

Newsmaker Transcript

White House Daily Briefing

Thursday, February 23, 2017

SPICER:

You ready, John?

(LAUGHTER)

Whenever you're ready we're kicking off.

I actually -- I was thinking about not doing a briefing today, and then I saw Reince Priebus on (ph) CSPAN give that talk, and I thought they were infringing on my ratings, so we figured it out. We had to do something to keep up our record.

It's been another busy day today. This morning after receiving his daily intelligence briefing, the president welcomes some of the world's top business and manufacturing leaders to the White House to continue the administration's effort to engage with the private sector to create jobs and expand opportunities for America's workers.

The 24 CEOs spent the morning in working sessions with the vice president, cabinet members and key aides and came together with the president to brief him on their discussions and recommendations.

The group discussed the need to roll back burdensome regulations that stifling economic growth, the CEOs take the president for the actions that he's already taken to address the issue - the issues and the president pledged to do even more, both through executive - the executive branch and by working with congress to pass legislation that will help further economic growth and job creation.

The business leaders recommended that the administration take a multifaceted approach to tax and trade policies including tax reform, toward which Secretary Mnuchin said that progress is continuing to be made.

The president committed to working to lower taxes and level the playing field with other countries when it comes to trade and taxation.

The group held a lengthy discussion about the need to invest in the American worker to prepare for the manufacturing jobs of the future, especially the key role of vocational schools and training the work force - the work force of the 21st century.

SPICER:

The CEOs and administration officials agreed that public private partnerships will be the cornerstone of a robust plan to rebuild the nation's crumbling infrastructure. The president committed to streamlining a permitting process that is holding back so many key projects.

At the end of the discussion, the group expressed their excitement for having a true partner in economic growth in the White House and Andrew Liveris, the CEO of Dow Chemical even said this is probably the most pro-business administration since the founding fathers. The president conveyed his intention to assemble the industry leaders on a regular basis to discuss progress towards these important goals. A full list of the participants is available.

This afternoon, the president spoke with Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau by phone. We'll have a read-out on that call soon. Right now, many of you just came from the president involved in another listening session with leaders in the fight against domestic and international human trafficking, including representatives from International Justice Mission and United Way. Their expertise and -- will be invaluable to the president as he engages with members of Congress to raise awareness about and push through legislation aimed at preventing all forms of the horrific and unacceptable practice of the buying and selling of human lives.

Human trafficking is a dire problem domestically and internationally, and solving this epidemic is a huge priority for the president. Dedicated men and women from across the federal government has focused on this for some time, and the president is committed to continue working with these organizations and departments. A participant list for this listening session is also going to be available. The president this evening will attend a dinner with the business council. Today in Mexico, Secretary Tillerson and Kelly had productive meetings at the cabinet level with officials from the Mexican government.

They were forward-looking looking at finding common ground, ways to advance both of our countries security and economic well-being. Both sides had a candid discussion on the breadth of challenges and opportunities as part of the U.S.-Mexico relationship. The conversation covered a full range of bilateral issues, including energy, legal migration, security, education, exchanges and people-to- people ties. The parties also reiterated our joint commitment to maintaining law and order at our shared border by stopping potential terrorists and dismantling the transnational criminal network that are moving drugs and people to the United States.

Under this president, there's no mistaking the rule of lawmakers' along both sides of our border. Both secretary Tillerson and Secretary Kelly are meeting with President Pena Nieto this afternoon. That will be a continuation of the productive dialogue that is setting our two countries down a pathway to greater security and long-term prosperity. Looking ahead to our upcoming schedule, tomorrow, the president will welcome President Peru (sic) for a working level visit.

President Peru (sic) is in town for a separate visit and requested a meeting with the president. There will be a spray at the top of that. Further guidance will be provided later today. The president will also speak at CPAC tomorrow. I know the president is looking forward to addressing this group of conservative - conservative committed individuals.

Our nation's governors are starting to gather in Washington this week for a meeting of the national governance association. The president and first lady will welcome to governors to the White House on Sunday evening. The vice president and members of the cabinet will also be in attendance. While the governors are in town, they will meet with members of the cabinet, White House staff and other secretaries including Kelly, Price and Secretary Chao have also set up a series of meetings. The president, vice president and senior White House staff will also participate in a portion of the business session of the NGA's winter meeting that takes place on Monday morning.

Next week, the president will give a joint session address before both houses of Congress. He's currently working closely with the speech-writing team on presenting his vision to Congress and the American people. I've got a few updates that I want to just -- as we're now a few days out. The theme will be the renewal of the American spirit. The address will particularly focus on public safety including defense, increased border security, taking care of veterans, and then economic opportunity including education, job training, healthcare reform, jobs and tax and regulatory reform. With that, I'm glad to take a few questions.

QUESTION:

Two questions. First, the White House said previously that that travel ban was pushed quickly out of necessity for national security. And now we're hearing there's these repeated delays while the new one is being drafted. How do we reconcile those two talking points? That's question one. And then secondly, the president said today that the deportations taking place under his watch are a military operation. Secretary Kelly said the military won't be involved in the deportation. Did the president misspeak?

SPICER:

So, I'll take the latter first. The president was using that as an adjective, it's happening with precision and in a manner in which its being done very, very clearly. I think we've made it clear in the past, and Secretary Kelly reiterated that, what kind of operation this was. The president was clearly describing the manner in which this was being done. And so, just to be clear, on his use of that phrase, I think the way its being done by all accounts is in -- is being done with very much -- very -- a high degree of precision and in a flawless manner, in terms of making sure that the orders are carried out and it's done in a very streamlined and efficient manner. I'm sorry, the first part was?

QUESTION:

The first one was about the travel ban.

SPICER:

Yeah. I -- and I think look, we have made it very clear that we believed that the first one was done in a compliance with U.S. code and the authority granted to the president. This time, the order is finalized.

What we are doing is now in the implementation phase of working with the respective departments and agencies, to make sure that when we executive this, it's done in a manner that's flawless.

And so we -- it's not -- it's not a question of delaying it; it's a question of getting it right. We've taken the courts opinions and concerns into consideration. But the order is finalized, it's now awaiting implementation.

What we want to do is make sure that we're working through the departments and agencies so that any concerns or questions or entered (ph) on the front end. But we are acting with appropriate haste and diligence to make sure that the order is done in an appropriate manner.

Yes?

QUESTION:

I wanna ask you about a comment that the Treasury secretary made today. He was asked if we should assume that the tax plan the presidents about to roll out will take effect in 2018. He said and I'm quoting, "I think we're looking at that."

So my question to you is will the president accept a tax proposal that deals with a timeline of implementation to 2018 but not 2017?

SPICER:

So I -- the Secretary Mnuchin also made very clear that his goal is to have this wrapped up by August and implemented. The question is or what you're referring to is what year it actually takes place right, so whether it's retroactive to tax year 2017 or fiscal year '17?

And I think as the details get -- yeah, we'll -- we'll have more details on that as they move forward. I think there's two issues, fiscal year '17 and calendar year '17. And for taxpayers, it's obviously tax year -- I mean excuse me, calendar year 2017 that they're probably most concerned with. And I think the president, as we work with Congress, will have those details to be able to flash (ph) out.

I wanna go to our first Skype seat of the day, Neil Vigdor, with Hearst Connecticut Media Group.

VIGDOR:

Good afternoon, Sean, thanks for taking my question, I appreciate it. Connecticut's governor directed police chiefs across the state Wednesday, to avoid taking any special action against undocumented immigrants, including (ph) honoring immigration detainer request from ICE.

What will the repercussions be for the state in terms of federal funding it receives from the Trump administration? And secondly, does the president's executive order on sanctuary cities apply to those that are undeclared sanctuary cities?

SPICER:

Well, you know, I think there's a couple things. The idea that Governor Malloy would not want the law followed as enacted by Congress or by the Connecticut legislature in any fashion, seems to be concerning, right?

You -- you -- whether you're a governor or a mayor or the president, laws are passed in this country and we expect people and our lawmakers and our law enforcement agencies to follow and adhere to the laws as passed by the appropriate level of government.

So it's obviously concerning, I think -- and it's -- its troubling that that's the message that he would send to -- to his people and to other governors, because we are a nation of laws and I think that people need to understand that whether it's the laws that he passes as the governor of Connecticut or the laws that are passed through Congress and signed by the president.

There's a reason that a democracy works, it's because the people speak, our representatives you know, at every level pass a law and the executive in that particular branch of government, signs or vetoes it. And then we -- we live by those rules. And the idea that you can decide which laws to agree or not to agree with or follow or not to follow undermines our entire rule of law.

And so I would suggest that that -- that is not a great sign to -- to be sending to the people of Connecticut and the people of -- of this country, that a particular governor chooses not to follow the do we (ph) pass laws in this nation. With respect to sanctuary cities, I think this is a -- an area that the American people, by huge amounts, support.

They recognize their tax dollar shouldn't be spent supporting programs and activities which people are not entitled to. And so I think the president's been very clear on this, that if you are a sanctuary city declared or undeclared, if you are providing benefits or services, we are gonna do everything we can to respect taxpayers and ensure that your states follow the law.

April (ph)?

QUESTION:

Sean (OFF-MIKE) issue.

SPICER:

Yeah?

QUESTION:

There was a different comment from the president about you know if people like Caitlyn Jenner wanted to use the (OFF-MIKE) Trump Tower (OFF-MIKE), what's happened?

SPICER:

No, I think that's -- so just to be clear, the president was asked at one point if Caitlyn Jenner was in Trump Tower and he said, that's great. That's -- that's consistent with everything he said. It's a states rights issue and that's entirely what he believes, that if a state wants to pass a law or a rule or an organization wants to do something in compliance with a state rule, that's their right.

But it shouldn't be the federal government getting in the way of this. I mean, if you look at this, the law that was passed in 1972 did not contemplate or consider this issue. Number two, the procedure for this guidance letter that was done through the Obama administration was not proper filed. There was no comment period, there was no input from parents, teachers, students, or administrators. None.

So we think about how this was implemented last -- last administration, there was zero input, there was zero comment period offered. Teachers and students never had any say in how this was implemented. Number three, there's a reason that the Texas court had this matter enjoined; it's because it didn't follow the law and it had procedural problems.

Four, as I mentioned, it's a state right issue. And then five, is I think that we do have to recognize that children do enjoy rights from anti-bullying statutes that are in almost every state and that there's a difference between being compassionate for individuals and children who are struggling with something and wanting to make sure they're protected and how it's being done.

And I think that the president has a big heart as we've talked about in a lot of other issues and there's a big difference. Personally, he addressed this issue when it came up with respect to one of his properties. But he also believes that that's not a federal -- it's not a federal government issue. It's an issue left to the states and it's an issue that -- I mean there's a reason in August of last year that the court enjoined this; because it hadn't followed the law and it hadn't -- the procedure, the comment period and the solicitation of opinions and ideas wasn't followed.

It was jammed down the process and so we're actually following the law on this one and I think that's the way it's supposed to be done. John (ph). Hold on.

QUESTION:

I'd like it if I could just follow on what April said (ph). The human rights campaign...

QUESTION:

...I wasn't finished, I'm sorry.

QUESTION:

I'm following on your question, would you like me to follow?

SPICER:

Why don't we let April (ph) follow and then we'll get to John (ph), Kristen (ph) and...

QUESTION:

...Sorry, I have one -- I have something on another issue really fast and John (ph) can do his (ph). On HBCU had said for the order, we understand the executive order that's coming out some time later this month, it's supposed to open -- you're working out issues of opening an office specifically to take the HBCU initiative out of the Department of Education and bring it directly under the purview of the White House.

Who will be heading that, have you figured that out? Have you also figured out how you will build that office out? Because I understand that is one of the big pieces of this.

SPICER:

Well, respectfully, that's ply -- hasn't finished yet (ph). We're working it through the process. Obviously that is something that we're committed to getting done by the end of Black History Month so our days are numbered but there's a commitment by the president and the staff to really focus on this issue and give it the proper respect that it deserves.

So if you'll bear with us a couple more days, I promise you we'll have more to say on that.

QUESTION:

So it will be -- it will be a department with a full...

SPICER:

...No, I just want to be clear, I'm not going to get into the details. Sort of my blanket statement on non-issued executive orders but I do know that there is a commitment by the president and the staff that he has -- he has been very clear with us that he wants that done by the end of this month for obvious reasons.

QUESTION:

Let me come back to where we were, the Human Rights Campaign responding to rescinding the guidance last night said that this is not a states rights issue, it's a civil rights issue and therefore is in the purview of the federal government. Do you disagree that this is a civil rights issue?

SPICER:

It's a question of where it's appropriately addressed and I think there's a reason -- like, we've got to remember, this guidance was enjoined last August by a court. It hasn't been enforced. There was no comment period by -- by anyone. By the Human Rights Campaign, by teachers, parents, students, nobody had any input in this. And it seems to me a little interesting that if this was any other issue, people would be crying foul that the process wasn't followed.

The reality is, is that when you look at Title Nine, it was enacted in 1972. The idea that this was even contemplated at that is preposterous on its face but that doesn't mean that the president -- the president obviously understands the issue and the challenges that especially young children face. He just believes that this is a state issue that needs to be addressed by states as he does with a lot of other issues that we've talked about.

And so this is -- we are a states rights party, the president on a lot of issues believes in -- in these various issues being states rights. I don't see why this would be any different and again, if you go through it, it's not just -- it's how the guidance was issued, it's the legal basis on which it was ordered, it fell short on a lot of stuff. It wasn't us that -- that did this, it was the court that stepped in and said that they hadn't followed the procedure of the law back in August of last year and enjoined the case.

QUESTION:

I understand all that. Just wondering if does the White House disagree with the position that this is a civil right?

SPICER:

Well I think it's not a question of whether it's a civil right, it's where (ph) it's appropriately addressed. And, as I noted, it's appropriately addressed at the state level. Kelly (ph)

QUESTION:

Can I follow (ph) on that? Sean does the president believe, personally believe, that any student who is transgender should be able to use the bathroom of their choice? His personal belief.

SPICER:

I think -- look, the president believes it is a state's right issue and he's not going to get into determining...

QUESTION:

(OFF MIKE)

SPICER:

I understand what you're asking Kelly (ph) and I think, that as April (ph) pointed out, when the issue came to one of his own properties he was very clear that you know -- but again, what he doesn't want to do is force his issues or beliefs down -- he believes it's a state's rights issue. I--

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

(OFF MIKE) but the public (ph) may (ph) want to know where (ph) the president's (ph) view on this -

SPICER:

I understand that. And I think that he is very sympathetic to children who deal with that and that this up to states and schools within a particular district to address how they want to accommodate that and not sort of be prescriptive from Washington.

That's what the president believes. Zeke (ph).

QUESTION:

Hey Sean, you mentioned that that -- that this order (ph) was enjoined (ph) by a court and there was criticism (ph) about the process. That exact same criticism has been levied on the administration's first executive order, on the travel ban.

I mean, can you help square (ph) this (inaudible), why are you relying on that same you know -- you know enjoined by a federal court criticism of the process for one but not the other?

SPICER:

Well I -- I think there's a big difference. The -- I mean there is no way that you can read Title 9 from 1972, anybody, and say that that was even contemplated back then. It just -- it wasn't (ph) -- there is nobody that is possibly suggesting that the law that was passed in 1972 did that.

Number two, there was zero comment period put forward on this guidance, which is in violation of how it was execute, okay? And so there's a big difference -- hold on -- hold on -- let me answer the question, Zeke.

There is also a strong reading when you read, you know, 1182 U.S. Code that it is very clear that the president does have the authority. So they are very much apples and oranges issues.

One, it is very clear that the president is told by congress in U.S. Code that he has the authority to do what's necessary to protect the American people that's -- and there's no way that anybody above a 5th grade reading level could see -- could interpret that different.

There is a difference between looking at a statute from 1972 and saying that something was complicated back then. Not only that, again, it's a multifaceted thing, when you look at how the guidance was issued, there was a zero comment period.

Nobody was able to weigh in on that situation back then. And so when you're talking about forcing schools to make a huge accommodation from the federal level and schools, parents, teachers, kids

were not able to have any input in that decision from Washington, I think it's a very, very clear difference.

John Gizzi.

QUESTION:

Thank you Sean. Just going back, in a story that got relatively little attention at the time, Chuck Cooper, a very distinguished lawyer, asked that his name be withdrawn when he was on the periphery of being named U.S. Solicitor General.

So my question is a two parter. First, can you confirm or deny the administration is now vetting Mr. Miguel Estrada, who is a former nominee for the Court of Appeals, as Solicitor General before the visa delay case gets to the Supreme Court?

And second, Mr. Cooper said that he did not want to go through the same experience that Jeff Sessions, his good friend, did when he had the confirmation hearings and the vote in the Senate.

Does that make the president a little bit discouraged about getting the nominees he wants for some very important positions?

SPICER:

Well, thanks John. And I'd say -- on the first part, as you know -- I'll give you the same answer we give executive orders, we don't comment on personnel decisions until they're made, until they're finalized, so I've got nothing for that.

On the second part, what I would say is that the president is very confident, we have deep bench of folks who, during the transition we talked about this, a number of people who've expressed a huge interest in joining the president in fulfilling this agenda. And that list is robust and long.

However, that being said, I think for folks who have to go through the Senate confirmation and to watch what has happened to some of these fine individuals, the delay tactics, the tearing apart of their personal lives, it is discouraging.

For some of these people I think, in terms of Mr. Cooper and others, who are looking at the process saying, I would like to be part of this administration, help fulfill this vision and this agenda, but this is what I'm going to have to go through.

So while this is somewhat of an isolated case, I definitely understand what he's talking about here. And I think, you know, those are few and far between.

SPICER:

But I think that when you realize what is happening largely at the expense of Senate Democrats, in terms of dragging these people through a very, very delayed and arduous process for purely political point -- you know I think there's some people who could look at that process and potentially say, I don't want to serve.

Luckily we've not come to that beyond a handful of folks. Largely, people have a huge desire and are willing to make great sacrifice both financially and personally to serve in the administration because I think they understand what potential change this president is bringing to this country and to the city.

So -- but I understand his point.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

This morning, President Trump (inaudible) really bad news.

SPICER:

Yes.

QUESTION:

You talked about rescission. The homeland security secretary this morning insisted there won't be mass deportations.

SPICER:

Right.

QUESTION:

Is it the president's intent or desire, as some advocates worry, that people who are here illegally with something as simple as a traffic violation, that those people will be subject to deportation?

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Well, I mean, I think everybody who is in this country, for obvious reasons -- I mean, if you overstay a visa, you commit a crime, you can't, by the very nature of you not being legal, you can be subject to deportation. That's by definition.

Being in this country is a privilege, not a right, if you are a visitor. I think we have a right to make sure that the people who are in this country are here for good, peaceful processes. And as I've said over and over again, there is a big difference.

The president recognizes that there are millions of people in the country who are not here legally and that we have to have a very systematic and pragmatic and methodical process of going through those individuals to make sure that the people who pose a threat to public safety or have a criminal record are the first that are gone.

What we've done, just to be clear, is to untie the hands of ICE and Border Patrol agents and say, "Your job is to enforce the law." First and foremost, to figure out who poses a threat to us. In the previous administration, their hands have been tied. There was exception after exception after exception.

And the fact of the matter is that we have to -- we are a nation of laws. And we have to have a system of legal immigration that is respected. So, I'm not going to be prescriptive in terms of what ICE's job is, but needless to say their job and their mission is to protect the country and to enforce our borders and our immigration laws.

And the president has basically instructed them to carry out their mission. And so the priorities, as we've discussed over and over and over again, is to do that in a way that is -- that is in accordance with the law, but also prioritizes those people that pose a threat.

I'm going to go to Roby Brock from Talk Business & Politics in -- where is he from? -- Arkansas.

QUESTION:

Hi. Thanks, Sean. Roby Brock with Talk Business & Politics here in Arkansas, the home of the rowdiest town halls in the nation.

I have a question on medical marijuana. Our state voters passed a medical marijuana amendment in November. Now, we're in conflict with federal law, as many other states are. The Obama administration kind of chose not to strictly enforce those federal marijuana laws. My question to you is, with Jeff Sessions over at the Department of Justice as A.G., what's going to be the Trump administration's position on marijuana legalization where it's in state-federal conflict like this?

SPICER:

Thanks, Roby. There's two distinct issues here: medical marijuana and recreational marijuana. I think medical marijuana, I've said before that the president understands the pain and suffering that many people go through who are facing, especially terminal diseases, and the comfort that some of these drugs, including medical marijuana, can bring to them.

And that's one that Congress, through a rider in 2011 -- looking for a little help -- I think put in an appropriations bill saying the Department of Justice wouldn't -- wouldn't be funded to go after those folks.

There's a big difference between that and recreational marijuana. And I think that when you see something like the opioid addiction crisis blossoming in so many states around this country, the last thing we should be doing is encouraging people. There is still a federal law that we need to abide by in terms of the medical -- when it comes to recreational marijuana and other drugs of that nature.

So, I think there's a big difference between medical marijuana, which states have a -- the states where it's allowed, in accordance with the appropriations rider, have set forth a process to administer and regulate that usage, versus recreational marijuana. That's a very, very different subject and I think -- Shannon? Shannon? Shannon?

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Glen (ph), this isn't a TV program. We're going to...

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

OK. You don't get to just yell out questions. We're going to raise our hand like big boys and girls.

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Because it's not your job to just yell out questions.

Shannon, please go.

QUESTION:

OK. Well, first on the manufacturing summit. Was the AFL-CIO invited? And then, yeah, I did want to follow up on this medical marijuana question. So is the federal government then going to take some sort of action around this recreational marijuana in (inaudible) states?

SPICER:

Well, I think that's a question for the Department of Justice. I do believe that you'll see greater enforcement of it. Because again, there's a big difference between the medical use, which Congress has through an appropriations rider in 2014, made very clear what the intent -- what their intent was in terms of how the Department of Justice would handle that issue. That's very different than the recreational use, which is something the Department of Justice I think will be further looking into.

I'm sorry, Shannon (ph), what was the first part?

QUESTION:

Was the (inaudible) invited to the manufacturing meeting today? Or was (inaudible)

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Right, I think this was just focused on people who actually -- they were not, I don't believe, part of this one. As you know, that we've had union representation at other meetings. I think this was specifically for people who are hiring people and the impediments that they're having to create additional jobs, hire more people. And obviously, while the president values their opinion and that's why that they've been involved (inaudible), this was specifically a manufacturing -- people who hire people, who manufacture, who grow the economy, who grow jobs. And that is a vastly different situation.

Andre (ph)?

QUESTION:

Thank you, Sean. I specifically -- (inaudible). Thank you. Question on Russia. Secretary Tillerson and General Dunford have had meetings with their Russian counterparts. Is the president pleased with the results of the meetings?

SPICER:

Yes.

QUESTION:

And what comes next?

SPICER:

Yes. Both of them had an opportunity to meet with their counterparts in different locations, ironically on the same day. I believe that was yesterday. They both had very, very productive discussions. The president was very pleased with the outcome of that. So I would refer you back to both, General Dunford and Secretary Tillerson on those, but -- yes?

QUESTION:

(inaudible) discussing the -- where and when for the summit for the leader's meeting?

SPICER:

I don't have any updates on that, but I'll -- I'll look into that.

Cecilia (ph)?

QUESTION:

I want to clarify...

SPICER:

OK>

QUESTION:

... make sure I understand what you said, you said you will see greater enforcement of it?

SPICER:

I -- I would refer you to the Department of Justice.

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

I know -- I think -- then that's what I said. But I think, the Department of Justice is the lead on that. It is something that you should follow up with them, but I believe that they are -- they are going to continue to enforce the laws and the books with respect to recreational marijuana.

QUESTION:

A real question, if you don't mind.

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

That first one was pretty real.

QUESTION:

Ivanka Trump was in the White House today for a meeting on human trafficking. She had this meeting on CEOs. We saw her in a smaller session here at the White House today. What exactly is her role here?

SPICER:

I think her role is to be helpful and provide input on a variety of areas that she has deep passion and concerns about, especially in the area of women in the work force and empowering women. She is someone who has a lot of expertise and wants to offer that, especially in the area of helping women.

She understands that first hand. And I think because of the success that she's had, her goal is to figure out any understanding that she has as a business woman to use her expertise and understanding to empower and help women have the same kind of opportunity and success that she's had. So...

QUESTION:

A formal role?

SPICER:

No -- I -- I think -- no, nothing more than you've seen now. I think, last night the meeting that she had in Baltimore was one that she had done on her own. There's areas that she's cared very passionately about before her time in the White House or before her father coming to the White House, rather. And now that her father is in the White House, she continues to seek a platform that helps empower and lift up women and give them opportunities and think of ways that they can be...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

Sean, thanks. On the human trafficking meeting today, the president said, well, when you talk about solving this kind of problem, that's a nice word, but it's really -- he suggested that more likely he could just help out on that problem. What's his definition of success in this? What's his goal? Is he looking at stronger criminal penalties...

SPICER:

Well, I think that's -- as I read out earlier, the president understands this is a serious problem both, for adults, but particularly for children who are being sold both domestically and internationally. And that's why we brought these groups in. It's to make sure how that we figure out how do we make that number as close to zero as possible.

And that we institute policies both, domestically, but then abroad and working with our partners to figure out how do we combat the trafficking of people. And it's -- so it's things that we can be forceful in terms of the rhetoric that the president uses, but also the enforcement tools he uses both domestically and internationally.

Trey (ph)?

QUESTION:

Has the president been briefed at all on the situation at Standing Rock? And is he concerned that a standoff with protesters could slow down his executive orders on the pipeline?

SPICER:

Our team has been involved with both, the tribe and the governor there. And so we're not -- we're constantly in touch with them and I think we feel very confident that we will move forward to -- to get the pipeline moving, and so we'll have a further update on that but I think we're in constant contact with the officials there.

QUESTION:

Thank you. A few topics I'd like to ask about, I want to start off by following up on the transgender directive. 82 percent of transgender children are feeling unsafe at school so isn't the president leaving some of these children open to, vulnerable, to being bullied at school?

SPICER:

No, I mean there's - there are bullying laws and policies in place in almost every one of these schools.

QUESTION:

Transgender children say their experience...

SPICER:

...But I - I don't think...

QUESTION:

...Is not being able to use the bathroom that they feel comfortable using.

SPICER:

But again, you're - you're missing the point here. The president said literally it should be a state decision. He respects the decision of the state so therefore...

QUESTION:

...Is protecting kids a states rights issue?

SPICER:

No, that's not - you're trying to make an issue out of something that doesn't exist. It was the court who stopped this in August of last year. OK? So where were the questions last year in August about this? It wasn't implemented correctly, legally and the procedure wasn't followed because the court found at the time that it didn't have the authority to do that.

So you're - you're asking us why we're following the law that wasn't followed. And the reality's - hold on...

QUESTION:

...We're talking about reversing the law, correct (ph)?

SPICER:

We're not reversing it. Hold on, we're not reversing it. That - you're - that is a misinterpretation of this scenario. The court stopped it, it enjoined it in August of last year because it wasn't properly drafted and it didn't follow the procedures and there was no legal basis for it in a law that was instituted in 1972. So hold on, for you to use those terms, frankly doesn't reflect what the situation actually is and how it happened.

That's just - so to talk about us reversing something that was stopped by the courts...

QUESTION:

...I understand that but you're sending a message.

SPICER:

No we're not. We're basically saying that it's a states rights issue. If a state chooses to do it, as I mentioned to April (ph), when this circumstance came up at one of the president's own properties he was very clear about his position on this. So for you to turn around and say "what message is the president saying," where was the message when he sent it last year?

I think the message shows that he's a guy with a heart that understands the trouble that many people go through but he also believes that the proper legal recourse for this is with the states. He believes in the states ability to determine what's right for their state versus another state. So...

QUESTION:

...I understand what you're saying but the LGBTQ community yesterday said they felt that...

SPICER:

...I understand what - but there's a difference between what people may or may not feel and the legal - the legal process and the law. And the law right now doesn't allow for it under Title Nine that was passed in 1972 and the procedure wasn't followed. The court saw this in August of last year for a reason and all we're doing is saying that the proper place for this is in the states.

And so, for you to suggest what message is this sending, it's very simple, that it's a states rights issue and the states should enact laws that reflect the values, principles, and will of the people in their particular state. That's it, plain and simple.

QUESTION:

Let me ask you about Obamacare very quickly. House Speaker - former House Speaker John Boehner predicted that a full repeal and replace of Obamacare, quote, his words, "is not going to happen." He went on to say most of the framework of the Affordable Care Act is going to be there. Do you think that he has a point? Are you going to see a full...

SPICER:

...Well, no, I think - I think, look, I think what we're going to end up with is something that I've talked about over and over again. We're going to end up with a more accessible plan that will allow people to see more doctors, have more providers, and drive costs down. Those are the two guiding principles that we're going to have in what the president is going to work with Congress to put forward on.

That's it, plain and simple.

QUESTION:

On roads and highways in the United States, in many places around the country potholes and other issues are affecting the way in which Americans travel and the president has said he would fix these issues during the campaign.

SPICER:

Right.

QUESTION:

What is the status on that and has the president spoken to heads of DOT or other people?

SPICER:

Well that, I mean, I think the president is starting to address that through the budget process we talked about yesterday. It'll be out in mid-March and so those - the infrastructure projects and priorities that the president has talked about, there's air - air control and our airports or the roads

and bridges will be something that he's going to work with DOT but also talk about in his budget and you'll see more in his joint address to Congress.

With that, Laurel Staples of KECI NBC in Montana.

QUESTION:

Montana has hundreds of miles of border with Canada and according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, almost 1 million people come across that border into Montana each year. What are the administration's plans to increase security on the Canadian border and does the administration have any plans to build a wall there?

(LAUGHTER)

SPICER:

Well, we're obviously concerned - thank you, at all sorts of immigration to this country whether it's from our northern border or southern border. I think the president understands that our southern border is - is where we have more of a concern in terms of the number of people and the type of activity that's coming over there in terms of cartels and drug activity.

But that doesn't mean that we're not paying attention to our northern border as well. We will continue to both monitor and take steps necessary at our northern border to ensure the safety of all Americans.

Yes?

QUESTION:

Sean, one question on the South China Sea, and then a followup on the Dakota access pipeline.

This week was the first week, I believe, that the Trump administration launched freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Can you give us a sense of how frequently you're going to be doing those?

And then on the Dakota access pipeline, a few weeks ago President Trump said would try to negotiate a solution between the Standing Rock Sioux and Energy Transfer Partners. Why hasn't the president intervened and tried to initiate those negotiations yet?

SPICER:

So, on the latter, our team has been in contact with both -- with all the parties involved. They have been working and communicating back and forth. So, if we have an update on that -- but there has been work at the staff level between the parties.

And then on the second, on the first part, you know, I've got no further update in terms of the frequency of which we will have (inaudible).

Alexis?

QUESTION:

Sean, (inaudible) described again his interest in seeing (inaudible) nuclear arsenal (inaudible) United States. Can you describe what it is (inaudible) have in mind, the timeframe, and how he would like to pursue that?

SPICER:

Yeah, let's just be clear. I mean, he didn't -- what he was very clear on is that the United States will not yield its -- its supremacy in this area to anybody. That's what he made very clear in there. And then if other countries have nuclear capabilities, it will always be the United States that has the supreme -- supremacy and commitment to this.

Obviously, that's not what we're seeking to do. The question that was asked was about other people growing their stockpiles. And I think what he has been clear on is that our goal is to make sure that we maintain America's dominance around the world, and that if other countries flout it, we don't sit back and allow them to grow theirs.

Francesca?

QUESTION:

Sean, a domestic policy question and then a foreign policy question, if you will.

You said yesterday that the president had named a task force on the voter fraud probe. When did he name that task force specifically?

SPICER:

I think two weeks ago he announced that Vice President Pence would -- would lead that task force and that the vice president and his team were starting to look at members to that.

QUESTION:

(inaudible) referring to the interview in which he said there would be a task force?

SPICER:

That's right.

QUESTION:

Not that something (inaudible).

SPICER:

That's correct.

QUESTION:

OK. And then on foreign policy, the president had said in his Saturday campaign speech that the Gulf states would be paying for that safe zone in Syria. Which Gulf states was he referring to? Have any committed to paying for that?

SPICER:

So, if you look at the readouts that he's had with several of the foreign leaders, that is brought up and mentioned in almost every one of the. And I think he's talked about the financing of the safe zones and the commitment that they need to make to those. And I think by and large, we've had widespread commitment. When we have an update on -- and I think that's an issue that's going to be ongoing at the secretary of state level as well, where you saw Secretary Tillerson follow up on that with numerous folks.

We will have further updates on the funding of safe zones as we go forward. But there has been a, you know, a general commitment by most of these heads of government to share in the president's commitment to help fund these things.

Can I go to Steve Gruber of WJIM in Michigan?

QUESTION:

Thank you, Sean. I greatly appreciate it. I'd like to talk to you more about tax policy, if I may.

President Trump, of course, on the campaign trail talked a lot about tax policy and tax reform. That hasn't happened yet, as we know. But I want to talk about something different. That's the border adjustability tax, with the manufacturers that were at the White House again today. States like Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, others have a great concern about this tax.

And there seems to be a disconnect between some of the CEOs, some of the Republicans on Capitol Hill, and the president as to whether or not this is appropriate. And I guess the question is, could this tax have a chilling effect on manufacturing at a time when places like Ohio and Michigan and the upper Midwest are trying to jump-start the economy with manufacturing jobs? And I wish for you to clarify, if you could, the president's position.

SPICER:

Yeah, Steve. Thank you.

I think the president has been very clear from the beginning that there is no tax if companies manufacture in the United States. We are one of only a handful of countries that doesn't tax the imports that come into our country. Almost every other country operates their tax code under that system.

And so what happened is we have a system by which companies abroad can send their products - tax our products going into their country, and institute an import tax. And then their products come into the United States with no import tax, which frankly gives a disincentive to companies to stay in the United States, to manufacture in the United States, to hire in the United States. And it tilts the field against the American worker.

And so, the president is looking at tax policy that encourages manufacturing and job creation in the United States. And if you think about it...

QUESTION:

But where is he on this border adjustability tax?

SPICER:

Hold on...

QUESTION:

Where is he on this tax specifically?

SPICER:

I understand that and I think that what he is doing is he met yesterday with his team on the budget. He's talked to Secretary Mnuchin and others, who are working on a comprehensive tax reform plan. And remember, see this isn't something that's been done since 1986.

QUESTION:

I understand.

SPICER:

And so as we look at it, part of that is to make sure that we lower our corporate tax rate, that we make it more attractive to manufacture and grow jobs in the United States, to make our companies more competitive with companies overseas that frankly, have better tax treatment than our own companies who stay in the United States.

So creating more of a playing field that encourages manufacturing and growing and creating, in the United States. But make no mistake; if a company's in the United States already and expanding in the United States, it will be only to their benefit.

It -- it -- actually, if you think about it right now, the way the current tax code works, it almost incentivizes companies from leaving the United States, manufacturing and expanding overseas and then sending their goods and services back to the United States, which undermines our own economy, it undermines our workers...

QUESTION:

But the question is about components coming back into the United States being manufactured.

SPICER:

I understand, Steve (ph). I -- OK, I know that you're on the Skype but we only do like one of two follow-ups.

QUESTION:

Sorry.

SPICER:

But the answer is that he's working towards comprehensive tax reform and we'll have a plan out within the next few weeks that will address that.

Yeah?

QUESTION:

Sean, Sean, on the transgender guy that the administration not only resubmitted (ph) but sent a letter to the Supreme Court informing them about the change as they consider it to be related change. Does the termination of the guidance present the administration position the way the Supreme Court should rule?

SPICER:

I'm sorry, I'm (ph) -- well, obviously, I'm -- thank you, I'm sorry, removing the guidance clearly does. If the guidance that was put forward by the Obama administration which clearly, hadn't been done in a proper way in terms of how they solicited or rather didn't solicit comments.

The guidance that puts forward obviously sends a signal to the court on where the administration stands on this issue.

Yeah?

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

...can I ask you about Syria, two quick questions?

SPICER:

Yeah.

QUESTION:

First, the talks have started again, peace talks in Geneva (ph). The manager meeting (ph) step inside store (ph) says he's not detected a clear strategy on the political track on the administration. So what is the president's thinking on that?

And in particular, what's his thinking on the picture (ph) of President Assad (ph) one that he can stay on in the transition of people (ph)...

SPICER:

Let me -- I would defer you to the State Department on the status of the talks...

QUESTION:

(OFF-MIKE)

SPICER:

I think we'll have...

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Right, I understand that and that's one of the things that the president, whether it's safe zones or how we deal with Syria and the problem, but...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

...thinking on a sense (ph) future is the key point...

SPICER:

I'm not -- right, I understand that, thank you. But I -- no...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

...one other question and on Syria, if you don't mind?

SPICER:

Yeah.

QUESTION:

The fall of Al-Bab in -- in northern Syria, an important development on the battlefield, creates some space and that town has fallen to the Turks and opposition. Is that the sort of space that the president would like to see a safe zone?

SPICER:

Look, I -- I don't -- we're not trying to be prescriptive right now, in terms of the geographic location of a safe zone. It's something that right now, the precedent's goal is to get commitment from other world leaders, both in terms of the funding and the commitment to share and -- and how we do that.

So I don't wanna get it -- we're not looking to be prescriptive today in how it's done. I think overall, we need a greater commitment in the region, to make sure that people are committed to a strategy and to safe zones to allow that to stop some of the human suffering that's going on and -- and create while other -- while the rest of the -- the conflict ensues.

And I think that we've got -- we've got to dual track this, deal with the conflict as a whole and how we address it and how we deal with ISIS and combating it. But then we also have to -- there's a humanitarian piece to this, as well, with respect to the safe zones. And I think that we are looking at both pieces of this, as well.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

...thanks, Sean. Since the election, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has expressed some disclaim (ph) about pulling out of the Paris Agreement on climate change and the president has also heard from some -- some world leaders about that.

Can you tell us, is the president still committed to pulling out of the Paris Agreement on climate change?

SPICER:

I think I will leave that to Secretary Tillerson. That's a conversation that he's having with them, as far as where we are on that.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

Sean, thank you very much. And to follow-up to the Syria question part (ph), do you have any timeline when it comes to when he wants to see those safe zones actually being built? And I wanted to go back to the executive order on immigration.

You talked about these dual tracks where you're gonna be doing the new executive order but also continuing to fight that in court. Can you give us the status update on where that legal fight is....

SPICER:

Right.

QUESTION:

...and what we should see happening?

SPICER:

So with respect to the executive order, there are several courts that this is being fought in, like 10 or so and we continue to -- to deal with that in all of those venues.

SPICER:

And then, again I guess the only way to say this and then obviously on the dual track side, we have the additional executive order that we talked about earlier to -- that will come out and further address the problem.

We continue to believe that the issues that we face specifically in the Ninth District -- Ninth Circuit, rather -- that we will prevail on on the merits of that. But on the other challenges that have come in the other venues and the others, that we feel equally confident, as we did in Massachusetts and other venues.

So, it's not a single-track system.

I'm sorry (inaudible).

QUESTION:

(inaudible) about the Supreme Court, taking it there?

And then the other question was on the (inaudible).

SPICER:

No, I think -- yes, so with respect to the Supreme Court, I mean, we've got to continue to work this through the process. So right now it's at the Ninth Circuit. That's the primary problem that we are addressing. And then we don't have any timeline that I can announce today on Syrian safe zones.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

I just want to follow up to this morning's meeting. And the president said that he gave authorization to a couple of countries to buy military equipment from the United States. Which countries was he referring to? And has he gone to Congress to ask for permission...

(CROSSTALK)

SPICER:

Let me get -- we'll have -- we'll follow up and get a list for you on that.

So, Jeff?

QUESTION:

Sean, if I could ask again about the delay of the executive order until next week. Is the administration still trying to craft its legal argument to this, to withstand scrutiny? Or why again the delay? I'm not sure I understand.

SPICER:

I don't -- yeah, and I think I asked and answered this earlier.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

OK. Then I'll explain it to you.

I think the president this time, we were very careful to understand what the court's concerns were and address them in the followup executive order.

With respect to when we're going to announce it, part of this is to make sure that we work with the appropriate departments and agencies on the implementation of it, to make sure that it is executed and continues to be executed in a flawless manner; that it meets the intent that it would serve.

We understand the challenges that may come. And so we want to do this in a manner that makes sure that the Hill, you know, other members of Congress, the appropriate agencies and departments, are fully ready to implement this when it's issued.

And so that's it. There's really nothing more to it.

Yes?

QUESTION:

(inaudible) there also is (inaudible), if I can follow up. There also is concern inside the Justice Department and in Homeland Security by some officials this afternoon that we're reporting that the White House is looking for them to help build this legal argument, to find a conclusion here.

SPICER:

No, that's not -- we -- basically, you're saying that we did our due diligence. We looked to the departments to ask them to review certain things. So last week, it was -- we rushed stuff. This week, you're saying that we are taking our time.

QUESTION:

(inaudible) more difficult than you thought (inaudible)?

SPICER:

No, no. Actually, that's not true. I don't think so. And I think you using continued unnamed sources, I think it actually is -- it is being -- it will be implemented flawlessly because we've done the right thing and gone to these individuals; sought feedback and guidance; and done this in an unbelievably comprehensive way to ensure that departments and agencies that are going to be executing and implementing this fully are aware of what's happening.

But there is -- this has been done in a very, very comprehensive way.

Yes?

QUESTION:

Thank you, Sean. Melanie Addor (ph), CMS News.com. (ph)

Former Labor Secretary Nominee Andrew Puzder admitted that for a few years he unwittingly employed an illegal immigrant as a housekeeper. Is this administration committed to holding employers accountable when they employ illegal aliens? And how does the administration plan to do so?

SPICER:

Yeah, I think that was -- that issue was something that -- that Mr. Puzder was very forthcoming on. And when he recognized the situation that had occurred, he paid all the appropriate taxes and tried to help the individual go through the proper process.

And so yeah, we're going to continue to make sure that we hold individuals in compliance with the law. And he did the right thing then. But whether it's companies or individuals, I think we are committed to making sure that people do what's right.

Yes, ma'am?

QUESTION:

Ronica Cleary with Fox 5. I have two questions.

Jackie Evancho, she sang the national anthem, she requested a meeting with the president. Her sister is transgender. Is he going to take that meeting or meet with anyone from the transgender community doing this conversation?

SPICER:

Yeah, I think the president would be welcome to meet with her.

QUESTION:

The second question -- second question.

SPICER:

Yeah?

QUESTION:

Steve Bannon today called the media the "opposition party." Last week, there was lots of conversation about the fake news and (inaudible) enemy of the people.

Some have said that this is really just a branding of the media, of where he did that in the primaries, branding little Marco (ph) in Lion's Head (ph).

SPICER:

Well, no -- that was (inaudible).

QUESTION:

(inaudible), but is this a branding strategy to (inaudible)?

SPICER:

Well, I think that (inaudible) believes (inaudible) absolutely. Of course, it's real. I don't think you go out -- Steve's been very clear about his position on the media and how he believes it distorts things. So I don't think there's...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

(inaudible) administration (inaudible).

SPICER:

No, no. (inaudible) I -- I just said that that is what Steve's (ph) view is, he's made it several times and I think he's very clear on this.

QUESTION:

Back to the border adjustment tax, President Trump's told Reuters that he does support some form of a border tax. How does the president respond to critics that are saying the border adjustment tax will be passed on to lower income and middle class families in the form of higher prices for goods and higher prices for gas?

SPICER:

Well I think if you look at holistically -- I mean, the first thing to understand is that there is no tax if you're manufacturing in the United States so there can be no higher cost. But if you think about it right now, we have to look at this in a holistic way which is when a company chooses to leave our country and shed American jobs so they can move overseas and then sell back to us at a lower price, there's a big cost that comes to our economy and to our workers.

And so, we've got to look at this comprehensively but there -- if a company chooses to stay and grow in the United States, hire more people, it actually will be a net savings if you think about it because it'll be the companies who are overseas who have chosen to move out of the country who will face a higher cost under these kind of plans. And that's a big difference.

It'll actually benefit consumers, benefit workers, and benefit our economy and that's -- when you really think about the economic impact about that, that -- that benefits our economy, it helps our

American workers, it grows more jobs, it grows the manufacturing base and again, it's -- we are probably one of only a handful of developed countries that don't have a tax system that looks at this.

And so right now it's America and American workers and American manufacturing that are at the disadvantage of the current regulatory and tax system not the other way around. Thank you, guys. Have a great day. We'll touch base tomorrow some way. I will see you then. Tune into CPAC to see the president.