

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 6/27/12

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Okay. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for being here on a glorious afternoon. I do not have any announcements to make at the top, so I will take your questions.

Associated Press.

Q Thanks, Jay. Two topics, please. On Attorney General Holder, the Speaker has said that this matter will go to a contempt vote tomorrow. There does not appear to be any signs of a last-minute effort to forestall that. So it seems like we've moved this beyond a hypothetical to this will happen tomorrow, there will be a vote. And I know that the White House is deeply opposed to this for the reasons you said before, but I'm wondering if you could speak to what the -- what consequences for the country, for the White House, if any, you see if in fact he's held in contempt.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I can tell you that House Republicans have made the strategic choice to try to score political points by focusing their time and attention on a law enforcement operation from 2009 that was botched and that everyone agrees was botched, and that employed a flawed tactic and everyone agrees that it employed a flawed tactic. And they've made that choice, rather than focusing on jobs and the economy. And with millions of Americans still struggling to pay their bills, I cannot imagine this will sit well with most Americans.

You saw, I think, and it has been reported on, that Justice Department staffers, White House staffers met with committee members' staff yesterday to try to resolve this, and there was an ample opportunity yesterday to resolve this, as there has been in the past when the Attorney General met with the Chairman. Unfortunately, the Republicans have chosen politics -- and I say that not just using my own voice, but I am quoting a leading House Republican who described this process as politics.

The Justice Department has been extremely cooperative in providing thousands of pages of documents. The Attorney General has appeared to testify numerous times on this matter. And the chairman of the committee himself said on Sunday that he has, and there is, no evidence of any White House involvement in this operation and this issue.

So it is unfortunate. We hope Republicans change their minds as to what the right course of action is, what's the best thing to do for the American people. But we certainly understand -- or see and agree with the assertion by some, including a leading House Republican, that this is politics.

Q You just spoke there at length about the motivations, as you see it. Can you speak to whether a contempt vote of the Attorney General by the House would have any substantive impact on how he does his job and the administration of justice in the country?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would refer you to the Department of Justice for answers to questions like that, although that is a hypothetical -- the vote has not happened. What I can say, I think with some confidence, is that it will be viewed for what it is if it takes place, and that is as political theater, an action taken by Congress that does not respond to the most urgent priorities of the American people, and is the kind of political gamesmanship that frustrates the American people so much about what happens in Washington.

This is not why Americans across the country go to the ballot box every other November to elect members of the House. They don't do it so that the House -- Congress in general -- engages in political gamesmanship and theater, and launches fishing expeditions. They send them here to get work done that's essential for the health of the American economy, for our national security, creation of jobs -- and they send them for legitimate oversight. That's one of Congress's responsibilities. And this administration has been enormously cooperative with Congress in its legitimate oversight function, and will continue to be so.

Q I'm sorry, one other question, on Syria. More violence today -- apparent attack at a TV station that the government there is blaming on the rebels. Assad has said, yesterday I believe, that the country is in a state of real war. I'm wondering if the White House agrees with that assessment that Syria is in a state of war.

MR. CARNEY: I'll start with what you mentioned at the top. We condemn all acts of violence, including those targeting pro-regime elements, and we call on all parties to cease acts of hostility -- this is in reference to your observation about the storming of a pro-Assad TV station.

In terms of Assad's comments, his observation about the situation in Syria is all the more profound because he created it. He caused it. The violence that is occurring there, the brutality that's being leveled against the Syrian people is of his own doing.

And we agree that the situation in Syria is serious. It is dire. It is resulting in the tragic and unnecessary deaths of civilians. And it is happening because of Bashar al-Assad's refusal to step from power in order to give Syria a chance for a better future. It is the

result of his choice instead to try to cling onto power at all costs, to try to cling onto power by spilling the blood of innocent Syrians.

And we are working with our international partners to continue to pressure Assad. We note the increasing number of defections that have taken place from the Assad regime and the Assad military. And we remain committed to a transition in Syria that cannot -- because of the choices he made -- include Assad.

Thanks. Reuters.

Q Thank you. On the same topic, Kofi Annan has called a meeting on Saturday in Geneva, kind of a meeting to discuss conditions in Syria and his plan. I wonder if you could tell us what the United States hopes to see happen there, and what's success look like in that meeting.

MR. CARNEY: Well, we look forward to the June 30 meeting in Geneva that you mention, and we look forward to it as an opportunity to press forward with Syria's political transition. We are working full-speed ahead on that transition at this critical juncture with our international partners.

Special envoy Annan has drafted a transition plan that we feel embodies the principles needed for any political transition in Syria leading to a peaceful, democratic and representative outcome that reflects the will of the Syrian people. The sooner this transition happens, the greater the chance we have of averting a lengthy and bloody sectarian war, and the better we'll be able to help Syrians manage a stable transition to democracy.

This is a step towards the transition that has to take place, but I would not speculate about or characterize on the outcome of a meeting that has not taken place yet.

Ann.

Q Thank you. On health care and the Supreme Court tomorrow, the President yesterday, the last two days, has vigorously defended some of the kind of consumer aspects that are already in effect on health care reform. He doesn't talk about the individual mandate and some of the government changes. Does the President think that popularity of those individual -- of those areas that he's been talking about is enough to justify the constitutionality of the whole act? And what should we expect tomorrow in terms of presidential reaction? Will the President make a statement after the Court rules?

MR. CARNEY: The constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act depends not on public opinion of polls, but on legal precedent, which is well established. The President has spoken to this. Many, many legal scholars have spoken to it. Several very prominent conservative jurists have ruled in favor of the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act because of their view of that precedent. The fact is the Affordable Care Act gives hardworking middle-class families the security they deserve. And we are confident that the law is constitutional, and I think that's what the President has been referring to, and that's why we're focused on implementing the law.

We await the Supreme Court decision, as does everyone, but while we do, we continue to implement the law. And I would note that thanks to the Affordable Care Act, 3.1 million more young adults who otherwise would have been uninsured have health insurance on their parent's plan, 5.3 million seniors with Medicare have saved \$3.7 billion on their prescription drugs, and everyone on Medicare can get preventive services like mammograms for free -- again, because of the Affordable Care Act. And 54 million Americans with private insurance can now receive many preventive services without paying copayments or deductibles.

Since you mentioned it, the mandate, the individual mandate was a product of a conservative think tank. It was adopted by many leaders in the Republican Party in the '90s. It was adopted by and implemented by a Republican governor in Massachusetts. And while the President opposed it in the campaign he, in the process of crafting a health care reform bill in office, was persuaded by experts in the field that it was the best and most efficient way to ensure that we can bring the largest number of people into and under coverage -- getting insurance coverage, and to allow for the -- to ensure that those with preexisting conditions get health care coverage.

And that was the impulse behind it. Again, it's not about public opinion of polls; it's about policy.

Q And you mentioned his original opposition to the idea of requiring mandates. Is the health policy team here at the White House prepared to work on a congressional fix quickly, this year, depending on what happens with the vote?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I won't -- with just 20 hours left, or so, before we hear from the Supreme Court, or before we expect to hear from the Supreme Court -- speculate about hypothetical scenarios. We await the decision, as everyone does. And I can simply point you to what the HHS Secretary, Secretary Sebelius has said, that we are ready -- we will be ready for the decision when it comes down.

Q Will the President speak tomorrow?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any scheduling updates for you on that.

Q Jay, would the President veto a bill that would delay the sequester until March of next year?

MR. CARNEY: That's a hypothetical. What we have said is that the President has put forward, on numerous occasions, most recently in his budget, the kind of balanced plan that deals with our medium and long-term fiscal challenges while ensuring that we invest in areas like innovation, education, research and development, that reflects the consensus thinking of a broad array of experts and a broad array of Republicans and Democrats -- at least Republicans who aren't currently members of Congress.

And that is the right way to go. That's the way to deal with our fiscal challenges. That's the way to ensure that in dealing with our fiscal challenges, we do not ask, as the Republican plan does, that the burden of meeting those challenges falls solely on middle-

class Americans, seniors, the parents of children with disabilities, and others. It asks that everyone does their fair share and that everyone plays by the same set of rules.

And that's the President's position and has been for a long time. And that avenue remains open to Congress to take. And again, it bears repeating that there is broad consensus on what the outlines of a comprehensive budget deal should look like. It must include spending cuts; it must include changes to our entitlement programs to make them stronger; it includes -- and it must include revenues.

If it doesn't have all three legs of the stool, then it is likely to fall over because it relies too heavily on one or the other and, in the case of the Republican plan, it basically doubles down on the policies of the first decade of this century and the previous administration that said the solution to our economic problems is simply to give more tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans and tell Wall Street and insurance companies and everyone else that they can write their own rules and that everyone eventually will benefit. And the problem with that theory is that every tried it and it hasn't worked. In fact, it precipitated the worst economic crisis in our lifetimes.

So the President's approach is clear. And he's not a lone voice out there saying that that's the approach we need to take. The outliers here are members of the Republican Party in Congress who have refused almost unanimously to acknowledge that we need to include revenues as part of a broader package.

Norah.

Q The National Rifle Association is urging members of Congress to vote to hold the Attorney General in contempt because they say Fast and Furious is part of the Obama administration's anti-gun agenda. Do you have response to that?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not going to speculate about the outcome of a vote that we still hope doesn't happen because it should not -- it's politics. And I think that, in many ways, your question reflects the politics of this.

I would only say broadly that the idea behind that thinking suggests that there was some grand plan behind the Fast and Furious program when, in fact, everyone knows the President did not know about this tactic until he heard about it through the media; the Attorney General did not know about it. The tactic itself was employed by the previous administration in a different operation. This was a field office tactic that was flawed. And when the Attorney General learned about it, he took action to ensure that it was no longer used, and he directed the Inspector General at the Department of Justice to investigate.

So the premise behind the assertion falls apart upon even the barest of inquiry.

Q You've said that this is part of the Republicans' agenda to score some political points, this contempt vote against the Attorney General. Does the President agree with former Speaker Nancy Pelosi that this contempt vote is an effort to distract the Attorney General and the Justice Department on voting rights issues?

MR. CARNEY: I can't really speculate about motivations except to point you to the words of observers as well as the leading House Republican that this is about politics. What underlies the politics --

Q What are the politics? I mean, what --

MR. CARNEY: I think you should ask those who are engaging in those politics. What we know is that this administration has been very cooperative with the legitimate oversight interest of Congress, broadly speaking, and in regard to this matter. The Department of Justice provided an enormous number of documents; provided hours and hours of testimony by the Attorney General and other Justice Department officials; and twice now has made an effort to accommodate the interest of the chairman and leaders in the Republican party on this matter. Unfortunately, they have shown very little interest in reaching a resolution. Instead, they've chosen a path of political confrontation and theatre -- which, I think, those of us who have been around for a while here recognize this for what it is.

Q What is it?

MR. CARNEY: Politics. It has -- as I said before --

Q I mean, this is the first time an attorney general is going to be held in contempt --

MR. CARNEY: Well, we'll see.

Q -- of Congress over this. And the most you'll say is to score political points?

MR. CARNEY: That's how preposterous it is. Because it's not about Fast and Furious. The operation itself, all the documentation relating to the operation itself prior to February 4th of last year has been provided. The administration has endeavored to accommodate the committee and Republican leaders in its request for further information.

The assertion of privilege here has to do with the absolutely necessary action that any President, any head of the executive branch must take in order to preserve the capacity of the executive branch to engage in internal deliberations, both now and in the future, for every administration going forward, for every President of either party, of some party in the future.

Q Is the President concerned at all about the precedent this is going to set having his Attorney General held in contempt? Has he called the Speaker of the House and asked him to reconsider? Has he been personally engaged at all?

MR. CARNEY: I think the Speaker of the House has made his position pretty clear on this, and it's highly political in nature. I haven't had the conversation about this with the President in the way that you framed it. I think he --

Q I mean, is he standing up for his Attorney General?

MR. CARNEY: He has absolute confidence in his Attorney General. And what you're hearing from me are the views of the President and the White House, the administration, that this is political theatre. It is an unnecessary distraction from the work that Congress should be doing for the American people on the economy, on jobs. And I think many Americans -- most Americans will view it that way.

Q Okay, sorry, one final question on health care. What if the Supreme Court strikes down the individual mandate but allows protections for preexisting -- or allows the protection for those who have preexisting conditions? What then?

MR. CARNEY: Norah, I cannot speculate on all the various permutations that have been put forward by really smart people in the press and in the health care field and the legal field. I think we just have to wait for the decision and move forward after that.

Q Fast and Furious -- is the contempt vote worth a stand on principle?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Q Well, last week you said that the reason that all of these documents in question were not being turned over was on principle, not because there was any sensitive material that was being released. So the fact is that now you most likely will have this contempt vote. Was it worth it? Was the stand on principle --

MR. CARNEY: Well, was it worth it is taking a position beyond -- into the future that will have to be evaluated in the future. It's absolutely worth the assertion of a privilege that's necessary for any President of any party to preside over the executive branch and allow for the executive branch to have the kind of internal deliberations that it needs to have as it responds to congressional inquiries or media inquiries.

The cooperation that has been extended to Congress on this matter is extensive. Everything about the operation itself -- who planned it, how the tactic was employed and why -- all of that has been provided in full to the committee. And again, I would point you to the statements of the chairman of the committee who said over the weekend that there is no evidence -- he has -- after all this, he has what we made clear at the beginning, no evidence -- because there is there no evidence -- of White House involvement in this.

This was a field tactic that was a bad idea, and everyone recognizes that it was a flawed tactic, beginning with the Attorney General and the President. The Attorney General, when he learned about it, put an end to it -- its employment, its use -- and instructed the Inspector General of the Department of Justice to investigate it.

And again, we have endeavored to cooperate with the legitimate oversight interests of Congress and will continue to do so. But this is -- as a leading House Republican has described it, it is politics. And it is not what the Congress should be up to right now. We know that we have challenges still. We have economic challenges that need to be addressed. Congress needs to finish work on the transportation bill. It needs to take action to make sure that student loans -- student loan rates don't double in a few days. It needs to -- it has the capacity to act very quickly on measures the President has put

forward that would put teachers back in the classroom or even more construction workers on the job; would give homeowners across the country the ability to refinance their home at these historically low rates. These are things that the American people care about.

The actions taken for political reasons by members of the House that win them spots on cable talk shows do not particularly interest, I think, the American people. And I think the highly political nature of this has been in evidence just by the actions and rhetoric that you've seen from Congress -- from Republicans in Congress on this.

Q Jay, is there anything that the White House is doing now in these final hours to try to head off this vote?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think you saw, it was reported, that several senior White House staff members as well as staff from the Department of Justice met with committee staff to try to resolve this. There was an opportunity to resolve this, and I think it was rejected for political reasons.

Q So is there anything else that's being done that can be done?

MR. CARNEY: There remains hope that Republicans will change their mind, will reverse their decision -- their strategic decision to try to score political points. You remain hopeful that common sense prevails here, although you do have to look at the beginning of the year when Republicans announced that one of their chief legislative and strategic priorities was to investigate the administration and damage the President politically. Again, that is not the kind of use of congressional time and authority that most Americans would support or endorse. They'd rather have their leaders in Washington focus on the issues that matter most to them -- like economic growth and job creation.

Q One quick thing on the health care. I know you said you wouldn't talk about the President's schedule tomorrow, but what else will be taking place tomorrow? Is there a war room that's set up to respond -- rapid response to whatever the decision will be tomorrow? Anything that you can shed in terms of the behind the scenes that will be taking place?

MR. CARNEY: Most of our communications meetings happen in my office so you can call it a war room if you -- (laughter) --

Q I was thinking of something a little more -- something more sort of set up just for this.

MR. CARNEY: No, we don't have that. We obviously have meetings about policy and communications all the time, and we'll continue to do that. I think we're just, like you, waiting for an opinion, a decision, and we'll assess.

Q -- gaming it, "if this happens this is what we'll do"?

MR. CARNEY: There are so many permutations I'm not sure how useful it is to spend at least our time doing that. I would refer you to the HHS for questions about the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and the actions that they're taking and the fact

that they're ready for a decision when it comes.

Q Can I follow?

MR. CARNEY: Yes.

Q House leaders are -- two questions, the first on health care. House leaders have said in the press caucus that they are ready to -- if the Supreme Court rules it unconstitutional -- they would push for a single-payer method. And do you think the President would favor a single-payer method?

MR. CARNEY: The President favors the Affordable Care Act. It was the right thing to do to provide insurance coverage to 30 million Americans, to ensure that people with preexisting conditions could not be denied insurance coverage, children with preexisting conditions could not be denied health insurance. It was the right thing to do so that young Americans could remain on their parent's health insurance policies rather than go without insurance. It was the right thing to do so that important preventive services like mammograms could be provided to millions of Americans free. And it was the right thing to do to ensure that seniors who faced significant costs through the prescription drug program were helped in alleviating that cost.

So these were policy prescriptions and the President, as you are, is awaiting the decision, and we will assess it when it comes and move forward accordingly.

Q It does not concern him that members of his own party are already waiting for the Supreme Court to rule it unconstitutional? They've already come out with this --

MR. CARNEY: I have heard every opinion imaginable expressed about what the decision will be, so it doesn't surprise me that some hold different opinions.

Ed.

Q Jay, on Fast and Furious, I was struck by what you told Norah that you wouldn't comment on something that may not happen and you seemed to kind of indicate that to Dan as well, that you're still hopeful, in your words, that they'll find the right --

MR. CARNEY: Congenital optimist.

Q Congenital optimist. And I don't want to selectively listen to that, but -- (laughter) -- heard in that a hope that something could be worked out. But in answer to Dan's question, you didn't say whether or not -- okay, there were meetings yesterday, but are there meetings going on today or phone calls?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have any meetings to read out to you. The fact that the meeting that was held yesterday has been reported on was not because we let you know in advance it was happening. We're trying to -- that reflected our good-faith effort to try to accommodate the committee and leaders on this matter to avoid what is a wholly unnecessary vote that is scheduled for tomorrow.

I don't have any meetings -- new meetings to preview for you or read out to you. But I think --

Q Well, wouldn't it be better if you can today to avoid it, whether it's the President --

MR. CARNEY: Ed, the suggestion that we haven't been doing everything we can is ridiculous given that the Attorney General asked for a meeting with the chairman, and got one, in an effort to resolve this; senior White House officials as well as Justice Department officials met with committee staffers yesterday in an effort to resolve this; and at the time -- as you'll recall, last Tuesday the Department of Justice made an offer of accommodation. At the time, Republicans rejected the offer because they claimed to be uncomfortable making a deal without seeing the documents that Justice Department officials suggested they could be shown.

In response, yesterday we in the administration, Justice and White House reached out and showed them a representative sample of the documents that they sought so they could see firsthand the types of communications in contention.

This offer would result in the committee getting unprecedented access to documents, showing how the Department responded to the committee's inquiry and would dispel any notion of an intent to mislead Congress. These documents are all after the fact and do not pertain to who designed, approved, or employed the tactics used in Operation Fast and Furious or Operation Wide Receiver, or any of the other operations from the Bush administration.

This was a good-faith effort to try to reach an accommodation while still protecting the institutional prerogatives of the executive branch, often championed by these same Republicans criticizing us now. Unfortunately, Republicans have opted, as I said, for political theater rather than conducting legitimate, congressional oversight.

So the effort has been made on a number of occasions. It's consistent with an effort to try to be responsive and cooperative to legitimate oversight interests throughout this episode. And hopefully -- one can hope that Republicans will at the last minute change their mind about deciding to try to score political points out of this. There's always room for hope.

Q On your point about after the fact documents, you just said a couple of times before as well as last Thursday that -- in a briefing that all of the documents, you said, every page related to the operation itself, not after the fact, has been turned over to Congress. After you made that statement Thursday, Republican Senator Chuck Grassley came out and said, no, that they're aware of a lot of other documents related to the operation itself that have not been turned over by the Justice Department. So you're contradicting that?

MR. CARNEY: Yes. And I'm saying that the assertion of privilege clearly begins with the period after February 4th, which is when the letter --

Q He's not talking about executive privilege. He's saying on the operation itself he's asked for other documents, and the Justice Department has not turned them over.

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to the Justice Department for details on what the 7,600 pages of documents that have been turned over. But it is simply a matter of chronological observational fact that documents created prior to that time that had to do with the actual operation -- who designed it, who approved it, how it was employed in both Operation Fast and Furious and in Operation Wide Receiver -- had been provided because they predated that period.

The assertion of privilege is only on documents post-February 4th, and those documents have to do with the internal deliberations within the administration over how to appropriately respond to congressional and media inquiries. And those are deliberations that need to be privileged and protected because of the separation of powers enshrined in our Constitution. And that is a principle that has been asserted by administrations going back 30 years.

Q On another subject -- the Colorado wildfires have been getting more and more dangerous, and I have not heard you read out in the last couple of days a phone call between the President and the Colorado governor -- or what kind of updates is he getting? It seems like the situation is getting pretty desperate. Has he spoken to officials there?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think the President did speak with the Colorado governor a while ago. The President is being updated regularly. I will read out to you further communications that he has on this matter.

Through the National Interagency Fire Center, which coordinates resources from the U.S. Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and other federal agencies, firefighters, incident management teams, air tankers, helicopters, fire engines and other resources are being provided to supplement state and local resources as teams continue to respond to what you appropriately described as very serious fires across the West.

More than 8,400 personnel, 578 fire engines, and 79 helicopters are operating on wildfires around the United States. More than half of federal wildfire-fighting resources are currently staged in Colorado. Federal partners continue to work closely with first responders and firefighters from local, state, and tribal agencies to combat and monitor large wildfires throughout the country.

FEMA has organized -- or rather has authorized three management assistant grants -- fire management assistant grants, known as FMAGs, since June 9, to help cover the state and local costs for fighting the fires. I think you know the formula -- it's 75 percent of the costs assessed after the fires is picked up by FEMA.

FEMA had deployed an incident management assistance team, known as an IMAT, to the Colorado Emergency Operations Center to work side by side with the Colorado Division of Emergency Management to monitor and support the firefighting efforts and has representatives in the Rocky Mountain Area Coordination Center, which is coordinating the federal response to the wildfires in Colorado and Wyoming.

In answer to your question -- well, go ahead.

Q Well, it's just that the phone call was on June 12th. That's 15 days ago. And it's been getting worse and worse. I just wondered why the President hasn't had another phone call with the governor.

MR. CARNEY: The President has been updated regularly on these wildfires. And when I have further communications of the President to read out to you, I will provide them.

Kristen.

Q Jay, thanks. If the action group that is set to meet this weekend on Syria is successful at re-implementing the peace plan and coming up with guidelines for a Syrian-led political transition, why should Syrians or the administration have confidence that it's actually going to work, given that Annan's former peace plan didn't?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think anything that depends on Bashar al-Assad's agreement and a promise to fulfill actions has to be viewed with skepticism, so I take your point. But the fact is that the transition plans that Kofi Annan has drafted embodies the principles needed for any political transition in Syria to lead to a peaceful, democratic and representative outcome that reflects the will of the Syrian people.

And the international community coalescing around a transition plan is an important step in the process of further pressuring, further isolating and hopefully, helping to bring about a transition that we believe needs to -- or cannot take place without Assad stepping aside from power.

Q As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated today, Russia and China could play, or will play, a key role in this. Is there any indication that they're shifting their positions, that they may be getting on the same page?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't have any updates for you. And I certainly won't speak for those countries. I can tell you that we have -- as I have in the past -- been in regular consultations with the Russians, as well as the Chinese -- in particular the Russians on this matter.

It has been discussed by you and by us the fact that we have had differences with Russia on Syria. And we are continuing to work with the Russians to help bring about a goal that we both share, which is an end to violence in Syria and a transition in Syria, a transition that we believe cannot take place without -- cannot take place with Assad in power.

So we continue to work with the Russians and our other international partners -- and others have discussions with the Russians and others on this matter. I don't have any updates for you on where those conversations stand.

Q Well, then I guess what I'm saying, has anything changed to make this more than just talking about a plan or implementing a plan?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think every step towards building a consensus around a transition that is essential for the Syrian people is a step forward. I don't want to overstate that. The fact is Assad is still in power. The fact is Assad continues to brutalize his own people and the situation is extremely volatile. And as we have said in the past, there is not a great deal of time here for the international community to come together and act before the situation there potentially dissolves into a broader sectarian civil war, with implications for the region. We are working with our partners urgently to try to avoid that outcome.

Q Can I have one more on health care, Jay? According to our latest NBC News-Wall Street Journal poll, 37 percent of Americans said they would be pleased if the health care law were found unconstitutional. Why, on the eve of the Supreme Court announcing its ruling on this, has the administration failed to convince the American people this is a good thing?

MR. CARNEY: Well, Kristen, that's a great question. I think we've discussed this on a number of occasions over the months and years. There was excellent reporting recently, I think, on the sheer volume -- in the millions and millions and millions of dollars -- that was spent in an effort to discredit the Affordable Care Act. The differential there in money spent was, I think, eye opening. But it reflects the challenge that we have faced.

And, again, the President's focus here has been from the beginning on crafting a policy that builds on our existing private insurance system that is most effective and efficient in expanding coverage that ensures that those with preexisting conditions cannot be denied coverage or thrown off their health insurance plans, and provides all the other benefits that I've mentioned. That was his aim.

And I think we've been focused on implementing the law, and as that implementation continues, it has increased the number of Americans who directly benefit from the Affordable Care Act.

Q If part or all of the law is upheld, do you need to shift your strategy to get the message --

MR. CARNEY: I think I'm very safe -- on safe ground here when I say that I will not speculate on a decision that is relatively imminent.

Yes, Jared.

Q Jay, two questions. Thank you. Will the Attorney General be at the congressional picnic tonight? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: I don't have -- I haven't seen the RSVP list.

Q You'll get back to us?

MR. CARNEY: We'll get back to you, sure.

Q And then, you might be able to answer this. Do you know where the President will be when he finds out about the Supreme Court decision tomorrow? I know, generally, he has to find out, like everybody else does, through WSJ.com or some good website. (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: He will be in the war room, in my office. (Laughter.)

Q Jay, can I follow up on that?

Q Follow up on that? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: Sure.

Q So here's my question. A lot of Americans seem surprised or even skeptical that the President of the United States would learn about something this important the same way that everybody else does, and they are curious about the process. Can you comment on the mechanics of how the President of the United States or his representatives learn just like everybody else of the Supreme Court's rulings? Because people don't believe it.

MR. CARNEY: Well, we turn on televisions and radios and computers, and watch SCOTUS blog. (Laughter.) And it is --

Q Jay, it's a leaky town and people are just so skeptical.

MR. CARNEY: I think anybody who covers the Supreme Court knows that it's pretty airtight. And it is perhaps anachronistic, or not, but that's a fact. And so, we all will await the decision and learn of it at the same time that you do.

Q Thank you, Jay. I just want to go back to one more thing you mentioned earlier, on the mandate. You said that it was the product of a conservative think tank, and the President was persuaded to include it, in part because his aims -- he thought covering 30 million Americans was the right thing to do, and including preventative care was the right thing to do. At this point, in hindsight, does he think the mandate was the right thing to do?

MR. CARNEY: He continues to believe that that was the most efficient and effective way to build on our private insurance system, to provide coverage to the most people in the most efficient way, and provide the benefits that I've described.

I'm not just making this claim about its origins. It's been well documented. For those of us who were reporters in the 1990s, during the health care debates then, we keenly remember the fact that there was a bill put forward by a Republican member of the Senate, endorsed by the Republican leader of the Senate and numerous other Republicans in the Senate that contained within it this individual mandate. And that's just a fact. And it is something that has enjoyed the support of Republicans and Democrats for a number of years.

There was a great piece in the New Yorker the other day about that remarkable transformation and decisions made about group affiliation trumping policy. And I think that may be what we have here, is a case of a concerted decision to abandon what was considered very mainstream conservative thinking on an issue like health care policy once it had been adopted by the other party.

Q The transportation bill seems to be coming together up on the Hill right now. What is your guys' assessment of that as you know it now?

MR. CARNEY: Well, congressional negotiators are still working on it, and we look forward to seeing the final product. We're encouraged by the progress that's been made. It's absolutely essential that Congress act so that thousands of construction projects around the country do not come to a halt and that we keep those many, many, many construction workers on the job.

This is the kind of work that Congress should have been and should be focusing on, rather than some of the purely political issues that we were discussing earlier.

We are cautiously optimistic that this will come together, but again, we await the outcome of negotiations in Congress. It is our understanding -- as I think it is yours -- that the package would include action on ensuring that student loans rates do not double. That would be a welcome thing.

Q Are you okay with that?

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, I think it is important to note that the only reason why that is in this bill, the only reason why it will get acted on, hopefully in time, before the rates double, is because the President made a federal case out of it. The President pointed out that Republicans were prepared to allow interest rates to double on 7.4 million students. The only reason why any of us have had this discussion for these past several weeks is because the President insisted that Congress take action.

And in sort of a pattern that we have come to see where these sort of stages of denial and then acknowledgement and then acceptance -- it was a phony issue; it was a distraction from the economy, when, in fact, education is very much a part of the economy, in the President's view and most people's view. Then there was an attempt to try to get a political scalp in the so-called pay-fors that was not a serious attempt to deal with this matter. And gradually, we've come to a point where hopefully we will reach an agreement that everyone finds acceptable and that, most importantly, allows 7.4 million students in this country to continue to pay their students loans at the current rate as opposed to double the rate. And that is purely a result of the leadership the President has shown on this matter.

Q So you don't have any objections to the way things are so far that you know of now?

MR. CARNEY: Again, as I've said, we're awaiting a final product from congressional negotiators.

Q And do you have any details on the bus trip next week?

MR. CARNEY: None beyond what's been provided. I don't have any -- I honestly don't have anything additional for you.

Q Jay, there's another round of TPP talks in San Diego next week. I know a lot of Democrats on the Hill have written a letter asking for more consultation, and now Congressman Issa is asking to be included in the talks as an observer. How much congressional input does the administration see room for at this stage?

MR. CARNEY: Scott, I will have to take that question. I have not focused on it today.

Q You haven't focused on TPP?

MR. CARNEY: I know, you really -- (laughter) -- is that a slider or a change-up? (Laughter.)

Viqueira.

Q Speaking of anachronisms, so the President regularly bashes Congress. They're going to hold his Attorney General in contempt. Things aren't going so well. Why bother with the congressional picnic?

MR. CARNEY: It's a great American tradition, and the President looks forward to it, as do I. Look, it's going to -- I think there are six different kinds of barbeque and -- (laughter) -- I'm told.

Q What else is there --

MR. CARNEY: I'll give you an after-action report.

Q Jay, for the first time since 1990, the United States will host next month, right here in D.C., the international AIDS conference. I'm told the President was invited to speak at this event but he hasn't yet confirmed to make an appearance. Will the President speak at the conference?

MR. CARNEY: I appreciate the question, but I do not have a scheduling update for you.

Q The President's FY13 budget request cut nearly half a billion dollars, or 13 percent, from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR. Is the hesitation to accept the invitation over any concern that the President may not be well received in efforts to address the global AIDS epidemic?

MR. CARNEY: Again, you're connecting things, and I just don't have an update for you on the President's schedule. But thank you very much.

END

1:48 P.M. EDT

