

Press Gaggle Aboard Air Force One En Route Michigan

 obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/10/press-gaggle-aboard-air-force-one-en-route-michigan

September 9, 2015

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

September 09, 2015

Aboard Air Force One
En Route Michigan

1:23 P.M. EDT

MR. SCHULTZ: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome aboard Air Force One en route to Michigan, where, at Macomb Community College, the President will announce new steps to expand apprenticeships and to build momentum nationwide to make community college free for responsible students.

I know that yesterday we released a lot of those details on what the President is going to be speaking about today, so I'm not going to take up too much time in reviewing them. I would draw your attention to two new pieces from this morning -- that includes a series of public service announcements from the Heads Up America campaign that included celebrities like Kal Penn, Louis C.K., Chris Rock, as well as the President and Dr. Biden, in an effort to spread the word about the value of universal access to community college.

I'd also draw your attention to the announcement today from Milwaukee Area Technical College, which made news just this morning that they were taking some significant steps to make community college more accessible for interested and qualifying young people.

And two additional announcements that are unrelated to today's travel, and then I'm happy to take your questions. The first is that the President and the First Lady will greet His Holiness Pope Francis on his arrival at Joint Base Andrews in the United States on Tuesday, September 22, 2015. As you all know, on Wednesday, the following day, September 23rd, the President and First Lady will welcome His Holiness Pope Francis to the White House. During the visit, the President and the Pope will continue the dialogue which they began during the President's visit to the Vatican in March of last year on their shared values and commitments to a wide range of issues.

Finally, on this Friday, in addition to a Moment of Silence on the South Lawn with the First Lady and the White House staff, the President will travel to Fort Meade in Maryland where he will meet with servicemembers on the 14th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. The

President looks forward to having a conversation with the patriotic men and women who work every day to keep America safe, and to honor the sacrifices of our troops and their families.

With all of that, I'm happy to take your questions.

Q Who made the decision to go to Andrews to greet the Pope? Is that a protocol matter? Where would that have come from?

MR. SCHULTZ: I know that it is not necessarily routine for the President to greet a foreign leader at Andrews, but I do know there's some precedent for it. President Bush met Pope Benedict XVI, with First Lady Laura Bush, in 2008 at Andrews. So we felt like this was customary.

Q And his call, or --

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I think the President definitely wanted to do this.

Q -- the President and the First Lady --

MR. SCHULTZ: The President and the First Lady? I don't know. I don't have a manifest for you right now.

Q Is there any update on the State Department review of the Syrian refugee crisis? Is that going to be settled before the Pope lands in Washington?

MR. SCHULTZ: Thank you, Ben. I will tell you that, as Josh made clear yesterday, the President does believe the United States has a moral responsibility to play a role in addressing this issue. That's why we've launched a review of options that are available to be responsive to the global refugee crisis. And we're also in regular contact with countries in the Middle East and in Europe who have been greatly impacted by the increased refugee flows.

It's also why the United States is the single largest donor to the Syrian crisis. And it's also why we believe that the Senate should confirm Gayle Smith to be the USAID Administrator, since there's nobody more qualified than Gayle to lead this agency, and they are at the center of spreading relief around the world. And particularly in light of this ongoing Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, if Congress is looking to play a constructive role in making sure the United States effort remains unhampered, that's a good way to do it.

Q Do the refugees need more money right now? They need some place to go -- that's more important than financial assistance, right?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, Ben, I think that it is a complex issue, and that's why we support the European efforts to develop a comprehensive approach to resolve migration challenges. I know the resources that are being sent to that region are being put to good use. That includes assistance like providing health care, food, water and basic necessities. And it also includes making sure that the refugees are safe and secure in where they go.

Q Senator Kerry is on the Hill today. Is he giving them any sense of how many more refugees the U.S. might be willing to take?

MR. SCHULTZ: Yes, as you point out, Secretary Kerry has been on the Hill this morning. I believe he met with House Judiciary and Senate Judiciary members. He is talking about this issue. He is talking about our review of the options available to us.

Q Was there any sense of numbers, though?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have specific details to read out of those conversations. You might want to check with the State Department.

Q One thing that has been reported is that he said that the U.S. is committed to taking more Syrian refugees. He did not give a specific number. Is one of the reasons he's speaking to Congress because Congress will have to allow for any more funding the process an increase in Syrian refugees and their resettlement?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, as Josh acknowledged yesterday, increasing the number of refugees to come to the United States is among the options that we were looking at as an administration.

In terms of the role that Congress plays, like you said, Secretary Kerry was up there consulting this morning. It's our understanding -- it is my understanding that legislation is not necessary to increase the number of Syrian refugees considered for resettlement here in the United States, but the administration does consult with Congress on this issue and annually requests funding for the overall refugees admissions program.

Q James Clapper said today that he had a huge concern that accepting more refugees from Syria could open the door to ISIL infiltrating with refugees and potentially coming into Europe or coming into the U.S. Is that a concern shared by the administration?

MR. SCHULTZ: As Josh mentioned, whenever we take a look at a policy concerning our relations around the world, the first thing we look at is our national security interests. And that's why we remain deeply committed to achieving the dual goals of safeguarding the American public from terrorists and providing refuge to some of the world's most vulnerable people, many of whom themselves are the victims of terrorism.

We can get you some more information about how that process works here at home. But I can tell you that refugees are subject to the highest level of security checks of any category of travelers to the United States. That includes the involvement of the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center, the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense.

Q Do you have any more details on how the administration is reaching out to allies in Europe? Any calls from the President as this issue has come to the forefront in the EU?

MR. SCHULTZ: Toluse, I don't have any specific calls from the President to read out, but I can assure you we are absolutely in touch with our counterparts in Europe. Those are both White House officials and also officials at the relevant agencies -- Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security.

And I want to be clear that in those conversations, we made clear that we understand how complex and difficult this issue is, and how it poses a very serious challenge to EU and non-EU nations in the region. But overall, we commend the humanitarian spirit of the European leaders and citizens for responding with such generosity and compassion.

Q Secretary Kerry also said that at the "appropriate time" we would know those numbers. When is the appropriate time? Doesn't it seem like now might be the appropriate time?

MR. SCHULTZ: We do understand the urgency of the situation, so I think you'll be hearing more in short order. But I don't have any updates for you right now.

Q Today on the Senate floor, Senator John McCain said it's no accident that the President is confronting this humanitarian crisis. He said the reason that the President is confronting the crisis is because he's leading from behind. What's your response to that?

MR. SCHULTZ: I didn't have a chance to see Senator McCain's comments, but I do know there are opponents -- there are critics of this President's foreign policy who have advocated for sending in more troops into the Middle East. That's just not a position the President holds. He has taken a different approach. He believes that more troops on the ground -- more U.S. troops on the ground is not the answer. We have called -- we have made clear that we believe that Assad has lost the legitimacy to lead and should leave.

Q So the steps that the President took that ultimately led to where we are right now as it relates to this humanitarian crisis, in your view, those steps did not lead to this crisis? The President did everything correctly? He made no mistakes?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I do want to be clear that ultimately the refugee crisis is a symptom of the horrendous conditions in Syria, and that ultimately a lot of these refugees would presumably want to return home once conditions are safe. So at the end of the day, the only true resolution to this will be a Syria that is safe for them to return home to.

Q And so, again, no mistakes by the President as it relates to his policies in terms of dealing with Syria, dealing now with the humanitarian crisis as it relates to the refugees?

MR. SCHULTZ: Our view is that we need a diplomatic solution in Syria, and that if those advocating for sending more troops on the ground into that country -- that's just not a position the President holds.

Q What about those who are saying that we should have sent more troops? Secretary Clinton said in a speech today that she would have acted earlier to arm the opposition -- to get in touch with the opposition who we could work with. She said that's something

that she's advocated and she broke with the President on. What about that position? She's been an ally on many other things. She says that you all made a mistake on this.

MR. SCHULTZ: I know that Secretary Clinton has made her views known on that many months ago -- I believe in her book, on her tenure as Secretary of State. We've also made clear why the President didn't think it was prudent at that time to move forward with that. And that included developing relationships on the ground, making sure that the right folks were being vetted, and making sure that we had the proper safeguards in place so that -- making sure we had the proper safeguards in place to make sure that there were no unintended consequences.

Q Russia is sending forces into Syria to participate in that operation. They also sent ships and aircraft, according to reports. What is the U.S. take on that? What does the White House think is the goal here and what's the concern? And are there any considerations to changing our operations in Syria?

MR. SCHULTZ: Julia, I think as Josh mentioned yesterday, we do have deep concerns by reports that Russia may have deployed military personnel and aircraft to Syria. We are monitoring the situation closely. We are also in touch with our allies and partners in the region to both get more information and relay our concerns. I believe -- the administration released that over the weekend Secretary Kerry spoke with Foreign Minister Lavrov to convey U.S. concerns about these reports suggesting an imminent enhanced Russian military buildup there to support the Syrian regime.

Our bottom line is that we would welcome constructive Russian contributions to the counter-ISIL efforts. But we've been clear that it would be unconscionable for any party, including the Russians, to provide any support to the Assad regime, which has not only failed to confront ISIL and those ongoing atrocities against the Syrian people, but have also continued to nurture the extremists that has led to this crisis.

Q On the Iran vote, there's some debate among Republicans as to whether to delay the vote, whether that 60-day period should have actually started or not because of the so-called side deals, whether or not once those are disclosed, the 60-day period would actually begin. What's your position on that?

MR. SCHULTZ: Sounds like a plan hatched up at Tortilla Coast on a Tuesday night. I have seen some press reports on the internal Republican strife. Our belief is that Congress, through much debate, set up their own oversight mechanism for this deal. You all covered that process extensively. I think that was a debate about the debate. And our view has been that according to their own design, they can play the spoiler in this deal, and that would be by passing and, if necessary, overturning a resolution of disapproval.

We've been gratified that over the past few weeks, as more lawmakers learn and study this complicated deal, the passing or overturning a veto on a resolution like that has become less and less likely.

Q What is the White House view of the rally that will be taking place around the time the President is speaking in Detroit?

MR. SCHULTZ: Christi, we know -- and as you all have extensively reported -- opponents of the deal have gone to great lengths to derail this deal. They have done so by using many of the same arguments that date back to the 2002 decision to invade Iraq. But as we've seen, those arguments have been a lot less effective this time around.

Thankfully, many in Congress who have taken the time to review the deal have concluded, as the President has, that diplomacy is the best way to cut off Iran's path to a nuclear weapon. I expect we'll hear a lot of the same arguments today as we've heard for the past few months, but I don't expect them to carry any more sway than they already have.

Q So do you think the rally is about trying to derail the deal or about something else?

MR. SCHULTZ: You should probably ask those attending. You should probably ask the luminaries attending today's event why they're there. But our focus is just making sure Congress doesn't derail the deal.

Q So does that mean the President won't speak to this issue today while he's speaking publicly?

MR. SCHULTZ: The President's focus today is on making sure that our young people have the skills and the education they need to succeed in the 21st century economy.

Q Are you still referring to today's rally as a pro-war rally?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think several of the speakers, including Senator Cruz, has mentioned that the only other option, other than acquiescing to Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon, would be military action.

Q So you're referring to it as a pro-war rally? You are. Even after the President last week, when he spoke to a group of Jewish voters that were at the White House, he talked about how he doesn't want to demonize opponents of the Iran nuclear deal. Are you still referring it as a pro-war rally?

MR. SCHULTZ: I think if you look at Senator Cruz's remarks on this, who, it's my understanding will be one of the headliners at today's rally --

Q But there are thousands of people that will be there. It's not just Senator Cruz. And my question is, are they attending a pro-war rally?

MR. SCHULTZ: I understand your question. I can't speak to the thousands of people who will be there and what their motives are. I can speak to those who are being marketed as the draw for the rally. And Senator Cruz himself has made clear that the only other option that he sees other than diplomacy -- which he has dismissed -- is either acquiescing to Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, or military action.

Q Republicans are discussing the idea of a lawsuit against the administration over the so-called side agreement between the IAEA and Iran. Do you have any reaction to that tactic to try to stop this deal?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I don't know if they don't like how the results are shaping up, or maybe they're just getting second thoughts about casting a vote to put us on the road to another military conflict. But, Toluse, I think anyone who reads the Corker legislation will see explicitly that if Congress does not vote, this agreement goes into effect. It's as simple as that.

Q They also say that that legislation indicates that any side deal should be disclosed to Congress, and that's the grounds that they were going to sue on. Do you all have a -- I'm sure you don't agree with that, but can you give your rationale for why the side agreement is a part of this legislation?

MR. SCHULTZ: To be clear, there's no side agreement. But the document to which you're referring has been briefed extensively to any member of Congress who wishes to learn more about it. That includes both in classified settings and also more generic settings. And I think you all have observed the robust outreach this administration has done to members of Congress. That includes both White House officials all the way up to the President of the United States, but also includes officials at relevant agencies, like the Department of State, the Department of Defense, Department of Treasury and Department of Energy.

So we've made clear that we will brief any member of Congress who asks about these aspects. But it seems like those calling for this are also those who made up their minds about this deal before it was even announced.

Q Draft Biden got two new state directors today in Nevada and New Hampshire. Any chance you have a readout of a conversation with the Vice President and President on his 2016 ambitions?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't have any readout of a private conversation between the President and the Vice President. As you know, they've -- I believe you're referencing a lunch from a couple weeks ago, or maybe more recent -- but those conversations we've kept private for the past six and a half years, and I'm not going to change that today.

Q How about the President and Mrs. Biden?

MR. SCHULTZ: The President is thrilled that Dr. Biden is with us today, as he has said that she is her favorite college professor -- community college professor. She will have a speaking role today, which she is very excited about. And she's also going to chair our committee that is charged with increasing visibility on this and making sure that the momentum we've created thus far, just since January, continues.

Q Do you think they'll have any political chat today?

MR. SCHULTZ: If they do, I'm not sure I'd be in a position to read it out.

Q Is the White House willing to brief presidential candidates on the Iran deal, even ones that aren't necessarily in Congress right now? Do you think that would be appropriate?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, I guess the first stop for them would be to go to the website, because the entire deal is listed on the World Wide Web.

Q Do you expect that Dr. Biden will be taking questions from reporters today?

MR. SCHULTZ: I don't.

Q There were reports out this morning about BlackRock CEO Larry Fink traveling to China to advise officials there on their market situation. You look surprised by that. I know the President is acquaintances with Larry Fink. What does the White House think of that? And has President Obama spoken to Larry Fink since this trip about what was said and what went on?

MR. SCHULTZ: I have not spoken to the President about Larry Fink's trip. But I can tell you that from the administration's view, the Department of Treasury is our primary interlocutor that's both monitoring and engaging with our counterparts in China. As you know, we've continued to press China to institute reforms, so I'd refer you to them on any updates.

Q On China, the visit by the Chinese President is coming up, but we haven't heard dates for it yet. Do you have dates? And if not, is that an indication of some hang-up between the U.S. and China over some of the different issues that have stood between us over the last couple of weeks?

MR. SCHULTZ: No, I would not say that it's an indication of that. I think the dates will be forthcoming soon.

Q And also on the budget, really quickly. Is the administration doing anything to tell agencies what they should be doing to prepare for a potential shutdown just a few weeks from now?

MR. SCHULTZ: Well, our focus is on making sure that Republicans and Democrats can come together and negotiate a long-term budget deal. This economy has seen strident economic growth over the past six and a half years, but now is not the time for any unforced errors.

And I know that Leader McConnell, over the weekend or maybe this past week, made some comments that he wants to get back to Washington to work with Democrats on that, and we encourage those conversations. We think it's time for our colleagues on Capitol Hill to roll up their sleeves and work on this.

END

1:44 P.M. EDT