

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 2/21/2013

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: In the chart behind me you can find in a link from the blog post that we just put up on whitehouse.gov and that I tweeted, written by Communications Director Jen Palmieri. That blog post is a refresher about the President's plan to eliminate the sequester and reduce our deficit beyond even the deficit reduction called for by the sequester.

To those of you who have covered this it will be familiar, because that plan has been on the table and an offer for quite some time. And we know and you know that leaders in Congress are aware of this because they were on the receiving end of the offer and that offer remains on the table.

If you note, in this particular chart, a couple of interesting facts. The first is that from 2009, when the deficit was the largest as a result of the Great Recession, we have seen a decrease in the size of the deficit that represents the largest reduction since the end of World War II. What you see beyond that in the projections, which are administration calculations based on the CBO baseline, is what would happen to the deficit as a share of GDP if the President's plan -- the offer to Speaker Boehner -- were implemented.

And as you can see, we would be, beginning in 2015, we would reduce further -- in 2013, 2014, and beginning in 2015, through the decade, we would see the deficit as a share of GDP coming in under 3 percent, which is a sort of magic number for economists in terms of stabilization of our debt-to-GDP ratio, which is very important -- deficit-to-GDP ratio.

So I encourage you, for those of who need a refresher, to take a look at the documents online -- at the charts as well as Jen's blog post. That's point number one.

Point number two, many of you have asked -- because I know you're intensely interested in process -- when the President is going to or has most recently spoken to Republican leaders on the Hill. I can tell you that he placed calls earlier today to Senator McConnell

and Speaker Boehner; had good conversations. But I have no further readout of those calls for you.

Number three, the President, as I think you know by now, will be visiting Newport News, Virginia next week to highlight the fact that there will be real-world impacts to the implementation of the sequester if that takes place, if Republicans choose to allow that to happen. There will be jobs on the line if the sequester takes place. And the President will, as he continues to do, call on Republicans in Congress to agree to avoid the sequester because it's a wholly unnecessary self-inflicted wound on the economy if it were to take place.

And with that, I go to the Associated Press.

Q Jay, the Chamber and the AFL-CIO have announced an agreement today on immigration. Can you talk about how important that development is in the process, and whether the White House agrees with the principles that they have on the worker visa program?

MR. CARNEY: Sure. This is yet another sign of progress, of bipartisanship, and we are encouraged by it. At the same time, the agreement you refer to is an agreement on principles, and we remain focused on encouraging the Senate to develop a comprehensive bill.

We are very focused on, as we've made clear in recent days, the bipartisan effort underway in the Senate. We think, and the President thinks, that represents a real, good chance at achieving something that has been a goal of Republicans and Democrats, as well as Americans across the country and businesses across the country for quite some time. And we hope that process continues. We urge the Senate to continue the good work they've done so far, the Group of Eight and their progress, and this is certainly part of that.

Q They also talked about the need for a new federal bureau to report to the public on the work in different industries around the country. Do you think that that's something that would be useful?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have a response to some of the details of this agreement on principles. I can tell you we think it represents a continuation of the progress we've seen, but we're focused on the bill that the Senate hopefully will produce relatively soon as part of this bipartisan effort.

Q I want to ask about gasoline prices and, as you likely know, they skyrocketed over the past month or so. And I'm wondering what concerns the White House has about the impact of the rise in gasoline prices on the economy, and whether there is any consideration being given to using the SPR to take the edge off speculation in the market.

MR. CARNEY: The President understands the impact of high gas prices on families, which is why he continues to implement and pursue an all-of-the-above approach. And that all-of-the-above approach includes, as you know, increasing domestic production of

oil and gas, increasing the efficiencies of the vehicles that we drive, investing in alternative energy and advanced technologies with an ultimate goal of reducing our reliance on foreign oil and protecting consumers at the pump.

We'll continue to do everything we can to ensure that consumers are protected and that we are less vulnerable to the ups and downs of the global oil market. As you know, and we try to remind you, in the last year since the President has taken office we've seen dramatic increases in domestic energy production, oil and gas production -- record levels of natural gas. And we have seen significant reduction in our dependence in our imports on foreign energy, foreign oil. We need to take steps so that that progress continues.

Last week, the U.S. Energy Information Administration announced that "crude oil production increased by 790,000 barrels per day between 2011 and 2012, the largest increase in annual output since the beginning of U.S. commercial crude oil production since" -- way before any of us were born -- "1859. The U.S. Energy Information expects crude oil production to continue rising over the next two years, represented in the short-term energy outlook."

On your last question, I have no announcements or comment on the SPR. As you know, we keep all options on the table.

Q How concerned is the White House about the impact of speculation in the market at this time?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would just say that we do all we can to ensure that consumers are protected. That has been the case all along in this process where we've seen periodically elevated price in oil and gas markets. Our overall focus has to be, however, on the need to insulate ourselves from these spikes in market prices by pursuing an all-of-the-above energy policy -- one that increases domestic production, increases the production of alternative energy sources so that we are not subject to the ups and downs of the global markets.

Q And is the White House talking to refineries at all about things that they could do logistically to make a difference?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any conversations like that to read out to you.

Q You said that the President is looking for bipartisan agreement from the Senate on immigration reform. But the White House -- the President has laid out his own principles on immigration reform, and it doesn't even include mention of a program for guest workers, low-skilled workers to come to the U.S., while you've let the Chamber -- the White House has allowed the Chamber to negotiate with AFL-CIO on what they would like in a deal. I can't remember the last time outside groups have negotiated policy for the White House. Why isn't a guest worker program part of your --

MR. CARNEY: You didn't cover the last administration?

Q Well, okay, so you're comparing yourselves to the Bush administration now, willingly?

MR. CARNEY: My point is that when you see the Chamber --

Q And why isn't it included? And isn't that politics?

MR. CARNEY: When you see the Chamber of Commerce coming together with the AFL-CIO and reaching an agreement on principles on this difficult issue, that represents significant progress. And our interest, as you have seen repeatedly, is not to dictate here, but to see the bipartisan effort in the Senate move forward. And we view this as more indication of that progress, and we will keep our eye on the ball here, which is the work that's being done in the Senate.

Q Does the President endorse a program for low-skilled workers as part of an immigration reform plan?

MR. CARNEY: We will see what the Senate produces. And we see this agreement on principles as a positive development, a sign of progress. But I'm not going to prejudge a bill that has not been written.

Q And what's the White House's response to a letter from 15 Republican senators calling for the President to withdraw the nomination of Chuck Hagel to be his Defense Secretary?

MR. CARNEY: There is so much I have to say about that. First, I would point you to Senator Shelby's comments this morning that he will support Senator Hagel's confirmation. He joins other Republicans, like Senator Johanns and Cochran. And I would also point you to Republican senators from the weekend shows who said they will support an up or down vote next week when the Senate returns, on Senator Hagel. Even Senator Hatch said this morning, "I don't think we should filibuster Cabinet appointments." And we certainly agree with that sentiment. It's been expressed by many others.

It is unfortunate, however, that some Senate Republicans put political posturing ahead of our nation's security. For the first time in American history, Senate Republicans filibustered a nominee for Secretary of Defense -- a member of their own party, a decorated combat veteran, and the right leader for our troops. A clear majority in the U.S. Senate supports Senator Hagel's confirmation. So today's actions that you refer to run against both the majority will of the Senate and against our national interest.

And this waste of time is not just meaningless political posturing, because we firmly believe that Senator Hagel will be confirmed. But the waste of time is of consequence. There are 66,000 men and women in uniform in Afghanistan, and we need our new Secretary of Defense on the job to be part of the significant decisions that have to be made as we bring that war to a responsible end.

This week in Brussels, the United States will meet with our allies to talk about the transition in Afghanistan at the NATO defense ministerial, and our next Secretary of Defense should be there. He is not because of this political gamesmanship that we've seen.

So for the sake of national security, we urge the Senate to confirm Senator Hagel. We urge the Senate to confirm John Brennan, and to get them to work because the nation needs them to be at work.

Q And just to be clear, he won't be withdrawn?

MR. CARNEY: Absolutely not. Any suggestion to the otherwise -- to the contrary might have been found in the minutes of the meetings of the Friends of Hamas. (Laughter.)

Yes.

Q Jay, the current Secretary of Defense said that if the sequester cuts go into effect we would turn into a second-rate power. Does the President agree that if these cuts go into effect America will become a second-rate power?

MR. CARNEY: The President agrees with his Secretary of Defense -- his current as well as his future. He agrees with the Speaker of the House. He agrees with the numerous Republicans who have said on the record that the onerous cuts in the sequester to defense -- the across-the-board, indiscriminate cuts to defense will harm our national security interests; will reduce our readiness; will result in a reduction in flight hours; will result -- have resulted already in changes in our rotation for aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf. These are real-world consequences.

This also will result, as we learned yesterday, in hundreds of thousands of furlough notices to men and women who are part of the national security team who work every day to protect the United States and our citizens.

So the consequences here are real. What we, unfortunately, see these days, including in an article in The New York Times today, is an indication from Republicans that they don't really care; that they're anticipating the sequester will go into effect, and they're not willing to do what the American public, as we've seen in poll after poll, overwhelmingly supports, which is to adopt the President's position of eliminating the sequester through a balanced deficit reduction plan.

They're not willing to protect the jobs of what the CBO predicts could be up to 750,000 Americans by asking oil and gas companies to forego their taxpayer subsidies, or corporate jet owners to give up their special tax break. They're not willing to do that. And this is very disappointing.

Q But, Jay, on the military spending, specifically, even if the cuts go into effect, the U.S. will spend more than China, Russia, all of Europe combined -- far more. If we're a second-rate power, who's the first-rate power?

MR. CARNEY: I don't think the issue here is the language you use to describe it, because every characterization you make of it, if you're being honest about it, is negative. The impact will be negative. It will harm our national security. And that is a problem.

Moreover, it will harm tens of thousands of children who would be thrown off of Head Start. It will harm children who depend on mental health services; seniors who depend on services. It will harm first responders across the country who will get furlough notices or layoff notices, teachers and the like.

The consequences of this are real. This is not just -- there seems to be a willingness, unfortunately, among Republicans on the Hill to reject the opinions of the vast majority of the American people; reject, obviously, the reasoned and moderate propositions put forward by, and proposals put forward by the President, and to adopt this approach that says, again, we would rather protect these special interest tax breaks than take action -- very simple action -- to keep those Americans in their jobs.

Q But put aside Republicans for a while. What do you say to Americans who, through this recession they've had to go through, they've had to make adjustments in their own family budgets, and to think that cutting 3 percent of an overall budget, 10 percent of a specific part of the budget, that the only way to do that is to do these draconian cuts that will jeopardize national security -- will mean forest fires won't be able to be put out; will mean prosecutors will have to let crooks go. I mean, what do you say to Americans --

MR. CARNEY: That's the facts, Jon. And what we would say is the sequester --

Q You can't run a government on \$3.7 trillion?

MR. CARNEY: The sequester, as everyone recognized at the time, was specifically designed to be so loathsome that Congress would actually be compelled to compromise. That was the idea. And compromising, coming up with the \$1.2 trillion in deficit reduction, in a way that protected our national security and protected our vital interests like the children on Head Start or the seniors who rely on services, teachers and first responders. The whole point was for it to be this bad so that Congress would never go along with it.

Unfortunately, there has been a change of heart in Congress, apparently, on the Republican side, especially in the House, and an embrace of an approach that has real-world consequences for real people who are sitting at home, or will be tonight, after work, wondering if they're going to have a job in a month or two months.

Bill.

Q So now that you've tantalized us with the fact the President called the Republican leaders, can't you at least suggest that he made an offer or threw down a gauntlet, or something?

MR. CARNEY: I think we all know what's on the table, what has been on the table from the President. We all know that the President supports the efforts of Senate and House Democrats to pass legislation that would postpone the sequester -- again, a manufactured crisis that's unnecessary -- and by postponing it, allow the Congress to take action on further and broader deficit reduction in a balanced way.

Q Was he reaching out to them simply to restate his position, or to reach out to them in the interest of compromise?

MR. CARNEY: The President spoke with Senator McConnell and the Speaker. I have no content to read out to you of those conversations. The President speaks with leaders and other members of the Senate and the House, and sometimes we don't read out the content.

Q Yes, but this was more than, "hey, how are you doing?" -- right?

MR. CARNEY: Again, there are a number of issues that need to be discussed. Certainly the sequester is one of them. But I don't have any characterization of those phone calls.

And to your question about compromise, I will simply remind you that if we take as a fact or as an assumption the notion that Democrats would prefer to deal with our deficit by raising revenues and Republicans would prefer to deal with our deficit by cutting spending, including cutting entitlement reforms, and that the tough choices for Democrats is to go along with spending cuts and go along with entitlement reforms, and the tough choices for Republicans is to go along with revenue increases, I encourage you to look at who has compromised -- who has put forward plans that represent tough choices for his party; who has led Democrats to go along with middle-of-the-road, common-sense plans that include spending cuts, that include entitlement reforms as well as revenues -- and that's the President.

What we have not yet seen -- and this is the false-equivalence problem that we have in some of the -- the way this is viewed -- we have not yet seen a single proposal by the Republicans to deal with the sequester or to deal with our overall deficit challenge that represents the kind of balance that the American people want in a deficit reduction plan and want their leaders in Washington to embrace. That's just a fact.

And this President has demonstrated again and again -- in his submission to the super committee, in his budget, in his proposals to Speaker Boehner -- a willingness to compromise, a willingness to meet Republicans halfway. But you come halfway and you're negotiating partner stays where he or she is, that makes it very difficult to reach a compromise. You need compromise from the other side.

Q So what was he trying to do when he called?

MR. CARNEY: There are a lot of issues that are at stake here, there are a lot of topics to discuss. But I don't have a read out of the call.

Q And one other thing. We understand the administration is weighing whether to intervene at all in the Prop 8 case before the Supreme Court. Can you tell us any more about that?

MR. CARNEY: I can tell you that decisions about whether to -- decisions about Supreme Court cases are made over at the Department of Justice and I would refer you there. And I have no comment on that case to which the United States is not a party at this time.

Q Yes, but we understand that the President was thinking of weighing in.

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think you have seen no expression from the President on the constitutional or legal aspects of this. He has an opinion, obviously, about Proposition 8 as policy, but we have no comment and nothing to say at this point about an issue that is properly looked at as a legal and constitutional matter over at the Department of Justice.

Q But they're thinking about filing an amicus brief, right?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I just don't -- I don't have a hint for you either way. That's something -- a question that I would take to Justice.

Kristen.

Q Jay, thanks. Does the President think that ultimately he is responsible if the sequester kicks in, given that he's Commander-in-Chief? I mean, does the buck stop with him, in other words?

MR. CARNEY: The President is Commander-in-Chief and he is very concerned, and that is why he has put forward compromise proposals again and again to the Republicans in the hopes that we can achieve something here in terms of deficit reduction that hits the mark of \$4 trillion -- in fact, exceeds -- with his plan and proposal -- exceeds the \$4-trillion mark, not insignificantly, because that would be the right thing for our economy.

And we can do it in a way -- if we follow this blueprint, this balanced blueprint that his plan represents and that is reflected in all of the bipartisan proposals that we've seen out there from commissions and the like, because it's the right thing for our economy and we can do it in a way that helps the economy grow, that prevents the kind of hit to our economic growth and job creation that implementation of the sequester would bring about according to outside economic analysts as well as the CBO.

So his feeling of responsibility is represented in the fact that he continues to offer solutions, rather than attempting to engage in word games about whose idea the sequester was, for example. I mean, imagine if Republicans put half the amount of effort into finding a solution to this problem as they have into coming up with hashtags -- and hashtags that are at total odds with the facts, which is that Speaker Boehner, Chairman Ryan, Eric Cantor, Kevin McCarthy all voted for the sequester. They all encouraged their membership to vote for the sequester. And they did such a good job that they got an overwhelming majority of their membership to vote for the sequester -- far more as a percentage than Democrats voted for it. And the Speaker said he was so pleased he got 98 percent of what he wanted out of that deal.

So there is some responsibility here on the Republican side to do what the President has done, which is to hear what the American people are saying -- which is, please compromise, please be reasonable, please do not adopt positions that represent a "my way or the highway" approach.

Q But at this point there doesn't seem to be any progress. So what's his strategy to get everyone to sit down and figure this out?

MR. CARNEY: Again, the President has put forward -- Kristen, the President has put forward and continues to support efforts to avert this unnecessary manufactured crisis to ensure that Congress doesn't foolishly allow the sequester to take effect and cause Americans across the country to receive furlough notices and layoff notices, and for children and seniors and other vulnerable communities to have their services cut or reduced.

And he will continue to implore Republicans to reconsider their position -- a position that, unfortunately, they're very publicly taking now, which is that they don't care enough about implementation of the sequester to ask corporate jet owners to give up a tax break.

Q I want to ask you one on Iran. According to a U.N. nuclear reporter, Iran has been installing advanced centrifuges at its main uranium plant. Chris Van Hollen just said that these talks that are coming up next week are the last best chance to resolve this issue in a peaceful manner. Does the President, does the administration share that view? And are these talks the last best chance --

MR. CARNEY: Well, we have been clear that the United States is determined to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. And we have also been clear that we believe there is still time to resolve this issue diplomatically.

We hope that the Iranian regime will make the strategic decision to come to the February 26th talks that you refer to, with the P5-plus-one in Kazakhstan, prepared to discuss substance so there can be progress in addressing the international community's concerns about the nature of the Iranian nuclear program. We certainly remain ready to do so.

Iran has a choice. If it fails to address the concerns of the international community, it will face more pressure and become increasingly isolated. The burden of sanctions could be eased, but the onus is on Iran to turn its stated readiness to negotiate into tangible action.

What we have said and remains true today is that the window remains open for this to be resolved diplomatically, but that window will not remain open indefinitely. And we have been very clear with the Iranians about that, and we encourage them to come to these talks ready to speak seriously about abiding by their international obligations.

Ed.

Q Thanks, Jay. A couple on the sequester. On Jon's question about Secretary Panetta obviously saying the defense cuts would be serious, there are other Democrats like Howard Dean who are saying they should let the sequester happen, because he says he fears some of the domestic cuts, as do you, but he thinks this is a sort of a once-in-a-lifetime chance to have real cuts at the Pentagon.

MR. CARNEY: Who is this? I'm sorry.

Q Howard Dean, former Democratic Party Chair.

MR. CARNEY: I'm sorry, I didn't hear who you had said. We disagree.

Q So what do you say to fellow Democrats who say this is a good chance to cut the Pentagon?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I haven't heard many say that. And we disagree with that proposition.

Q Okay. Yesterday, I asked you about the WARN Act and the notices on furloughs, and you said the reason why you didn't put those out before the election was that that was not 10 days before implementation. Now, eight days, obviously --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think I said something like that. The point is we are now very close to implementation. But I would refer you to OMB and others about how that process works.

Q But the WARN Act, those are something like 60-day notices, right? So if we're under 10 days now, my question is, the Pentagon did a briefing yesterday saying that the furloughs among defense civilian employees wouldn't really take place until late April. Is the fact that you're putting out --

MR. CARNEY: I think the process begins -- and there's a process at work here that is administrative that -- well, you announced something that's going to begin, and notices begin to go out, and there are notices of furloughs that didn't take place in the future. But I would refer you to the Pentagon for details.

Q But do they kick the can down the road in terms of cuts so that you have to cut into other things in March?

MR. CARNEY: Each agency is having to deal with the pretty serious implications of the sequester -- the dramatic, across-the-board indiscriminate cuts to their budgets that the sequester represents. And the Defense Department is clearly one of those agencies that will be hit very hard. But I would refer you to the agencies themselves about how they are managing that process. It's a complicated process.

Q Last thing, on Medicaid. The President got good news last night from Florida because you have a Republican governor, Rick Scott, who is saying that he now wants to expand Medicaid. He's one of several Republican governors who have sort of flip-flopped on that. How is the White House viewing the fact that there are these Republicans all of a sudden saying, well, maybe that's a good idea, we're going to implement it? Is this going to help implement his law?

MR. CARNEY: We're focused on implementation of the Affordable Care Act, and we think the decisions made by governors across the country to move forward with implementation recognize that the benefits here for providing affordable health care to the citizens of their state are very worthwhile.

And we will continue to work with governors in states across the country to bring about the implementation of the Affordable Care Act because of all the benefits that derive from implementation and the savings that derive from it. So we're just going about the business of implementing this very important piece of legislation.

Roger.

Q Thank you. Back to Iran for a moment. Western diplomats are saying that the P5-plus-1 are prepared to offer what they say are significant new offers. Can you shed any light on that?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to get into details of what the P5-plus-1 will present in Kazakhstan other than to say that the group is united in its approach and is ready to have a serious and substantive discussion. Let's allow the negotiators to do their work. We simply call on the Iranians to arrive at those talks with the intention of having them be substantive and focused on the issues that are of concern here to the international community.

Q We had reports today that Iran rolled out some new atomic technology today.

MR. CARNEY: I think Kristen asked about that.

Q That doesn't seem to bode well.

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, the actions taken by Iran that represent a continuation of their refusal to abide by their international obligations are hardly a surprise. They are why Iran is suffering under a sanctions regime that is more strict and more universally applied than any in history, and a regime that's having a real impact -- a negative impact on the Iranian economy and on its political structure.

There is a way for Iran to avoid these sanctions and further sanctions, and that is to abide by -- through the P5-plus-1 process -- to come to an agreement whereby they will abide by their international obligations. And that is the purpose of the talks, and we hope that those talks will be substantive and serious.

Chris.

Q Jay, the President's former ambassador to China and former presidential candidate, Jon Huntsman, has come out for same-sex marriage in an article in the American Conservative. Any reaction to that?

MR. CARNEY: I didn't know about that. I think that what we have seen, and the President has spoken about this, is an evolution, if you will, of views across the country about this issue, about extending rights to LGBT Americans. And the President feels very strongly about that, as you know. So while this is not news I was aware of, it's certainly in concert with the President's views.

April.

Q Jay, I want to go back to issues of sequestration. You have said if sequestration were to happen, it would erode the progress made to keep the country out of recession. Well, Congressional Black Caucus head, Marcia Fudge, says, if that 750,000 number is correct and those jobs would be lost, it would definitely put America back in recession. That's a large number. What do you say about that, about recession, versus the erosion of the process?

MR. CARNEY: Well, it's hard to predict, and there are technical ways to define recession. What we know, looking at the CBO's analysis and analysis by Moody's and Macroeconomic Advisers is that the impact of implementation of the sequester on GDP would be something on the order of -.5 or -.6 percent of GDP. And that is a significant hit.

We're not ready to predict what that means technically in terms of recession. What we do know is that it would do harm to our recovery and it would certainly, through the losses of jobs that would come about from implementation of the sequester, as well as the reduced job creation brought about by the slower growth, it would have an extremely harmful impact on jobs in this country.

So we agree with the concern expressed, and that's why the President continues to put forward and support proposals that represent the balanced approach that we need to take to eliminate the sequester and to reduce our deficit in a way that allows our economy to grow, allows it to expand, and make more secure the middle class.

Q Let me ask you this last question. Do you think it's a far reach for your fellow Democrat to say that it's recession, that it would go back into recession?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think that's something I leave to the economists to project and then to analyze if and when something like that were to happen. What we know with unfortunate certainty is that the impact of sequester would be negative on the economy.

Q Jay, the Boston Globe had a story today that the State Department is considering taking -- reviewing whether or not Cuba should be on the terror list. What's the White House's discussions on that?

MR. CARNEY: We have no changes in our approach or policy to Cuba to announce or under consideration that I'm aware of.

Q Are you saying, then, that there's not consideration of --

MR. CARNEY: Again, not that I'm aware of.

Q -- of taking Cuba off of the terrorism list?

MR. CARNEY: That's right. I'm not aware of any.

Q Has the White House or NSC?

MR. CARNEY: Correct.

Q Okay. And have you had any conversations with Senator Leahy, who's been down in Cuba, and his delegation had met with the detained American, Alan Gross?

MR. CARNEY: I don't know that -- I certainly haven't and I don't know if anybody in the administration has. The President, as you know, has followed Mr. Gross's case with concern and urges his release. The Cuban government should release Alan Gross and return him to his family where he belongs.

Mr. Gross is in his fourth year of unjustified imprisonment in Cuba. He was arrested on December 3, 2009, and later given a 15-year prison sentence by Cuban authorities for simply facilitating communications between Cuba's Jewish community and the rest of the world.

Mr. Gross is a 63-year-old husband, father, and dedicated professional with a long history of providing assistance and support to underserved communities in more than 50 countries. Again, we call on the Cuban government to release Mr. Gross.

Q On the sequester.

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Connie.

Q With all the President's powers, isn't there anything he can do by executive order at this point to stop sequester?

MR. CARNEY: It would certainly be a welcomed development if the President were able to legislate. Unfortunately -- at least in this case -- unfortunately, that is not a power that the President has, and it is up to Congress to act.

Congress chose to write the sequester into law with overwhelming support from Republicans because it felt that the sequester would be so onerous as an outcome that it would never come to pass. Congress is responsible for making sure it does not come to pass.

The President has provided, again, a series of proposals for how to eliminate the sequester; ensure that its effects are never felt by middle-class families across the country; and that those proposals represent real compromise, they represent the balance that, as we see again and again in surveys of public opinion, the American people strongly support. Unfortunately, thus far, we have seen from the Republicans intransigence and a seeming desire to flout the American people's will here and to allow the sequester to take effect, and that's unfortunate.

Q He can't legislate, but can't he mandate at this point?

MR. CARNEY: It's, unfortunately, in this case, not in his power to eliminate the sequester. Congress needs to pass a law.

Yes.

Q The conflict in Syria looks like it's overspilling into Lebanon now with the Free Syrian Army is engaged in battles with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Do you still believe that the administration policy is the right one regarding Syria and still not supplying weapons to the rebels?

MR. CARNEY: It is still our policy that we are providing nonlethal assistance to the opposition. We are providing substantial humanitarian aid to the Syrian people. And we are working with our allies to put pressure on the Assad regime to bring about a future that the Syrian people deserve, and that's a future without President Assad.

We are constantly evaluating the situation in Syria and evaluating our policies with regards to Syria, as you would expect. But, again, I think it's important to know we are the lead provider of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people and we have provided substantial nonlethal assistance to the opposition, and we have worked with the opposition to help itself unify as it works to bring about a future in Syria that is better for the Syrian people and is -- and that requires the absence of President Assad.

Q -- you say it's evolving? Do we expect some --

MR. CARNEY: Oh, I didn't say it was evolving. I was simply saying that we're constantly reviewing our policy.

Q You're reviewing it. Does that mean that we expect some change in the near future?

MR. CARNEY: No, I'm simply saying that we are constantly reviewing every possible option that could help end the violence and accelerate a political transition. The options we have considered include whether the provision of lethal assistance to the opposition would hasten our goal.

As we analyze every option, we must assess whether the action will change Assad's calculus and hasten a transition to a post-Assad Syria. We also must consider whether it will provoke a wider regional conflict and endanger our allies, including Israel, or create a risk that weapons will fall into the hands of extremists.

There are no easy answers, and the President has said that he wrestles with these decisions. Right now, we are focusing our efforts on helping the opposition become stronger, more cohesive, and more organized. As a result of this effort, we will continue to analyze every feasible option that would accelerate a political transition to a post-Assad Syria.

Yes.

Q What is the President doing to reassure NATO and other allies about the cost of defense cuts as a result of the sequester?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as I mentioned in reference to the politically driven stalling of the confirmation of Senator Hagel to be Secretary of Defense, we have important business to do. There is a defense ministerial taking place and Senator Hagel should be there as

Secretary of Defense. But it is certainly something that we discuss. I think Secretary Panetta has been talking about it. It is of concern, but I don't have any specific conversations to read out to you.

Yes, Susan. And then Jackie.

Q Did the White House or the administration make the Department of Defense wait to release the specific cuts on the sequestration until the last two weeks? It seems like we're just hearing about this. And General Odierno had said last week that they didn't prepare for it very well because they didn't think it was going to happen.

MR. CARNEY: No. The answer to your question is no. And there is a process here underway. I think -- I mean, I can't speak for General Odierno, but I think we're all hopeful and remain at least insistent that Republicans do not make the choice to allow sequestration to happen; that they choose instead to come up with a balanced plan or to agree to a balanced plan to postpone or eliminate the sequester.

The fact is, broadly speaking, we've known what the impact of these dramatic, across-the-board cuts would be. I can quote to you page after page of Republicans citing the harm to the Pentagon and our defense readiness that would come if sequester were to take effect.

Q I mean, why are we hearing so much about the furloughs, the civilian furloughs, and not weapons systems like Congress --

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to each agency for how they are planning for the implementation of the sequester if it comes about. That's a question that the Defense Department can answer.

Q But it seems like the weapons systems, a lot of them -- like the Abrams tank -- the Congress funded it and the Pentagon didn't even want that. So why aren't we seeing weapons systems --

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think you should ask the Defense Department. I just don't have any specifics for you on it.

Jackie.

Q Jay, the governors are coming this weekend for their annual winter meeting. How is the President going to use their presence here and his mixing with them to perhaps proselytize about the sequester and bringing that to an end in a way that won't hurt states?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't want to preview or prejudge conversations that the President will have with the governors who are assembling here in Washington as part of their annual meeting.

The fact of the matter is that sequester is of great concern to governors across the country, and I'm sure that that will be a topic of conversation. It is also true that implementation of the Affordable Care Act is a topic of conversation that is likely to be raised because of

the work that's being done and the progress that's taken place on that effort.

One of the things that we've talked about this week that is of great interest to governors, both Republican and Democratic governors, is the need to invest in our infrastructure. And governors of both parties are very interested in our efforts to both invest in "fix-it-first" infrastructure development -- going after those projects that are desperately needing maintenance and repair that can help put people back to work in their states as well as build the foundation for economic growth in the future; and in the proposals the President has as part of his plan for a public-private partnership to invest further in infrastructure development.

This is the kind of thing, as you know, Jackie, that has been traditionally an area of agreement between Republicans and Democrats; an area of agreement between labor and the Chamber of Commerce, labor and management; an area of agreement between all regions of the country. And it certainly should be an area of agreement now. So that will also be a topic of conversation.

Thanks, all.

END

2:16 P.M. EST