


# Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 12/7/2016

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MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Very calm in here. Let's see if we can keep it that way. (Laughter.)

Josh, no pressure, but you'll go first.

Q Thanks, Josh. I wanted to start with a statement that President Obama and some of the Western leaders released this morning on Syria and the crisis in Aleppo. And I was wondering if that statement was intended to signal support specifically for this five-day ceasefire that a number of Syrian rebel factions are calling for, or if the leaders were just referring more generally to the crisis and trying to call attention to it.

MR. EARNEST: Josh, my understanding is they're not seeking to show support for any one specific plan. There are a variety of proposals that have been put forward that would reduce the violence sufficiently to allow innocent Syrians in Aleppo to get out of harm's way, and for the consistent flow of humanitarian aid to commence, particularly to those regions of the country and to those areas of the city that have been under siege for a long time.

So as you'd expect, Josh, these kinds of statements take some time to be negotiated through diplomatic channels, and so this isn't in response to one specific proposal that's been put forward, but rather demonstrating clear, unified international support for some kind of diplomatic arrangement that reduces the violence and allows the flow of humanitarian assistance to commence in a sustained way.

Q And the statement was very critical, even condemning, of Russia for its role in facilitating the continuation of violence through its actions at the U.N. and elsewhere. And I'm wondering, given the fact that the U.S. is still talking with Russia about this -- I believe Secretary of State Kerry is meeting Lavrov even today in Germany -- what is the utility of continuing to try to work with Russia on that when we're, in the same breath, saying you guys are the problem, you're the reason that there is not progress on this?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, I think the strategy is essentially to apply pressure to Russia because of the tactics that they have been willing to not just condone but, in some cases, actively support that have resulted in significant innocent loss of life. And it's continuing.

And the President does not believe it's an effective strategy to gloss over or somehow obscure Russia's complicity in this sordid affair in order to reach a solution. In fact, we actually believe that Russia bears special responsibility to help bring about a diplomatic solution because of the way that it intervened on behalf of the Assad regime and because of their own stated significant national interest in the outcome of the situation inside of Syria.

So we're not going to advance a diplomatic solution by somehow acting like Russia has been a good actor when they haven't, or pretending that Russia somehow doesn't have a stake in the outcome when the truth is they've got as big a stake in the outcome as any other country outside of Syria. So it's time for them to play a responsible role. And thus far, they haven't. And that's isolated them in the international community. It's what makes them the object of so much criticism and even scorn from the international community because of their willingness to support actively the depraved tactics of the Assad regime to try to bomb innocent civilians into submission.

Q Philippine President Duterte has given out a readout of his recent conversation with President-elect Trump and he says that Trump said basically, don't worry about U.S. concerns about your fight against drug criminals; go ahead, you're doing a good job. How alarming is that to the U.S., given that what we're essentially talking about -- or what you've talked about from that podium is the killing of thousands of people without any kind of due process?

MR. EARNEST: Josh, I have no special knowledge of the telephone conversation between the President-elect and the President of the Philippine, so I can't be in a position to critique the view that's being expressed by the President-elect to the President of the Philippines.

What I can do, however, is restate the position of this administration, the position of the current U.S. government, and that is simply that extrajudicial killings are entirely inconsistent with the notion of the rule of law and a commitment to upholding basic, universal human rights. It's plain and simple.

There is a significant challenge facing the government of the Philippines to combat the drug trade in their country. And it raises significant questions about their economy and about the security situation in the Philippines. That is a legitimate problem that's worth confronting. And, in fact, the United States has been supportive of previous efforts by the Philippines to confront the drug trade and try to limit, if not eradicate it.

But President Duterte has certainly raised concerns about the degree to which his government is at least willing to look the other way while these kinds of extrajudicial killings are taking place and while vigilante justice is being meted out. That's not going to solve the problem.

The President gave a long speech about this yesterday, about how it's important that our efforts to advance the interests of the United States and provide for the security of the United States is enhanced when we do it consistent with our values. That same principle applies to other countries, as well.

The other principle that I think is at stake here is a little higher-level principle, but it's an important one nonetheless. One of the reasons that it's important for us to invest in the durability and strength of our alliances is so that we can acknowledge publicly when we disagree. It's the sign of a strong relationship that we can acknowledge differences of opinion and encourage our closest friends around the world to live up to the values that our countries and our people prioritize. It's a sign of weakness in a relationship if you can't acknowledge differences of opinion.

That's true in interpersonal matters; it's also true in international diplomacy. And we don't agree with our allies on every issue. And preserving the strength of those alliances and investing in the strength of those alliances allows us to, where appropriate, air those differences and not shy away from them. And in this case, it's important because the United States draws upon our adherence to these values because it contributes to our influence around the world. Countries want to be allied with the United States because they recognize what it is that we stand for. And when we stay true to those values, it only enhances our influence around the globe. That makes us safer.

And signaling a willingness to backtrack from those values is bad for our individual relationships, but it's also bad for -- degrades our ability to exert our influence around the world.

Q And lastly, is the White House amenable to adding a provision in the short-term spending bill to essentially fast-track a waiver for General Mattis, given that the President is going to have to sign this bill to keep the government funded?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a couple of principles at play here, Josh. The first is that President Obama has long made the argument that while the Senate does have some responsibility to confirm the President's nominees -- to offer that advice and consent is a fundamental responsibility of the Senate -- at the same time, the President of the United States should be given a lot -- significant latitude to assemble his team.

In many instances, that courtesy was not extended to this President by Republicans in the Senate. But the President believes that's an important principle. And again, that is a principle that can be faithfully observed without eroding the constitutional responsibility of the United States Senate to offer their advice and consent.

Second, when it comes to General Mattis, we're talking about somebody that President Obama knows. General Mattis served as the commander of Central Command for two or three years while President Obama was in office. He is somebody who served his country with distinction. He's a decorated Marine Corps veteran. But President Obama believes

that -- well, the standard that we have tried to set is to not comment on, pass judgment on the individuals that the President-elect has put forward to serve in his Cabinet. And I'm going to try to abide by that principle here.

Q This isn't really about General Mattis and his own views on issues or anything. It's about the fact that he's a general, and that in order for him to be confirmed there would have to be a waiver passed by Congress to permit that. So it's kind of a different principle.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, well, I think all these principles come into play, though. And I certainly wouldn't want any sort of commentary about this matter to be construed as some sort of implicit criticism of General Mattis -- for a variety of reasons, including he's somebody who has served this country with distinction under Democratic and Republican Presidents, and he's supported, based on the public comments I've seen, by both Democrats and Republicans that he's interacted with in the context of his job.

What I will say seems odd is that Senate Republicans feel the need to tuck this provision into a budget bill in order to advance it, instead of having this question of a waiver be considered on its merits. So the kind of tactics and legislative strategy, to the extent there is one, that has regularly been applied by senators in the Congress is one that I've been mystified by in the past, so this is not exactly an unprecedented kind of situation.

But, in general, what I can say is that President Obama believes in the principle of the President being able to assemble a team. He certainly believes in the principle that somebody like General Mattis is a decorated Marine, has demonstrated his patriotism and service to the country, has served this country with distinction, but ultimately the President-elect and the next Congress are going to have to determine how exactly to advance his nomination to the Senate.

Ayesha.

Q More on appointments. Today, President-elect Trump told the "Today Show" that he has consulted President Obama about some of his appointments and that he takes the President's recommendations very seriously, and also that I guess at least one of the appointments or some of the appointments were highly -- or were liked by President Obama, according to President-elect Trump. So I just wondered -- I know that you have declined to kind of talk about what the President thinks of all the appointments, but I guess what type of advice is the President giving to President-elect Trump? Trump talked about it today. So what type of advice is he giving him as he appoints his Cabinet? And also can you speak even about this kind of burgeoning relationship? I mean, at this point, Trump has repeatedly said that he likes President Obama and he thinks President Obama likes him, too. So can you talk about this relationship? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: This would probably make for an interesting episode of "Dr. Phil." (Laughter.) Not that I'm giving them any programming ideas -- but they can take that one and run with it.

Look, I know that the President-elect had an opportunity when he was asked in an interview to talk a little bit about his consultations with President Obama. And he's the President-elect of the United States, and he's on the other end of the phone when the President is talking, so he's got a little more latitude to do that than I do. I'm going to, from here, in my role, going to protect the ability of the President of the United States to consult in private with the President-elect.

I've, on a number of occasions, confirmed that there have been at least a handful of conversations between the President and the President-elect, in addition to the Oval Office meeting that all of you observed, something that took place 36 hours after the votes were tallied on Election Day. And after that meeting, the President-elect told all of you that it was his expectation that he would consult frequently with the President of the United States because he believed it would be helpful to him. And since that time, we've made clear that President Obama was not just a willing participant in those kinds of conversations but that he would welcome the opportunity to be as helpful as he possibly could to the incoming President.

And that's what he has tried to do. That's what we have tried to do as an administration in terms of ensuring a smooth and effective transition to the next administration. But for the content of the conversations that are occurring between the two men, that's not something that I'm going to speak about from here.

Q So there's no -- like you couldn't talk about maybe an overarching kind of guidance that he's trying to give him when it comes to the Cabinet?

MR. EARNEST: Look, I think the way that I would describe it is consultation, and the President is responsive to requests and phone calls from the President-elect. But beyond that, I just don't have any additional insight that I can share about the nature of the telephone conversations.

Q Going back to Aleppo, I just want to be clear. Does the administration have a position on what the rebels should do? Should they withdraw from Aleppo? I guess Syria and Russia have called for that, said they will not consider a ceasefire until the rebels leave Aleppo. Does the U.S. have a position on that?

MR. EARNEST: The U.S. position is that the United Nations is working tirelessly to try to broker the kind of ceasefire in Aleppo that would allow for the significant flow of badly needed humanitarian assistance. The opposition has agreed to the U.N. plan. And we believe that the Syrians should, too. We believe that the Russians should use their influence with the Assad regime to get them to agree to that plan.

But whether it's the U.N. plan or some other diplomatic negotiation that results in a reduction of violence and an increase in humanitarian assistance, that's what we're after. And the chief obstacle to that goal has been the depraved military tactics of the Assad regime and the complicity of the Russians and Iranians. And that's the position that we're trying to get them to change. And it's a position that, thus far, has resulted in widespread

bloodshed and a genuine human tragedy inside of Syria. And the longer that the Syrian government and the Russians and Iranians resist this potential solution, the more conflict and more violence and more bloodshed and more tragedy will occur.

Michelle.

Q Just to clear up some of these things that have been said on both sides of these phone calls between the President and President-elect -- does the President enjoy these phone calls?

MR. EARNEST: The President is pleased that he can play a role in ensuring a smooth and effective transition. And that's something that he has identified as a very high priority, particularly for his last several weeks in office here. So he's certainly pleased that he can offer advice and assistance that may be useful to the incoming administration.

Q And now that President-elect Trump has been pretty detailed in his description and he, just today, as Ayesha was saying, he said that he really does like -- that he loves getting his ideas. Can it at least be said -- does the President like Donald Trump? Does he like talking to him as a person?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, for the President's personal feelings you should just talk to the President about that. And it's important that -- we'll do another news conference here and maybe somebody will choose to ask. But I can't speak to their personal relationship.

What I can speak to is the President's ongoing commitment to coordinating effectively with the President-elect's team and the President-elect personally to ensure a smooth and effective transition. And that's included not just in the Oval Office meeting 36 hours after the votes were tallied, but it's also included additional telephone calls between the two men and a variety of meetings at a variety of levels at agencies all across the federal government to give the incoming administration the best opportunity to get off to a running start.

Q Since the last time we asked you about these phone calls -- and you mentioned that there had been a handful -- have there been any more between then and now?

MR. EARNEST: I don't remember exactly the last time that I was asked, so I can't confirm any additional calls at this point.

Q One thing you have spoken to a number of times both before and after the election are what you call the deep concerns that the President has going forward with this new administration. So is it safe to say that the President still has concerns about some of the picks that Trump has made?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have a -- we're not going to take a position on individual nominees that are put forward by the President-elect. I think what those deep concerns often referred to were some of the rhetoric and policy positions that were advocated by Mr. Trump when he was running for President. But elections have consequences. And while those concerns have not gone away, the election is over, and the institutional

responsibility of the President and everybody who works for him is to focus on putting our political differences and our political opinions aside and fulfilling the duties that the American people have entrusted us with, which is to serve the public and to give the choice of the American voters the opportunity to succeed in the years ahead.

Q So the numerous concerns that both the President and you listed haven't been assuaged at all by anything you've seen since the election?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, I think it's too early to judge. And people all across the country will have the opportunity to do exactly that. And, look, President-elect Trump ran for office advocating a much different approach to running the country than the one that President Obama has pursued over the last eight years. He said he wanted to do things differently and he found a variety of very colorful ways to make that quite clear to everybody who was walking into the voting booth. And the outcome of the election is such that Secretary Clinton got 2.5 million more votes, but President-elect Trump won the election. He won the Electoral College. He will be the next President of the United States. And the American people will have an opportunity to see whether or not the different kind of approach that he's advocating actually yields better results.

So we certainly want people to understand exactly what kind of progress this country was able to make under the leadership of President Obama, to persuade them of the wisdom of that approach so that they'll be able to evaluate it against the kind of changed approach that President-elect Trump is vowing to pursue.

Q Over the last couple of days we've heard some pretty heavy criticism of certain of Donald Trump's picks. And I know you don't want to get into individual assessments or anything, and I'm not asking for that. But when you talk about concerns that are still there, do those include the people that he's choosing to be around him?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't want to signal a position one way or the other on some of -- on any of the President-elect's personnel decisions. I think the obvious thing that I would be willing to say is that President-elect Trump is choosing people with different views and different styles than the kinds of people that President Obama chose.

And the American people were very well served by the service of people like Secretary Burwell, who has effectively implemented the Affordable Care Act; or Secretary McDonald, who has implemented a series of reforms and reduced the backlog at the VA, and expanded and improved the delivery of benefits being provided to our veterans; or there are people like Secretary Carter, who has undertaken significant efforts to strengthen our military and making sure that we're making smart planning decisions so that the future of the U.S. military is effectively adapted to the challenges that we may face moving forward.

So, look, I could cite examples all across the administration, not just at the Cabinet level, but also at the White House. The kinds of people that President-elect Trump has chosen appear to have, in many cases, different priorities, different styles and, in some cases,

starkly different bank accounts. (Laughter.) But the President-elect should benefit from the latitude -- significant latitude to choose his team.

Q -- a little contrast there?

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I think I am. (Laughter.) I do think that over -- look, at the end of eight years, we will have a variety of benchmarks and metrics to evaluate how the United States of America benefitted from the priorities, agenda, and leadership style of President Obama. And there will be a very clear opportunity for all of you, in particular, to evaluate whether or not the kinds of changes that President-elect Trump puts in place benefit the country. And that's an open question, but it's an experiment that the American people in all their wisdom have chosen to conduct.

Q Are you saying their bank account affects someone's capability?

MR. EARNEST: Not at all. I think it -- I don't think it would actually have much of an impact at all on anybody's ability to serve the country.

Q Why did you say it then?

MR. EARNEST: Mostly to be funny. (Laughter.) And it got a couple of chuckles.

Q Thanks for spelling that out. (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I guess that goes to that old adage, though, if you have to explain the joke, it wasn't that funny. (Laughter.) So maybe it wasn't.

Cheryl.

Q Okay, the CR.

MR. EARNEST: Yes.

Q Yes, it came out last night -- April 28th, a lot of riders, but a lot of funding. Will the President sign it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I can tell you that the President and his team were up late last night -- I don't know if the President was up late last night reviewing the bill, but the President's team, the experts at the OMB and other agencies that are trying to understand the consequences of some of the proposals that are included in the CR have been carefully analyzing that.

I'm not ready to render a judgment one way or the other on the proposal. But I can tell you that we continue to review the legislation and are looking at the finer points to make sure we understand exactly what impact the passage of the bill would have on funding the U.S. government.

Q Do you believe that we can avoid a government shutdown in two days? Is there enough time to pass this CR?



MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm certainly no expert on legislative procedure and as I've observed on many other occasions, even simple things have posed a significant challenge to this Republican-led Congress, so I'm not making any predictions. I certainly hope we'll be able to avoid a government shutdown. I can't envision a scenario in which the U.S. economy or the American people somehow benefit from a government shutdown. So hopefully that's something we'll be able to avoid.

What it will require is something that it's required the last couple of years, which is compromise. And that is another thing that Republicans in Congress have not demonstrated much of an ability to do. But it will be required in this instance. It's going to require bipartisan compromise for this bill to pass both houses of Congress and be signed into law by a Democratic President. The President is willing to compromise. He doesn't expect that every element of the CR should be something that he wholeheartedly supports. He recognizes that this will be a compromise. But we're taking a look at the bill to understand exactly what sort of compromise will be required, and we'll let you know as soon as we can about the final conclusion that's been reached.

Q Do you expect to have a judgment today on that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know how much progress they've been able to make on it today, but we'll keep you posted.

Ron.

Q Anything on the General Flynn-Ambassador Rice meeting?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have anything on that. I know that there have been some reports about Ambassador Rice meeting with the individual that the President-elect designated to succeed her in the fancy corner office in the West Wing.

What I can tell you is that, more generally, the National Security Council, under the leadership of Dr. Rice, has spent months preparing materials, assembling briefing books, compiling information to ensure a smooth and effective transition into the next administration. So I'm not in a position to confirm any individual meetings that have taken place, but I can tell you that there have been a variety of meetings that have already occurred that are focused on achieving that goal.

And when we're talking about the National Security Council, we're talking about the organization that is responsible for managing a range of very sensitive issues. So a lot of close coordination and consultation will be required to ensure a smooth handoff here. And we're certainly committed -- and I know that Dr. Rice is personally committed -- to ensuring that we're going to do everything that's required to make that happen.

Q The statement on Syria by the six nations, how was that initiated? Was that something that the President initiated? Or who? I'm not sure, you may have answered that. But I --

MR. EARNEST: Yes, I'm not aware that there was any individual presidential-level conversation about this. But obviously the President has had a number of conversations with some of the world leaders who signed on to this statement about the situation in Syria.

Q I ask because you've always emphasized how the President is trying to use every diplomatic means available to him to effect a more positive situation there. So this doesn't fall into that category?

MR. EARNEST: Well, no -- look, the President has worked assiduously to mobilize the international community to respond to the situation inside of Syria, and there were a number of conversations that President Obama has had with the leaders of these countries who signed on to the statement in a variety of settings. And this has been a long-running effort.

And, look, I think this is a good example of how U.S. leadership is important in the international community and is effective in advancing our interests. It doesn't benefit the United States of America for there to be continued chaos inside of Syria. And President Obama continues to rally the international community both through our counter-ISIL coalition, but also through diplomacy like this to try to find the kind of diplomatic solution that will bring an end to the violence inside of Syria that will expedite the provision of humanitarian assistance, but also make the world safer for the American people.

Q In an interview -- in a tease about an interview that the President did on CNN -- I believe it was about ISIS -- he said something to the effect that ISIS's ability to launch a major land offensive "was not on my radar." Have you heard that?

MR. EARNEST: I think this may be the CNN documentary that's running later today.

Q So the statement, again, ISIS's ability to launch a major land offensive was not on my radar -- does that suggest a huge failure on the part of the administration to see this threat coming?

MR. EARNEST: Maybe you're making a reference to an event that's not coming to mind here. What are you referring to here?

Q The President's statement in this interview where he said, ISIS's ability to launch a major land offensive was not on my radar.

MR. EARNEST: So you're talking about in Iraq in 2014?

Q Exactly.

MR. EARNEST: Okay. I thought this was a reference to the President's speech yesterday. But now I see what you're trying to talk about.

Look, I think this may be a situation where let's take a look at the President's -- the entire context of the President's remarks. I think we've talked a lot about how the Iraqi security forces did not perform at a level that we expected them to, even in the face of this threat from ISIL. And that's something that I know that I've talked about from here, and something the President has talked about before. But we'll take a closer look at the President's comments when they air in full tonight.

Q He seemed to suggest an intelligence failure -- or admit one -- on the part of the United States -- not necessarily a failure by the Iraqis, a failure on the American side to see this coming.

Lastly, what does the President think of Joe Biden in 2020?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't asked him about it. I think that as the Vice President was answering the question, I think that he -- well, I didn't talk to the Vice President about it either, so --

Q You couldn't think of anything funny to say? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: Well, not for the first time in my life and certainly not for the first time in the context of this job.

I'll let the Vice President's comment stand. And if he chooses to further clarify them, then he'll do that himself, or I'll have a conversation with him and see if I can bring some greater clarity.

Margaret, nice to see you.

Q Nice to see you. The President, yesterday in his remarks, talked about Guantanamo -- hundreds of millions' expense to keep 59 guys there, a blot on our national conscience. But he stopped short of saying that he's actually going to shut the place down before he leaves. Was this a final sort of coming to terms with the fact that the prison is going to stay open after he leaves office?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, we have been deeply dismayed at the obstacles that Congress has erected to prevent progress on this significant national security priority. Democratic and Republican national security experts strongly support the President's position that closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay would save taxpayer dollars and make the country safer. A variety of military leaders have reached that conclusion. Even President George W. Bush, who has different views on foreign policy than President Obama in most areas, but in this area, he agrees that the prison should be closed.

So there's strong bipartisan agreement among those who have dedicated their lives to protecting the country that the prison at Guantanamo Bay should be closed, and the American people would benefit from it.

But this is a political situation that members of Congress in both parties, to be fair, have allowed to persist that prevents this kind of common-sense policy from being implemented. That's been deeply disappointing to the President. And we're going to continue to do everything we can between now and the President's departure to reduce the prison population at Gitmo.

And there's a strategy that we have initiated that includes the individual review of these prisoners to determine the wisdom of transferring them overseas. And when this interagency panel determines that an individual, under the right restrictions, can be safely transferred to another country, we're doing the important diplomatic work of finding another country who will take them.

And since President Obama has been in office, there are about 175 Gitmo detainees that have been transferred under these conditions. And that's been good for the country. But Congress has repeatedly thrown up obstacles that prevent the successful closing of the prison.

Q That wasn't admitting defeat?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has been deeply disappointed by how Congress has refused to fulfill their basic responsibility to save taxpayer dollars, or at least spend their money judiciously, and enhance the national security of the United States. On both metrics, with regard to this policy, Congress has fallen down on the job. And that's been a source of significant frustration that we've expressed from time to time over the last eight years.

Q You talked about some of the national security officials who support closure. One of them who clearly did not is the man who looks to be the new Department of Homeland Security chief, General Kelly, who has argued that Guantanamo is not only operated well, but that it has a place in our national security framework, and prisoners should be there. So is the President disappointed to see that the President-elect is putting someone into this position who is on record saying no one is innocent at Gitmo and that it should stay open?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, I want to be real clear about our position about the need to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay should not be viewed by anybody as an attempt to impugn or criticize the service of our men and women in uniform who are operating that prison. That's difficult work. And so I don't want this policy position to be portrayed by somebody as a criticism of our men and women in uniform.

With respect to General Kelly's comments, I'm going to reserve comment on anybody that President-elect Trump has put forward for a senior Cabinet-level position. Obviously, as I alluded to earlier, many of them have positions that are different than positions that this administration has prioritized. And that's not particularly surprising given the outcome of the election. But I don't have a specific reaction to General Kelly's stated position on this issue.

Q A question on Syria, to come back to it?

MR. EARNEST: Sure.

Q In the language of the statement you released this morning, you seem to be suggesting something like sanctions. You said “restrictive measures on entities and individuals are being considered”. You've got sanctions on Russia, sanctions on Iran, sanctions on the Assad regime. These are all punitive. They are clearly not prohibitive. They've done absolutely nothing to stop the violence in Aleppo or in Syria. So is this kind of rhetoric the extent of the action the United States and the world powers are going to take right now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the extent of the action that we are taking is, first and foremost, military action against ISIL terrorists and other extremists inside of Syria that are trying to capitalize on the chaos to plot and execute attacks against the United States and the West. And so --

Q Well, the statement was about that 200,000 civilians and children are being denied medicine and food. That's what your statement was about.

MR. EARNEST: That was what the statement was about. But people should not be confused about the totality of U.S. action to protect the American people and advance our interests around the world, including in Syria. And our actions in Syria have taken ISIL leaders off the battlefield. They've taken other extremists off the battlefield, including extremists who are plotting and planning to carry out attacks against the United States and our allies in the West.

And so there is a lot of focus on the situation in Aleppo, and there should be. In fact, there probably should be more. But we should not allow the tragedy in Aleppo to obscure the important work that's being done by the United States military and our 67 coalition partners to take the fight to ISIL, to increase pressure on extremists, and to enhance the national security of the United States.

With regard to Aleppo, our efforts don't just include negotiations among Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and the U.K. They also include supporting a U.N.-led effort to try to facilitate a diplomatic agreement. And they also include extensive repeated discussions with the Russians to try to bring them to the negotiating table so that they use their influence with the Assad regime to get us closer to an agreement. But the Russians have been resistant to doing that. And that's what's allowed this tragedy to continue.

But ultimately, the United States is playing a leading role in the international community -- to organize the international community to apply pressure to Russia, Iran and Syria to bring them to the negotiating table. They're going to have to be a part of any negotiated solution. And that's what we're trying to bring about.

Q Respectfully, the international community efforts -- five or six U.N. resolutions have been killed so far, all the diplomatic talks have failed. So that's why the question --

MR. EARNEST: The reason why we're still working on it is because we haven't gotten the results we'd like to see yet.

Q But it's just rhetoric, it's just words at this point. And there's an immediate crisis. I mean, Kerry is talking to Lavrov today. He's going to Paris this weekend. But in the meantime, there are people very much in crisis, which is what your statement is about. So is the statement the extent of immediate action?

MR. EARNEST: No. There's a meeting with Russia that Secretary Kerry is planning later this week. There are continued efforts at the U.N. to apply diplomatic pressure to the situation. There are continued talks that are being led by the U.N. to try to facilitate a diplomatic agreement.

If there were an obvious or simple military solution, it's certainly possible that the United States and our allies, or at least our partners in the counter-ISIL coalition, would have considered it by now. But we have said from the beginning, from day one, that the ultimate solution here is a diplomatic one. And diplomacy is hard. And Russia, in particular, has been resistant to engaging constructively in pursuit of that negotiated solution.

And we've been profoundly disappointed by that, and lives have been lost as a result of that. There's no denying that. But it's certainly not for any sort of lack of effort or lack of action on the part of the United States. And we continue to mobilize and lead the international community both to look after the national security interests of the United States but also to try to bring this human tragedy to an end.

Q What are the restrictive measures that you're talking about in the statement?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are a variety of things that have been considered, including the kinds of financial penalties that the United States has been able to apply in coordination with our allies in a variety of situations. And I certainly wouldn't rule out something like that in the future, but I would also acknowledge that we haven't seen those sorts of sanctions bring about the entirety of the change in strategy that we'd like to see.

Kevin.

Q Thanks, Josh. Is the President aware of the declared mistrial in the case of the South Carolina officer that killed Walter Scott? What's his reaction to that?

MR. EARNEST: He is aware of that, Kevin, and the reason I can't offer you a reaction is that the police officer in question is facing civil rights charges that were brought by the Department of Justice. So there is an ongoing legal proceeding, and I wouldn't want to say something or comment on this situation in a way that could have an impact on that legal proceeding.

So the Department of Justice is going to continue to do their work, and that is work that they have done independent of any sort of direction or opinion that has been shared by the President of the United States.

Q Any idea if the President might accelerate the number of commutations between now and the end of his administration? The New York Times had a fairly interesting piece, in one part lauding him for doing something on criminal justice reform that he was not able to do broadly, and yet they also point out that there are thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of people that might be candidates for that sort of special consideration.

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, when the President was asked about this question back in August at the Pentagon, he made clear that there is a process that the Department of Justice is administering to consider individually the applications for clemency that have been submitted, and the President does not envision circumventing that process.

His expectation, and what we have tried to do particularly over the last year or 18 months, has been to turbocharge that process, to offer more resources to that process, so that it can function more efficiently, and to consider more applications. But I do not envision a scenario in which that process is somehow shortened or that we cut corners in that process so that more individuals can benefit from this clemency. The President believes that rigor being applied to that process benefits the American people and benefits those who are given this special opportunity for a second chance.

Q I know I've asked you previously about the President's comments about Pearl Harbor Day, and I know that there's something scheduled for later in the month. I'm just curious, how is he spending this particular Pearl Harbor Day? Is he reaching out to any veterans or doing anything in particular today?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware of any specific actions on the part of the President, but obviously he had an opportunity on Veterans Day, less than a month ago, to travel to Arlington National Cemetery to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns, and to restate once again the profound debt that we owe to military veterans of all generations, including the Greatest Generation. And this was a generation that was summoned to action based on the tragic attack perpetrated by the Japanese 75 years ago today. And I think all of us, including the President, have thoughts of deep gratitude for the sacrifice and service of the Greatest Generation of Americans.

And the President himself has talked quite a bit about his grandfather who served, I believe it was in the United States Army, in World War II in the European theater. And that's his own personal connection to that generation. And I think all of us, to one extent or another, even though many of them are no longer living, have our own connection to those who served and to those who fought and even those who died in ensuring that tyranny was defeated in World War II.

Q Last thing, I wanted to ask you about welfare reform. House Republicans are said to be considering laying the groundwork for a fresh effort to overhaul the food stamp program and coming up with different work and eligibility requirements. And I ask you that in part because I remember previously this month you talked about the steep decline in the rate of poverty growth in America. And so I'm wondering if the White House feels like now is a good time for a fresh look at SNAP.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I haven't seen the individual proposals that have been put forward by Republicans, so I don't know if I can comment on those specifically. But obviously, there was a government report earlier this year that indicated that poverty in 2015 fell faster in that year than in any year since the 1960s. I think it might be one indication that the anti-poverty economic strategy that President Obama has pursued worked pretty well.

And that is true when you consider how significantly poverty has been reduced over the last year. It's also true when you consider how significantly wages for working people have gone up -- the highest on record that same report showed. And wage growth was actually higher for lower- and middle-income families than it was for those at the top. So it's not just that we're reducing poverty; we're actually making some progress in reducing inequality as well.

I think it's a pretty good indication that the kind of strategy that we've implemented has worked. And if Republicans want to implement a new strategy, we'll see what impact it has. This sort of goes back to what I was saying to Michelle. If Republicans want to try a different approach, we'll have an opportunity to see if it works. We'll have an opportunity to see

-- if by making some of these changes Republicans can further reduce the poverty rate beyond the historic success that we've had in reducing the poverty rate, we'll have an opportunity to tell.

I'm skeptical that they'll succeed in doing that, but the American people have given them the opportunity to try.

Q By the measure of success you're saying that it's gone better under the President's program and the poverty rate is not rising at a faster rate -- certainly slower rate than it has in half a century. And I just wanted to throw a couple numbers at you. SNAP apparently serves about 44 million people at the cost of \$74 billion. Those are 2015 numbers, but that's up significantly since 2008. So I'm just curious if it's going better -- based on your own assessment -- is it now a good time to maybe take a fresh look at programs like these?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President actually in his -- back in January, the President delivered his State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress, and one area that he identified in that speech was an opportunity to work in bipartisan fashion with Democrats and Republicans on a proposal that Speaker Ryan himself had long advocated, and that was essentially the expansion of tax cuts for low-income workers that don't have kids.

Unfortunately, the Speaker of the House didn't take him up on that opportunity for cooperation. So I'm not suggesting that somehow there aren't further improvements that could be made. In fact, President Obama has offered his support for some of the ideas that Republicans have put forward to do that. I don't think that SNAP falls in that category, but I can't speak at length about the proposal just because I haven't seen it.



But there certainly are areas where President Obama would -- has already indicated his strong support for some of these proposals that he believes would have a beneficial impact on the economy and would further reduce inequality in this country.

April.

Q Josh, I want to ask a couple of questions. First -- and I want to go back to the Trump thing and the phone calls -- how many times has President Obama spoken by phone with President-elect Donald Trump?

MR. EARNEST: We played this game a couple times over the last couple of weeks --

Q It's not a game, I'm asking a real question, though.

MR. EARNEST: I didn't say it wasn't a real question. What I'm telling you is I'm not going to get into the details of reading out individual phone calls. So they've spoken several times since their face-to-face Oval Office meeting just after the election, but I don't have a specific number to give you.

Q Okay, well, it's more than twice. We know that. Maybe three or four now?

Q I think he said "a handful" last time.

MR. EARNEST: So I did say "a handful" last time. I'm saying "several" this time.

Q Two handfuls? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: I'm being intentionally ambiguous.

Q We know it's at least two times. Maybe three, four? (Laughter.)

MR. EARNEST: April, I would suggest that maybe we pursue a more fruitful line of questioning, respectfully.

Q Respectfully. All right, well, now, on Donald Trump and his comments this morning about how President Obama is a likable sort -- if, indeed, these two would have talked, do you believe -- earlier -- that some of this division, some of these, the thought process and some of the words may not have been used to cause the divide that continues right now in this nation? Do you believe if they had talked prior to the elections that we would not be seeing the efforts to come together because of the comments that were made?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, it's difficult to answer counterfactuals because nobody really knows. I think the one thing we do know is that Republicans laid out a very clear strategy on the day that President Obama was inaugurated the very first time, which is to block and obstruct every single thing that he tried to do and to, as much as they could, to try to delegitimize his presidency.

That was the strategy that was pursued by Republicans, and they did not succeed in limiting President Obama to one term. In fact, President Obama was not just elected once, but twice, with a strong majority of the American electorate. And that gave him a

mandate to go and pursue an agenda that has benefited the American people. And that's everything from strengthening our economy, preventing a second Great Depression, rescuing the American auto industry, to reforming our health care system in a way that ensures every American has access to quality, affordable health insurance and can't be discriminated against because they have a preexisting condition.

It also gave him a mandate to go and advance our interests around the world, to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon by working through diplomacy and not firing a single shot, but actually confronting what most people, including some of our closest allies, had identified as the greatest national security threat that the world was facing.

I could obviously go on at some length, and I'll stop. But the fact is President Obama has repeatedly sought to work with Republicans, but that ran counter to the political strategy that Republicans laid out to try to block him at every turn and to refuse to cooperate with him even on things they supported. And the country did not benefit from that. But this was a political strategy that has yielded some political benefits for Republicans. And a lot of that is what led to the election of Mr. Trump. But that will be something for historians and others to carefully consider.

What I think the President's hope is that what all of you consider as you report on the next administration is to evaluate what impact their changes are having, particularly when you consider the strong trajectory that the country currently enjoys.

Q On your thoughts about Rahm Emanuel in Trump Tower?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, there are a number of Democrats that have accepted an invitation from the President-elect to meet with him, and it certainly makes sense that the mayor of the third-largest city in the country might want to have a conversation with the President of the United States.

Q And lastly, going back to what Kevin said about -- more so about the area and what happened -- Charleston, North Charleston area. It was in the news last year. It caused a lot of change in the mind and in the heart and on so many levels -- President Obama, weeks after what happened to Walter Scott, President Obama was there. He preached a sermon for the nine that died in Mother Emanuel church. And now Dylann Roof is -- the jury has been seated in this trial. What does the President say, looking back a year to today, after what happened? And I understand that you can't say much on the issue that is going to the federal piece. But what does he say about the area and how it made a mark in this nation from that time to today?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, I can't talk about the individual cases for the reasons that you cited, but I think both of these cases, just gauging by the news media interest, have captured the attention of people all across the country. And I think all of this debate and examination can sometimes be painful, but ultimately that's the kind of examination and debate that will be required to move the country forward.

And the President gave a powerful speech -- a sermon at a memorial service in Charleston about 18 months ago, and that certainly captured the attention of the American people as well. And to the extent that the President was able to contribute to a healthy examination of some of these issues and a healthy debate and discussion and dialogue in this country, he's pleased with that.

One example, one manifestation of that is the way that a lot of people reconsidered their view of the confederate flag in light of these issues, in terms of what it symbolizes. That was a healthy thing for that country.

But this is going to be part of process. And there's not just going to be one event, or one landmark jury decision, or one heart-wrenching tragedy that's going to solve all these problems. This is going to be a process. And it's going to be a process that the President hopes the country can pursue together -- that the more that we can remember that the differences that unite are more powerful and more influential and more numerous than the things that divide us, that will certainly benefit us as we make our way down this path.

Q And the last question. You say it's going to be a process, and as we go through this transition, I'm thinking about that process that you said and what the President said in that sermon that he delivered for Reverend Pinckney. He talked about "amazing grace," and he kept talking about grace. Is it about grace, or is it more so about heart, or is it about legislation as we deal with the newness of life for the next couple of months?

MR. EARNEST: Listen, I think more grace in our public discourse in every area, not just when it comes to national politics, I think is something that the entire country and all of our citizens would benefit from.

Kenneth.

Q Thanks, Josh. Going back to Rahm Emanuel at Trump Tower today, we know that he urged the President-elect not to deport DREAMers -- of course, hundreds of young people -- or people who were brought here as children who were covered under the President's DACA program. Even in the past hour, there have been some Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill who said they were encouraged by the President-elect's remarks, and people -- I think he said that we have to look at this and take a look at something that will work and that the American people would be proud, according to his words. So is the White House -- this White House -- encouraged by those words as well?

MR. EARNEST: Well, listen, the President has been crystal-clear, both in words and in deeds, about his view that young people who are American in every way but their papers shouldn't be deported, shouldn't be ripped away from family members, when the truth is that they came to the United States through no fault of their own.

A policy of deporting them would be inconsistent with our values and one that would be a setback for the country, particularly when you consider the remarkable contribution that many of those young people have already made to our country, whether it's by starting a business, or signing up to serve in our military, or otherwise living as upstanding members of communities all across the country.

So I can't speak to what policy the next administration intends to pursue. I think the perspective and values that I've just given voice to are the kinds of values that enjoy strong bipartisan support not just in Washington and not just in Congress but all across the country. And hopefully Democrats and Republicans will be able to find a way to deal with this situation in a way that's consistent with our values, in a way that's consistent with our laws. And if they do, the country stands to benefit not just from a national security perspective, not just from a quality of life perspective, but also from an economic perspective as well.

Q I'm sure you would agree, there are a number of people -- undocumented immigrants and people who are covered under the President's executive actions who want to know what is this White House doing? You say you don't know what the next one is going to do, but we want to know what is this White House doing to have an impact and maybe even change some minds or policies from the incoming President?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the thing that we certainly have done is we have taken quite seriously the transition process to ensure that the incoming administration understands

MR. EARNEST: Well, the thing that we certainly have done is we have taken quite seriously the transition process to ensure that the incoming administration understands what policies we've pursued and why we've pursued them, and what impact it has had across the country. But ultimately, the next President will take office on January 20th. And his policies that will be implemented.

Q Finally, can you confirm a report that the First Lady held a good-bye party for White House staff and brought everyone to tears at a local pizza restaurant? I know there's a lot of good-byes happening over the next few weeks, or 44 days left. Can you confirm that? And were staff -- were they moved to tears? Were you one of them?

MR. EARNEST: I was on the President's trip to Florida yesterday, so I did not participate in an event like that. But let me see if I can get you some more information about it, okay?

Toluse.

Q Thank you, Josh. Is it still the position of this administration that Assad must go? I know the President said that a few years ago. But does that stand?

MR. EARNEST: That continues to be the policy of the administration. And again, it's not just because he stands in the way of a solution -- a diplomatic solution, although he does. And it's not just that we are so offended morally by his willingness to use the military might of his country against innocent civilians. There's also a practical consideration, which is that he has waged war on a substantial number of citizens in his country; his country has been torn apart; he has made it clear that he is unable to lead that country. And in order for us to find the kind of political solution that will bring that violence and chaos to an end, he can't continue to serve as President of that country. And that's been our policy for years. And it continues to be our policy today.

Q In the statement today, the five or six countries said that there must not be impunity for those responsible. Is that statement specific to Assad? And do you believe that he should face war crime challenges for what he's done?

MR. EARNEST: That statement is an indication that there must be accountability, particularly with regard to the kinds of depraved tactics that have been used by the regime against innocent civilians. Accountability in these situations is necessary and consistent with our values as a country.

Q Let me ask you about the Cabinet that's being formed -- not specifically about specific picks, but the fact that there seem to be a large number of generals who have been chosen or who are being interviewed -- the Department of Defense, NSA, now the Department of Homeland Security, and potentially the State Department. Does the White House have any thoughts about the fact that Donald Trump seems to be potentially choosing a Cabinet that's very heavy on retired military?

MR. EARNEST: No, just because I don't want to be in a position of criticizing or being -- even appearing to criticize decisions being made by the President-elect.

What I'll say is that the President spoke as recently as yesterday about the values and leadership qualities that are exhibited by the men and women of the United States military. And many of the people that President-elect Trump has put forward are people that have served this country in the military with distinction. And that is -- even where political differences exist, that service and that commitment to sacrificing for the country are worthy of respect. The President certainly has exhibited that respect. I certainly tried to exhibit that respect.

But ultimately, what qualifications and criteria the President-elect wants to use in choosing his Cabinet is something that I'll let him decide.

Q Secretary Hillary Clinton is going to be on Capitol Hill for the unveiling of Harry Reid's portrait tomorrow. Is there any chance that President Obama will meet her, speak to her tomorrow?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not aware that they'll meet, but we'll keep you posted. I don't think I can commit at this point to announcing that meeting if it does occur. But let me see if I can get you guidance.

Q Thanks, Josh.

MR. EARNEST: John.

Q Thanks a lot, Josh. Since the presidential election four weeks ago, the President has nominated numerous individuals to government boards such as the Surface Transportation Board, Legal Services Corporation, the Kennedy Center Board. Is it the President's expectation that the lame duck Senate will take up these nomination up or down?

MR. EARNEST: Well, John, I actually don't know to what extent the individuals that you have named actually require Senate confirmation. But we can certainly have somebody take a look at that for you.

Q Is there an agreement with the Senate Majority Leader that the lame duck Senate will take up various nominations that require Senate confirmation?

MR. EARNEST: I don't know what sort of agreements, if any, have been reached with Senate Republicans.

JC.

Q We had discussed the benefits of, in a sense, living above the store for the President, the immediacy to a crisis situation where he can meet in the Situation Room with his Joint Chiefs, his security team, members of Congress, et cetera. And the fact that Donald Trump has been choosing to stay -- at least for now -- at Trump Tower, and possibly maybe the first bi-city President, so to speak -- what in a sense -- now that we have a price tag, it's literally costing the American taxpayer and the New York City taxpayer in excess of \$3 million a day to keep Mr. Trump safe in the tower. Do you have any additional thoughts about that? I know you made a comment about wherever the President goes, his security team is close by.

MR. EARNEST: That's right. Look, over the years I have been in a variety of situations, in a variety of settings where I have fielded questions about criticism from Republicans with regard to the President's travel, and I'm not going to give into the temptation to do the same thing to the President-elect.

Mark Knoller, you had your hand up earlier. I'll give you the last one if you still have a question.

Q You bet I do.

MR. EARNEST: Okay.

Q I wanted to ask you to clarify your answer earlier about the waiver for the Defense Secretary. Were you saying the President would not sign a waiver if it reached his desk, that he'd prefer it happen during the new administration?

MR. EARNEST: No, I think what I'm saying is the short answer to your question is, no, I was not signaling an unwillingness on the part of the President to sign a bill containing such a waiver. I think the observation that I was making is that it seems odd that congressional Republicans would be choosing to sneak a provision in a budget bill to expedite the confirmation of somebody who is a decorated Marine Corps officer, somebody who has served Presidents in both parties, somebody who Democrats and Republicans have spoken warmly of. So I can't really explain it.

I'm not indicating that the administration will refuse to cooperate with them. In fact, the principle that I was giving voice to earlier was the idea that Presidents should be given some latitude to choose the people that they want to have on their team. The President was not extended that courtesy consistently by Republicans in the Senate, but it's a principle that the President believes in not just since he's coming in the door, but on his way out the door. And it's one that we'll -- that he believes in.

So, hopefully -- did that clarify --

Q You're saying a standalone bill on the waiver is the way to go?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess I find it strange that Republicans in Congress seem to be taking an unconventional step to avoid the straightforward consideration of this waiver purely on its merits and on the merits of General Mattis's service to the country. So I think it's a question that I'm raising that I think is worth asking. But it's one that only congressional Republicans can answer.

Q And I wanted to ask about what the President said yesterday, that it was the last time he was going to hear "Hail to the Chief" on the road. What does that tell us about travel between now and January 20th?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think it's an indication that the President's travel between now and January 20th is likely to be limited, at least with respect to official events. The President does still intend to travel to Hawaii to spend time with his family there over the holidays.

All right? Thanks, everybody. We'll see you tomorrow.

END

1:37 P.M. EST