

## **Newsmaker Transcript**

### **White House Daily Briefing**

Thursday, February 2, 2017

SPICER:

Good afternoon. Happy Groundhog Day.

We've got six more weeks of winter, apparently. Luckily for those of you who are going to be joining the president down to Florida this weekend, you get some time to get a glimpse of summer at the winter White House in Mar-a-Lago.

The president is going to start his meeting at 1 o'clock sharp. You probably just saw the B-roll of the folks from Harley rolling on in, literally. So I'm going to try to keep this a little quick.

The president signed a proclamation yesterday ushering in Black History Month. He looks forward to engaging in an informative month of events honoring the enormous contributions that African Americans have made throughout our history.

Last night, the president was honored to host the swearing in of the next secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, in the Oval Office. As the president said last night, Secretary Tillerson is a man who is already respected all over the world for the tremendous life that he's led, and now will bring his years of experience to the critical task of making our nation more safer, more prosperous and more secure.

It's time to bring a clear-eyed focus to our foreign affairs. And now with Secretary Tillerson at the helm of the State Department, we'll do just that. We'll strengthen our alliances, form new ones, and enhance America's interests throughout the world.

Speaking of the president's excellent nominees, praise is pouring in from around the country for his pick for Supreme Court. The Detroit News said Judge Gorsuch is a, quote, "legal superstar." "An outstanding choice," says the New Hampshire Union Leader. The Richmond Dispatch says, "The initial reaction was to cheer." The South Florida Sun-Sentinel touted his, quote, "excellent qualifications."

Yesterday, Judge Gorsuch had his first round of meetings on the Hill. Unfortunately, Senate offices aren't in the habit of releasing editorials, but from everything we heard, the judge knocked it out of the park on the Senate as well.

The president looks forward to a fair and speedy confirmation process for this exceedingly qualified nominee and jurist.

In my last briefing, I read out a list of the senators Judge Gorsuch has met with. In addition to the meeting with Majority Leader McConnell, Majority Whip Cornyn, Judiciary Chair Grassley and

Senators Hatch and Gardner, the judge also met with Democrat Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

SPICER:

Recently, Senator Manchin expressed his belief that Judge Gorsuch could win enough Democrats to hit 60 votes. I'll agree with the senator there on that one. I'll agree with the senator there on that one. I mean, we have to have a few Trump state Democrats who want to win re-election.

But as I pointed out yesterday, the so called 60-vote standard is simply not accurate. Democrats are grasping at straws to block the confirmation of an unquestionably qualified nominee.

I'll repeat, neither of the two Supreme Court justices that President Obama put forward were subject to the 60-vote threshold. So although I agree with Senator Manchin that Judge Gorsuch will probably get 60 -- get enough Democrats to get to 60, it's just simply not ever been a requirement.

Now on to the events of today. The president started his day by attending the National Prayer Breakfast. It was a continue -- it's a tradition that continued over six decades going back to President Eisenhower.

The president thanked the American people for their faith and prayers that have sustained and has inspired him, noting that the five words that he has heard more than any others as he's traveled throughout the country are, "I'm praying for you." He spoke at length about the ISIS genocide against Christians and the oppression of peace loving Muslims. As well as the threats of extermination against the Jewish people, and made it clear that he believes the United States has a moral obligation to speak out against such violence.

He encouraged Americans to remain a tolerant society where all faiths are respected and where all of our citizens can feel safe and secure. With that goal in mind, the president remarked that he's taken action to insure that the United States will not allow a beachhead of intolerance to spread throughout our nation.

In the coming days, we'll develop a system to help insure that those admitted into our country fully embrace our values of religious and personal liberty and reject any form of oppression or discrimination. The president also committed to get rid of the Johnson Amendment, in allowing our representatives in faith to speak -- speak freely and without retribution.

In particular -- in a particular poignant moment during his remarks, the president recalled yesterday his visit to Dover Air Force Base, to join the family of Chief Ryan Owens as America's fallen hero was returned home. After honoring Chief Owens for giving his life in defense of the American people, the president quoted John 15:13 "Greater love have no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

After returning to the White House this morning, the president held a legislative affairs staff meeting in the Oval Office with his team. The team continues to work closely with Congress to

enact the president's agenda with the nomination of Judge Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, extensive outreach is underway on Capitol Hill and we look forward to the judge receiving a swift and fair hearing.

Between his meetings, the president was pleased to see the EPA administrator designee, Pruitt, was voted out of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. As unfortunately has become the practice, Democrats again boycotted the hearing requiring a suspension of the rules in order to advance his nomination.

Following the strategy session, the president met with Senators Hatch, Wyden and Congressman Brady and Neil. This meeting was an opportunity for the president to meet with the chairman and ranking members of the Senate Finance Committee and the House Weighs and Means Committee to help chart the future of the U.S. trade policy.

The president has put together an all-star trade team that will work closely with U.S. trade representative and the committees led by these members to craft new trade deals. The president has expressed his concern time and again with NAFTA, which he believes is an out of date agreement. The ultimate goal is to insure that the best and fairest treatment of U.S. workers and businesses and the president believes that those interests are best secured by bilateral rather -- rather than multi-lateral trade deals.

He looks forward to working closely with the USTR and Congress when it comes to issues of trade. For those of you who weren't outside and just saw the Harley's roll up, it's no surprise that this afternoon the president will host a meeting and listening session with Harley-Davidson executives and union representatives. For a list of those individuals, please contact our office.

Harley-Davidson's been an American success story since 1901, when William S. Harley, at age 21, completed the blueprint drawing of an engine designed to fit into a bicycle. In 1903, Harley-Davidson began building motorcycles in the United States and today the company has approximately 6,000 employees and \$6 billion in annual revenue. The company's global headquarters is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which may have had something to do with them getting in so quickly, there's a certain staffer (ph).

Today the president will welcome to the White House the latest generation of Harley-Davidson executives to discuss how to make it easier for businesses to create more jobs and factories in the United States. Beyond the company executives, representatives from the machinists and steel workers unions will also be in attendance.

Their motorcycles have carried our American service members in war. They carry our police officers that keep us safe. They carry the Secret Service as they protect our presidents and they bring joy to millions of Americans throughout the world -- and others throughout the world rather. The president is looking forward to hosting these leaders from one of America's truly great entrepreneurial success stories. The American worker built this country and the president is focused on restoring a government that puts their interests first.

SPICER:

A few administrative notes. The national security adviser, Mike Flynn, today announced additions to the NSC senior staff.

David Cattler will be a deputy assistant to the president for regional affairs. John Eisenberg, deputy assistant to the president, NFC legal adviser and department council to the president for national security affairs. Kevin Harrington, deputy assistant to the president for strategic planning. And Kenneth Juster, deputy assistant to the president for international economic affairs.

Lastly, we had a great reaction to our Skype introduction seats (inaudible). I know we've had tremendous amount of requests pouring in from around the country, please contact the press office if you know of anyone that has an interest in joining us in the future.

In terms of the schedule for tomorrow, the president will host a strategic and policy forum, and in the afternoon, the president will have lunch with General Flynn before departing down to Mar-a-Lago later in the day.

With that, I'll take some questions.

Katie Pavlich?

QUESTION:

Hi Sean, thanks for the question.

Today, President Trump talked about Christian genocide at the National Prayer Breakfast, and last year the Obama State Department officially declared a genocide by ISIL against Christians and other minorities in the Middle East and North Africa.

Now that Rex Tillerson has been sworn in as the secretary, what specifically is the administration planning to do to comply with the legal obligations of protecting these routes under the U.N. 1948 Treaty?

SPICER:

That's a great question. I think Secretary Tillerson is learning his way around the building so far this morning. He gave a great speech talking about his vision and goal for the State Department, I think there'll be further guidance coming out on that, Katie.

Right now his job is to get it in, get settled, talk to the employees, make sure they understand. But back to the issue, obviously it's important to the president who was, throughout the campaign, it's something he address this morning and it's something that he's committed to.

He talked about in terms of the executive orders, and allowing Christian minorities in key countries seek asylum in the United States. He recognizes that in so many nations these are the oppressed

groups in accordance with how the U.N. defines refugees. So I think you'll see further guidance with that.

Jennifer Wisen (ph)?

QUESTION:

Thanks Sean. I have two questions actually.

Today, the president renewed his promise to protect religious liberty which has been under threat. Some Americans see religious liberty as code for discrimination. Can you kind of give us a sense of how the president views this tension?

SPICER:

It's an interesting question, because I do -- I -- I -- this is something that comes up quite a bit. I think there's a -- there is a line. People should -- we have freedom of religion in this country, and I think people should be able to practice their religion, express their religion, express areas of their faith without reprisal. And I think that pendulum sometimes swings the other way in the name of political correctness.

And I think the president and the vice president both understand that one of the things that makes our country and this democracy so great, is our ability to express our religion, to believe in faith, to express it and to live by it. And that's where I think the important part is, whether it's a small business-owner or an employee, who wants to have some degree of expression of faith at the company. And too often, those voices get you know, pushed out in the name of political correctness.

So he's going to continue to make sure that we not only speak up for it, but find ways in which we can keep that line a little less blurred, and make sure that the pendulum against people. We -- we shouldn't impose a religion on anybody. We're free to express our religion or be -- not have one.

That's obviously under our -- under our -- in our country an equally valid way of living your life. But at the same time, I think people who want to express their faith shouldn't be ostracized because they want to -- to live that.

Major (ph)?

QUESTION:

If you could give us an example, if you could, of a pendulum swinging in the direction of political correctness. And how is that going to inform the president with this executive order. And as you may know it, draft is circulating around town, and many are wondering if that is going to be a way to either silence, those on the left, or be a threat to the LGBTQ community.

Talk us through both those.

SPICER:

Well, I think if you look back to the Little Sisters case, if you look back to other businesses that were under -- under Obama -- what's that?

QUESTION:

Would you put Hobby Lobby in that category?

SPICER:

I would, yeah. Absolutely. I think there's several businesses and several institutions, Catholic institutions and others that have been mandated, or apparently attempted to mandate certain things that they may or may not do or how they have to treat their employees.

Those are instances where clearly the pendulum is swinging a different way, where you are not carving out institutions, or the ability for privately held businesses to conduct themselves to live according to their faith or their moral compass. And so, there's clearly a lot of evidence in the last couple of years of the government coming in with regulations and policies that have, frankly, denied people the ability to live according to their faith.

QUESTION:

From the president's point of view, that's discriminatory in itself?

SPICER:

Well, I -- I think there's -- like I said, I think it's a pendulum, and where the president is, is that he wants to make that you don't penalize someone for wanting to express their faith. And that to the extent we can keep that line a little less blurred and allow people who don't believe in a faith or have an opposing faith, make sure that they are equally comfortable in the workplace.

But we shouldn't penalize people or mandate them to abide by certain policies or regulations which are in direct contradiction to their faith.

QUESTION:

What about the executive order?

SPICER:

There is now -- there is right now no executive orders that are official or able to read out. We maintain that there are -- there is nothing new on that front. I'm not -- until we have...

QUESTION:

Are all religions free (ph)?

SPICER:

It's not a question -- there are a lot of ideas that are being floated out. I mentioned this the last couple days. But that doesn't mean -- part of it is as the president does all the time, he asks for input, he asks for ideas, and on a variety of subjects, there are staffing procedures that go on where people have a thought or an idea and it goes through the process.

But until the president makes up his mind and gives feedback and decides that that's final, there's nothing to announce.

QUESTION:

In light of the tragedy that's happened in that city last week which Prime Minister Trudeau is actually calling a -- an act of terrorism, what is the president doing, what initiatives is he taking to ensure that that kind of homegrown -- because he was a Canadian citizen -- homegrown terrorism, homegrown violence doesn't happen within our country?

SPICER:

Well there's a lot of things. Number one, he's talked cyber -- I mean, he's looking at it from every angle. I think the first thing is to make sure that we look at our borders. You've got to protect your own people first and you've got to look at the cyber threats, you've got -- I mean -- so there is a holistic approach to both immigration and there's a direct nexus between immigration and national security and personal security that he has to look at.

But then it's a multi-tiered step. You look at the borders, you look at who we're letting in, and you also look at what we're doing internally with our intelligence agencies and the FBI up that make sure that we're looking at -- whether it's the cyber threats that we face or other terrorist activities but making sure that we're working with the NSA and the FBI to be ahead of the curve, if you will.

QUESTION:

If I may, these are home -- this is Oklahoma City. It was an American kid.

SPICER:

Sure.

QUESTION:

OK. That's what I'm asking...

SPICER:

That's what I'm saying. But I think that part of it is looking at using the assets that we have here, the NSA, the FBI, looking at -- using the different agencies to see if we can get ahead of the curve and see things. And a lot of times, that was -- that's been a very big issue, is getting ahead of the curve for when there are telltale signs, having reporting systems up, working with the various agencies.

But it's -- it's a multi-effort process, if you will

QUESTION:

Why is the administration easing sanctions against Russia?

SPICER:

We're not easing sanctions. The Treasury Department -- it is, from what I understand, is a fairly common -- it's a fairly common practice for the Treasury Department after sanctions are put in place to go back and look at whether or not there needs to be specific carve-outs for different, you know, either industries or products and services that need to be going back and forth.

But I would refer you back to the Treasury Department on that one.

QUESTION:

But Sean -- hold on, Sean, the language on the Treasury Department website suggests that you are in fact easing sanctions and authorizing certain transactions with the Federal Security Service. Does that not suggest a shift...

SPICER:

No, it doesn't. It's -- it is, from what I understand a regular course of action that Treasury does quite often when there are sanctions imposed but I would refer you back to the Treasury Department.

QUESTION:

(inaudible) Australia? Thank you.

Could I ask you to describe the tone of the call on the weekend between the Australian prime minister and the president and also outline the president's concerns about the refugee deal in question? And I asked you this earlier this week, but could you clarify whether the deal is on or not? Because the president tweeted last night "I will study this dumb deal" implying that he's still considering it.

The president had a very cordial conversation with Prime Minister Turnbull where they went through an extensive discussion of this deal. The president is unbelievably disappointed in the previous administration's deal that was made and how poorly it was crafted and the treat to national security it put the United States on. He has tremendous respect for the prime minister and for the Australian people and has agreed to continue to review that deal and to ensure that as part of the deal, was always part of it, that we would go through a very, very extreme vetting process to ensure that every single person that goes -- that is being offered up is coming here with peaceful intentions and poses no threat to the United States.

SPICER:

So he has ensured that while he has respect for the Australian people and respect for Prime Minister Turnbull, that we do not pose a threat to the United States of America, that the deal that he was cut by the last administration is something that he is extremely, extremely upset with. He does not like it. But out of respect for him, he's going to allow that process to continue to study, and allow to move forward under the conditions that have been set that there will be extreme vetting on every single one of those individuals.

QUESTION:

Just for clarity...

SPICER:

Yes?

QUESTION:

... the deal itself is still under review, so it's not certain to proceed, or it will be...

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Yes, part of the -- part of the deal was that the deal allows for the United States to vet the individuals that are being offered up to be processed. The president's goal is to make sure that every single one of those people, in accordance with the deal, and as discussed in the telephone conversation with the prime minister, is subject to extreme vetting to ensure that no one (inaudible).

But I cannot underscore how disappointed he was in the deal that was made and how he thought it was just a horrible deal that was offered up by the United States by the previous administration.

Sarah?

QUESTION:

The president and his national security adviser have been clear that the administration wants to put Iran on notice, but they haven't specified what that is. What options are on the table? And are there any options like military action that might be off the table at this point?

SPICER:

So, I think General Flynn was really clear yesterday, that Iran has violated the joint resolution; that Iran's additional hostile actions that it took against our Navy vessel are ones that we are very clear are not going to sit by and take. I think that we will have further updates for you on those additional actions.

But clearly, we wanted to make sure that Iran understood that they are on notice this is not going unresponded to.

John?

QUESTION:

Thank you very much, Sean.

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Thank you.

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Yes?

QUESTION:

(inaudible)

SPICER:

Right. That's right.

John?

QUESTION:

Thank you, Sean.

On January 27th at the Republican retreat in Philadelphia, Vice President Pence had a closed-door meeting with House Republicans, where several of them brought up the case of IRS Commissioner John Koskinen.

SPICER:

Right.

QUESTION:

There was an attempt to impeach him last year, which some of the leadership in the House felt was unfair to the commissioner. And they urged him to tell the president that given his entire record, he should fire him or ask for his resignation soon. My sources said the vice president said, "I can hear you."

Is there any pending action on the fate of Commissioner Koskinen?

SPICER:

I have nothing to update you on.

Halley (ph)?

QUESTION:

Sean, on Yemen, this was initially described, the raid over the weekend, as a successful raid by the administration. There are now some questions (inaudible) about the possibility of additional civilian casualties. I've got a couple of questions for you on this one.

SPICER:

Yes?

QUESTION:

Would you still stand by your characterization that the raid is successful? Was the president given multiple options about this raid or just one? And were there consultations with the prior administration's national security officials, military officials about the raid moving forward?

SPICER:

Thank you. Actually, I'd like to just walk through that. I appreciate you bringing this up.

There is -- let's go through the tick-tock on that raid. On November 7th, CENTCOM submitted the plan to DOD. Clearly, that was under the last administration. Legal teams were involved immediately when it was submitted to DOD. On December 19th, the plan was approved by the Department of Defense and recommended that it be moved ahead.

It was sent then to the National Security Council staff here in the White House. Again, it all -- this all happened under the previous administration. On January 6th, there was an interagency deputies meeting. The deputies recommended at that time that they go ahead. It was so easily approved it was sent straight up. The conclusion was at that time to hold it for what they called a "moonless night," which by calendar wouldn't occur until then- President-elect Trump was President Trump.

On January 24th, shortly after taking office, Secretary of Defense-then Mattis read the memo, re-sent it back up to the White House conveying his support. On the 25th of January, the president was briefed by General Flynn on Secretary Mattis's recommendation and the status of the operation or potential operation.

The president asked to see Secretary Mattis and Joint Chiefs of Staff Dunford. He then on that evening had a dinner meeting, which included the president, the vice president, Secretary Mattis, Chairman Dunford, Chief of Staff Priebus, Jared Kushner, Chief Strategist Bannon, General Kellogg, General Flynn and CIA Director Pompeo, where the operation was laid out in great extent.

The indication at that time was to go ahead. On Friday, the 26th in the morning, the deputies committee met again. It was not a necessary step because they had previously recommended, and also reaffirmed their support for that. On January 26th, the president signed the memo authorizing the action.

So it was a very -- not only was it a very, very though-out process by this administration, and it started back on November 7th in terms of -- clearly, well before that, but it was moved forward by CENTCOM on November 7th. This was a very, very well thought out and executed effort.

QUESTION:

Where was the president the night of the raid? How did he learn about Chief Owens' death and do you still stand by your characterization that it was successful?

SPICER:

The president was here in the residence. He was kept in touch with his national security staff. Secretary Mattis and others had kept him updated on both the raid and the death of -- of Chief Owens, as well as the four other individuals who were injured. So, he -- he was kept apprised of the situation throughout the evening.

And again, I think, I would go back to what I said yesterday. It's hard to ever call something a complete success when you have the loss of life or people injured. But I think when you look at

the totality of what was gained to prevent the future loss of life, here in America, and against our people and our institutions and probably throughout the world, in terms of what some of these individuals could have done.

I think it is -- it is -- it is a successful operation by -- by all standards. It is -- and again, I want to reiterate, it is tough to ever use the word "success" when you know that somebody has lost their life, but when you go back and look at an individual that dedicated their life to serving this country and went over and over and over again knowing that this was not only the risk that he took, but wanted to do it because he knew the threat that these kind of individuals pose to our country and to our people, you know, that's -- that's, while not a success that you lost him, you know he died in sacrifice for someone else here in this nation.

Hunter Walker?

QUESTION:

Thank you, Sean.

I've seen some criticism of the president's remarks at the Prayer Breakfast this morning. Can you shed any light on why he thought that was a good venue to mock "The Apprentice" for its ratings?

SPICER:

I -- look, Mike Burnett, the creator of "The Apprentice," who is a long-time supporter of the Prayer Breakfast, but also has a personal relationship, was there. He meant it as a light-hearted moment and I think if you look at the totality of his remarks and they were absolutely beautiful and I think -- to hone in on that, it was a light-hearted moment he was trying to have with a big supporter of the National Prayer Breakfast and a personal friend.

Guys, I'll be out tomorrow. I want to make sure we all get to see the president now.

Thank you, guys. Take care. Good bye.