raised there.

Go ahead, Ebony.

Q Tomorrow, Representative Norton, along with several other progressive groups, are going to be having a rally, but also delivering a petition with thousands of names to the President to ask him to come out and still speak on the filibuster.

And while we know what the President stance is, today, on the steps of the Supreme Court, you had family members of John Lewis talking about how the President has done so much on the filibuster — speaking more than 300 times, but less than 50 when it comes to voting rights.

Is there anything in his schedule where we can see where the President is going to be making the same type of effort he is doing with infrastructure on voting rights?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the President gave — has given major speeches recently, in the last few weeks, on voting rights. He's also said that it is a cause of his presidency, and he believes that voting rights are fundamental rights for the American people and the American public. His closest advisor and partner is — is, of course, Vice President Harris; she is leading this effort.

And he has taken steps that he has the purview to take, including signing an executive order to expand and protect voting rights, including ensuring and supporting steps for the Department of Justice to provide additional funding, including nominating voting rights — leaders in the voting rights community to play important roles in the Department of Justice.

He will continue to speak out on this issue. He will continue to advocate for fundamental rights. And he will look forward to signing legislation into law.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. Given the uptick in — given the uptick in inflation, is anyone at the White House taking a closer look at the previous administration's tariffs to see which ones actually serve, you know, geopolitical interests and then which ones just increase costs for consumer?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we've talked about how there's ongoing reviews of tariffs and a range of steps that were put in place by the prior administration. And, of course, we're going to continue to use every economic tool in our toolbox.

I would note — and I know noted this pri- — previously — but as we look at averages, the rate of inflation has actually come down, and we continue to be at a projection where it is going to come back to normal rates next year.

And we also know that there are specific industries that are impacting inflation. We also saw a — encouraging data as it relates to the used car industry. Last month, it went up by 10 percent. Now it went up — the cost, I should say — by less than 1 percent.

So, we're seeing some encouraging data. And we want to, of course, see that trend continue.

Q And then even though he's now out of office, would this President support the New York legislature if they decided to impeach Governor Cuomo?

MS. PSAKI: That's a decision for them to make. The President made clear his views. Obviously, the former — the governor announced his steps yesterday. We'll leave it at that.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, you said at the top you're hoping that the companies and universities the President is about to meet with will be a model for others. So, is the President's official position that all companies in the private sector should have vaccine mandates for their employees?

MS. PSAKI: The President's position is that every company should take a look at how to protect their workforce and that there are going to be different carrots and sticks that can be used by different private sector entities. Even these industries that are represented today have taken different steps. He's lifting up them as examples of models of what works. But there are different — different companies will take different approaches.

Q Is the President disappointed in other airlines that haven't taken the steps that United has?

MS. PSAKI: We've seen some other airlines — I know Delta announced that they would only be hiring people who were vaccinated. And we've seen different industries take different steps. But we are certainly encouraged by the step of United Airlines and by any steps by employers to protect their workforce.

Q And lastly, has the President spoken with the outgoing governor of New York?

MS. PSAKI: No.

Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. Just a follow-up on mask mandates. Yesterday, when President Biden was asked if he has the authority to intervene in states like Texas and Florida where they are banning mask mandates, he signaled that the administration is looking into it. Can you provide more clarity on what the President meant, any avenues that the administration is exploring to intervene in states?

MS. PSAKI: Sure. What he was speaking about — and I think he gave a little bit of context on this — was that we're looking into ways we can help the leaders at the local level who are putting public health first continue to do their jobs, keep students safe, and keep students in school.

That's something our Department of Education and others are looking at. I just don't have anything to preview for you at this point in time.

Q And a follow-up on the debt ceiling: Does the President believe that he can unilaterally raise the debt limit through an executive order if it was under emergency circumstances?

MS. PSAKI: The President believes that Congress should act to raise the debt ceiling, as they have 80 times in the past.

Q Has he asked his lawyers if he could raise the debt limit unilaterally?

MS. PSAKI: He believes Congress should and will act to do it. Go ahead.

Q Thanks, Jen. I wanted —

MS. PSAKI: Oh, did we —

Q Jen —

MS. PSAKI: Okay. Go ahead. And then we'll go to you.

Q Okay, great. Thank you, Jen. Two questions. The Biden administration has already delivered 20 million vaccine doses to 26 countries in Africa from the pledge the President made on May 17th.

And Africa expects to receive a significant portion of doses from the pledge the President made at the G7 on June 10th.

But with only 1.7 percent of people vaccinated in Africa and the Delta variant killing so many people, is the President considering scaling up vaccine donation from the G7 pledge to African countries?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the G7 made their commitment, which is significant and will be implemented. We are continue — going to continue to build on what we've already announced, so we plan to share tens of millions of doses across the summer months.

I'd also note that we're also working to support vaccine manufacturing in Africa by providing a South African bus- — by providing financing to a South African business to bolster manufacturing capacity to produce more than 500 million doses.

So we are looking at a range of ways to provide supply, to be the arsenal of vaccines in the global community, including Africa, and we will continue to expedite that as quickly as we can.

We know that the — the pandemic knows no borders.

Q And on Guinea: Is the White House doing anything to support Guinea to contain the Marburg virus disease that was identified there?

MS. PSAKI: Is it a strain of the coronavirus?

Q No, it's a strain of the — it is in the same family with the Ebola virus.

MS. PSAKI: Ah. I will — I'm happy to check with our team and see if there's any specific updates. The State Department might be the best entity to speak to that.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you. A question about Africa. We have seen a number of deadly jihadist attacks in the last days in Mali and Burkina Faso. You just said the President's assessment is that the terrorist threat is spreading in other countries. Is he planning to do anything about those countries in Africa?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think what I was referring to is what the President conveyed in May when he gave a speech about his decision as it relates to U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

And certainly his assessment — not new assessment; this has been growing over time, as you know — that the threat has expanded to — over the last several years — to Northern Africa and other parts of the world.

So, certainly our counterterrorism strategy reflects that assessment, which, again, is not new, but certainly contributed to his decision on Afghanistan.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, a headline from the New York Post from, I believe, two days ago: Team Biden's war on DeSantis is all about "kneecapping" a successful governor — a GOP governor. Could you address that concern, please?

MS. PSAKI: Our war is not on DeSantis. It's on the virus, which we're trying to kneecap. And he does not seem to want to participate in that effort to kneecap the virus, hence our concern.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. I have a rapid fire, three questions on transparency. As Ed noted earlier, the President's been to Delaware 17 times — it's soon going to be 18 and 19 times — over the past six months. I want to know how visits from visitors and from family members with potential conflicts of interest are being treated for the purposes of White House visitor log disclosure.

Also, I was hoping that you could respond to Walter Shaub's criticism of the First Son's art sales. He says he wants to — "shame on the President if he doesn't ask his son to stop." What exactly has the President said to his son?

And the third question is: What spacing constraints are there in the White House East Room that are preventing us all from attending the event later today, especially considering there are no spacing constraints in this room?

MS. PSAKI: Well, one, I think we wanted to make it as transparent as possible and make the entire meeting available to everyone who isn't just in this room, so we are actually not discriminating against people who are covering the White House from outside of the

White House briefing room.

Second, I would say, we — we have spoken extensively to the arrangements, which are not White House arrangements; they're arrangements between Hunter Biden's representatives and ones that we, certainly, were made aware of. I don't think I have anything to add in that regard.

And no, I can confirm we are not going to be providing information about the comings and goings of the President's grandchildren or people visiting him in Delaware.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen.

Q In the reconciliation —

MS. PSAKI: Okay. Last one. Thank you, Darlene.

Q In the reconciliation framework there was — that made the next step here — the public debt, it says, goes to \$30.7 trillion in the next fiscal year, then it balloons to \$45.1 trillion by 2031, and that's with the payfors. So, at what point does the federal debt become an issue or concern for the President?

MS. PSAKI: Well, it was a concern when he came in, and he was left with quite a debt and deficit by his predecessor. But the President has proposed a plan and package that would be fully paid for by asking corporations and the wealthiest Americans to pay a little bit more to make our country more competitive, and he feels quite comfortable with the fiscal responsibility of that.

Thanks, everyone, so much. Have a great day.

1:16 P.M. EDT

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