

WHITE HOUSE DAILY BRIEFING TRANSCRIPT

Friday, March 4, 2016

EARNEST:

All right. Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all.

I do not have any statements to make at the top, so we can go straight to your questions. Darlene (ph), do you want to start?

QUESTION:

There was a time -- I wanted to ask about the economy.

There was a time when, you know, every month the jobs report would come out and the president would have something to say about the numbers. And he stopped doing that for a little while. And it seems now that (inaudible). I was just wondering if you could explain why the resumption.

EARNEST:

Well, look, I -- what continues to be true here is that we were mindful of the need to not be too disappointed when one set of jobs numbers falls short of expectations and not get too excited when one set of jobs numbers exceeds expectations.

But what we are focused on are the longer-term trends.

And the longer-term trends were further cemented in this month's job numbers: 72 consecutive months of private-sector job growth, 14.3 million jobs created. Over the last -- you know, that is over the last two years the fastest rate of job growth since the late 1990s.

The longer-term trends when it comes to wage growth continue to be pretty good. You know, wage growth is increasing but -- wages are growing at about 2.5 percent a year. That's good; it could be better, and the president certainly has some ideas for how to make that better.

EARNEST:

And I think the reason that it -- it seems particularly important to discuss it now is precisely for the reason that the president explained, and that's simply this: There is a -- a vigorous political debate going on in the country and the intensity of that debate will only increase as we get closer to the general election. And the debate in the general election will be focused on whether or not we build on the progress that we've made over the last seven years, that has led to the longest consecutive streak of private-sector job growth in American history, or are we going to go back on that progress and are we gonna turn back to the policies that actually led to the Great Recession.

And the reason the president feels it's important to comment on this with increasing frequency, is it's important for people to understand that we have made important progress. And there are a lot of ways to measure it. This is the measurement that tends to get the most attention, and that's the reason the president chose to discuss it.

So, you know, will we get another set of job numbers next month? Hopefully. Does that mean the president will necessarily talk about it? Not necessarily.

But, look, this will be an important part of the discussion because, look, if people don't recognize that we have made progress, then it's going to be hard to make the case that we need to build on that progress.

So -- and it won't just be in reaction to -- to a release of information from the Department of Labor. This is certainly something that all of you who cover the president's fund-raisers hear him talk about. And as the president becomes more engaged in the campaign across the country over the course of this year, I'm confident this will be an important part of his stump speeches.

QUESTION:

(inaudible) warming up for the campaign basically?

EARNEST:

No, I -- I don't think I'd say it -- I'd say it quite that way.

But I think the president is certainly pleased about the important progress that our country has made that's borne out in the numbers.

And I don't just mean the numbers that relate to the state of the economy in February of 2016. I mean the longer-term trends point to important strength in our economy. And there is a fundamental question about whether or not we want to build on that progress or if we want to turn back to a set of policies that actually weakened our economy.

That's a -- that is a legitimate subject of political debate. Republicans, obviously, have their own ideas. The president just happens to think they're the wrong ones.

QUESTION:

I also wanted to about Cuba. Secretary Kerry apparently has decided not to go to -- to make a stop in Cuba before the president arrives there later this month. (inaudible) there's still some disagreement over -- with the Cubans over (inaudible) the secretary's decision -- Secretary Kerry's decision not to go (inaudible) on the president's trip.

EARNEST:

It doesn't, because, as Secretary Kerry testified before Congress a couple weeks ago, he was considering a trip to Cuba. He had no -- made no plan to follow through on it. Since then, Secretary Kerry has decided to travel with the president to Cuba in just a couple of weeks.

On that trip, the president does intend to meet with some political dissidents inside of Cuba. That is a -- the guest list for that meeting will be determined solely by the White House. There will not be any input from the Cuban government about the list of people who attend that meeting.

So there is no real dispute about this. I suspect that -- (inaudible) dispute about this because the president will meet with whomever he chooses to meet with. And there's no disputing that. And when he has that meeting, the secretary of state, John Kerry, will be sitting right next to him.

Aisha (ph)?

QUESTION:

On North Korea, I'm sure you've seen the reports that North Korea told its military to be ready to maybe make a pre-emptive strike or even to use nuclear weapons. In -- and this is coming after they've been hit with these additional sanctions.

QUESTION:

I mean, is it a concern that they're -- that they're still engaging in this rhetoric?

That they're still making these threats? Obviously, the sanctions are just starting, but is it a concern that they may not be changing their posture at this point?

EARNEST:

Well, as we've often discussed in other contexts where the United States in coordination with the international community has imposed sanctions against another country, our expectation is that that will not yield a change overnight. But over time, we have seen that increasing isolation does prompt some countries to reevaluate their strategy.

Iran is, of course, the best example of that. There are some situations where we have seen that international isolation has had a tangible and increasing impact on a country's economy. Russia is a good example of that situation.

So I think it is too soon to evaluate what impact the recently agreed upon sanctions against North Korea has on the leaders of that country's decision-making. The fact is, as you pointed out in your question, the kind of comments and provocative actions that we've seen out of Pyongyang in the last 36 hours or so are not new.

And we continue to urge the North Korean regime to refrain from provocative actions and statements that tend to aggravate tensions. Instead, we believe that they should focus on fulfilling their international obligations and commitments, particularly when it relates to their nuclear program.

And that is not just the view of the United States. That's the view of the international community. And, you know, that will continue to be our posture moving forward even as implement a set of sanctions that are tougher than have ever been implemented against them.

QUESTION:

Is there concern that, I mean even though the rhetoric is not new, they have been doing more testing and testing more equipment and things of that nature. Is there is a concern about maybe eventually them following -- being able to follow through on some of these threats? Like, are these threats that they're doing now, how much concern does -- or how seriously does the White House take the threats that they're making at this moment?

EARNEST:

Well, the -- the concern about the North Korean ballistic missile program and nuclear program should be evident based on the significant sanctions that were passed by the United Nations Security Council. I think that is an indication that the international community agrees that this is a subject of concern.

It's why we've imposed a level of sanctions and inspections against them that have never been imposed against them before. Our concern stems primarily from our need to protect the American people and we've talked about the steps that the administration has taken at the direction of President Obama to bolster the defenses of the United States in the face of threats that emanate from North Korea.

There are missile -- ballistic missile defense systems that have been moved to the Asia-Pacific region to protect the United States. There is a ballistic missile -- ballistic missile defense system that was moved to Alaska in 2014. There are ballistic missile -- ballistic missile warning radar systems that have been moved to Japan.

There are a set of naval assets that are part of a ballistic missile defense constellation that have been moved to the Pacific, and that ramped up presence there; enhances the security not just of the United States, but also of our partners and allies in the region, including countries like Japan and South Korea that, you know, are most likely to be in harm's way.

So we certainly take very seriously the responsibilities that we have to protect the security of our allies Japan and South Korea. We're going to continue to monitor the situation closely and we're going to continue to call upon the North Korean government to avoid destabilizing actions and other provocations that tend to rattle an already jittery region of the world.

QUESTION:

And on Zika, the White House is planning to have -- hold a summit on Zika in April to try to control the spread of the mosquitoes that would spread the disease. Can you talk a bit about why - why the White House has chosen to move ahead with the summit at this time? What is the main goal that you hope to accomplish out of that? And kind of -- just kind of the outlook for a Zika response at this point?

EARNEST:

This summit is actually the result of a discussion at the National Governors Association conference here at the White House a couple of weeks ago. The CDC will be hosting this conference in Atlanta on April 1st, and it will include representatives from state and local governments across the country, including many governors.

EARNEST:

And it is an opportunity for us to bring together these leaders from across the country with the foremost public health experts in the U.S. government to discuss what prudent steps should be taken to protect the American people.

The administration has treated this as a top priority, and we certainly recognize that, when confronted with risks like this, early action is important.

And that's why we've taken the kinds of steps that we have already taken to try to get ahead of this situation. The most important of those steps, frankly, was putting forward a package to the United States Congress that would ensure that all these activities that are necessary to protect the American people are adequately funded.

And we haven't seen Congress do anything with that proposed package. And that -- these -- our request is predicated on steps that are necessary to protect the American people. And it is necessary for Congress to take action to protect the American people.

We're mindful of what the risks are. For most people, the Zika virus does not pose a risk. But it does pose a particularly acute risk, potentially, to pregnant women.

And so an important part of this effort is a public education campaign. But there are resources that are necessary to ensure that our public health systems are adequately oriented to this threat.

There's important work that can be done with what's called vector control, to essentially try to prevent the spread of mosquitoes that we know carry the virus.

So -- and we need Congress to support that effort, and it's important for Congress not to be asleep at the switch when we have a significant emerging threat.

OK? Devon (ph).

QUESTION:

Thanks, Josh.

With Super Tuesday in the rear-view mirror, we're sort of in a new phase of the campaign, and this is something that struck me with the presidential remarks today -- we sort of had a few subtle jabs at -- at Republicans, and (inaudible) someone was saying specifically Donald Trump. Well, not so subtle in some cases.

(LAUGHTER)

But is he champing at the bit to get back out there? How would you describe his interest level in getting into the mix right now?

EARNEST:

Well, I -- I think he's just mindful of the fact that there's a general election ahead, and I think the president is certainly looking forward to having an opportunity to make the case in support of a successor who understands that we need to build on the progress that we've made.

And that is -- makes him an important voice, when the candidates on the Republicans side of the aisle are suggesting policies that would actually roll back that progress.

And -- you know, as -- as somebody who has devoted a lot of his own sweat equity to the last seven years, and as somebody who loves this country, the president is somebody who feels like he's got a vested interest, and is somebody who can make a pretty persuasive case about -- in favor of a candidate that's committed to building on this progress.

QUESTION:

I guess what I'm asking is he (ph) seems eager to go right after the Republican front runner. Are - - are we reading that right? He really seems to want to get back in the mix, and -- and -- not just to set his own record and support the Democratic nominee -- he really seems to want (ph) to take some swipes at -- at the other side.

EARNEST:

No, I -- I think the president is quite focused on making a substantive case on the issues that are most important to the country and most important to the American people, and certainly the economy would fit that description.

And having a substantive discussion about what sort of economic policies will allow us to continue the progress that we've made, I think, is a subject of legitimate discussion on the campaign trail, and when it is, the president will be an eager participant.

QUESTION:

Can I ask you (ph) about a development at the State Department today? Their I.G. has issued a final memo on the e-mail practices of the past and current secretaries of state.

And they claim pretty definitively that past secretaries -- specifically Rice and Powell -- have handled classified material on unclassified systems, and basically the bottom line is they're sort of moving towards making this case closed.

And my question is, does the president, with respect to Secretary Clinton, consider this matter closed? Should the matter be closed with respect to her e-mail situation?

EARNEST:

Well, I -- I'm reluctant to weigh in directly on your question, because there is an ongoing independent investigation into this, and I certainly want to avoid even the appearance of trying to influence the outcome of that independent investigation by suggesting -- you know, the president's view of how it should conclude.

So -- you know, we've all along been respectful of that ongoing independent investigation. And once that independent investigation is -- is concluded, then that will be announced by the independent investigators who are performing it.

QUESTION:

And could you just weigh in. In October on 60 Minutes, he said he didn't think secretary's e-mail arrangement endangered national security. Does he still -- I think, in the months since with what's come out, does he still share that view?

EARNEST:

His views have not changed but his views also include, as he noted in that interview, that there is an ongoing independent investigation that is led by independent investigators. They will follow the facts and reach their own independent determination. OK?

Justin?

QUESTION:

First, I was wondering if you had any updates on the Supreme Court and in fast (ph) statements, the timing next week, what the president is doing over the weekend? If he or Ryan or anyone who's going to meet with candidates for the...

EARNEST:

Well, I -- just to manage expectations here. I would not at any point -- I do not at any point expect to be in a position to confirm any individual, private meetings with potential candidates, either at the staff level or the presidential level. Since what I can't talk about, let's talk about what I can talk about.

I would expect that the president will have an opportunity to meet with his team before the end of the day today, and that will essentially to get some additional material that he can review over the weekend as he weighs this important decision.

You know, obviously there has been extensive consultation involved in this process with both Democrats and Republicans. I noted earlier this week that White House officials, from the president on down, have been in touch with every office in the United States Senate to discuss the constitutional responsibility the Senate has to fill this vacancy.

I don't know whether or not there will be additional calls over the weekend, but we will try to get you an update on that early next week. But certainly the work to review relevant material about potential nominees is ongoing.

QUESTION:

The president expects to meet with financial regulators on Monday. I am wondering if you can preview that, I mean and to also then to talk about whether discussions about the judiciary role, which is obviously kind of getting close to being finalized, will that be part of that discussion?

EARNEST:

The president is meeting with a number of federal independent financial regulators on Monday here at the White House. The president has done that periodically over the course of his presidency. We're obviously quite respectful of the independent role that these regulators have to play. But there seems value in at least keeping an open line of communication from the White House to these regulators with periodic engagements like this one.

I don't have good sense for you exactly what's on the agenda as it relates to the conflict of interest rule. I note that it is still going through the regulatory process. I don't have an update for you in terms of how soon it will emerge from that process, but I know that that process is ongoing.

One of the key legacy achievements of this presidency will be the important reforms of Wall Street and those reforms have led to a financial system that is more stable and ensures that taxpayers are not on the hook for bailing out financial institutions that make risky bets.

You know, I've said it so many times over the last few years that it sort of sounds like a really easy thing, but the truth is, in implementing that law, administration regulators have had to fight tooth and nail with Wall Street institutions and their highly paid lobbyists to ensure that that law is effectively implemented.

And the president also takes some pride in knowing that we were able to keep the promise that he made at the beginning, which is that we could impose greater regulations on Wall Street to make the system more stable.

While at the same time, not shutting down the dynamism of the U.S. economy. In fact, we have seen Wall Street's -- you know, we have been talking a lot about economic numbers in the context of this briefing. You know, I'm loathe to talk about independence movements of the stock market because it fluctuates so wildly based on, sometimes, unknown forces.

EARNEST:

But the truth is, when you take a look at it over the last seven years, there may be no metric on which the economy has performed better than the significant growth of the financial indexes. And that's an indication, that's just one piece of evidence that we have succeeded in both making our financial system safer and more stable and less of a threat to middle-class families, while at the same time allowing Wall Street to perform an important function, which is to ensure that homeowners and business owners and business owners, small and large, have access to capital in a way that allows them to innovate and create jobs and grow our economy. So, you know, all along, we saw immediately in the aftermath of Wall Street reform being passed, that this is something that was going to be really bad for the economy, and the -- the numbers just don't bury that out.

QUESTION:

Last one on Prime Minister Trudeau's visit next week, the Canadian press is saying that the U.S. and Canada are negotiating on a package -- an environmental climate package (inaudible) talking about auto emissions, care technology and also maybe a trade element having to do with (inaudible) lumber. I'm wondering if you can confirm that those discussions are -- are going on and if have any detail or light that you can shed on it?

EARNEST:

I -- I've -- I've been briefed on those reports. I haven't seen them firsthand. I don't have a lot of information to share about what's on the agenda for Prime Minister Trudeau's visit next week. I'll see if I can get you some more information about that early next week that we can discuss.

I can tell you that in the first meeting that the president had with Prime Minister Trudeau during our trip to the Philippines last fall, it was clear that there were a number of issues where the United States and Canada very effectively cooperate, and countering climate change is an important one. Obviously, Prime Minister Trudeau dedicated a significant amount of time in his campaign on the campaign trail talking about how the policies of the government in Canada needed to be and could be more effectively oriented to counter the threat from climate change.

He made a case quite similar to the case that the president has made, that the people of Canada and the economy of Canada can benefit from focusing on this in the short-term. And I think what that

does mean is it means that there may be an opportunity for the United States and Canada to coordinate even more effectively our policies when it comes to fighting climate change.

How much of a -- how much of a discussion that will be when Prime Minister Trudeau visits the White House next week is something that I'll see if I can track down for you for next week.

Scott?

QUESTION:

(inaudible) that meeting today with the staff on the Supreme Court. Is that something he's been doing everyday or is that sort an end of week check-in?

EARNEST:

Periodically, the president has been meeting -- meeting with members of his team who are working on this. Sometimes, it's more formal than others and sometimes it's just an opportunity to -- to hand them some paper to -- so that he can go do his homework, if you will. So I don't have a lot of details to share about this particular meeting, but it certainly is an opportunity for the president to consult once again with his team prior to the weekend about -- about the work that he has already done.

OK. Michelle?

QUESTION:

We heard from the president today on the economy. He -- it was almost as if he was framing the entire news in political terms. I mean, talking about how it contrasts with the doomsday rhetoric. He -- at one point, he even said that America is doing great right now. I mean, the -- couldn't the news stand on its own? Why did he feel the need to frame it that way?

EARNEST:

Well, it certainly seems to have attracted all of your attention. And I certainly welcome the opportunity to have a robust discussion of -- of them and I think that -- but look, to your point, I think that these numbers do merit attention on their own. In their own right, this is an important indication of the direction that the economy is headed and of the progress that we've made over the last several years.

And it's certainly relevant to the ongoing political discussion in the country and will be more relevant in the fall when you have one candidate on the ballot, a Democrat, whether it's Senator Sanders or Secretary Clinton, making an aggressive case about how important it is for us to build on this progress, and they'll be matched up against a Republican candidate who is vowing to roll back that progress and roll back the policies that led to that progress. That's an important debate for the country to have and it's a debate that the president is looking forward to be -- to engage -- engage in.

QUESTION:

But as much as you and the president himself has diminished that rhetoric out there and basically said it's -- you know, it's hurting the country and -- you basically trash a lot of what is said out there. So why does the president feel the need to respond directly to individual points in that rhetoric?

Does that, in a sense, just give as much attention to the rhetoric as it does to the economic news that the president was announcing? I mean, he could have said, "Here's why this news is great for the economy and here's what it did." But no, he wanted to kind of match individual points in that news to individual things that Donald Trump has said. You know what I mean?

EARNEST:

Well, look. There's no doubt that the -- given the colorful style of some of the Republican candidates, they have gotten plenty of attention for their rhetoric talking down the economy. So I think there's little risk of inflating that attention any further. I think the benefit is that particularly when you have jobs numbers illustrating a much broader trend, that that warrants some attention too.

Oftentimes, these kinds of positive economic reports include a whole set of pretty inconvenient facts for those who are getting the most attention. The President felt it was worthwhile to point that out as well.

QUESTION:

I think maybe a better way to frame the question, and more simply, is to say, "Couldn't the President get his own attention for these points without having it be political?" You're talking about getting attention for this. Does the President have to bring in the Republican rhetoric to get the amount of attention that he wants for what he feels he has done?

EARNEST:

I think this has more to do with the fact that there is an active, roiling debate that's going on across the country and in newspapers and on your airwaves every day. Most of the attention is focused on the colorful candidates who are talking down the economy. The President felt like this was a good opportunity to weigh in on the other side, with the facts, and that's what he did.

QUESTION:

I really didn't expect to be asking this many questions about it, but I think we're on it.

(OFF-MIKE)

EARNEST:

I'm pleasantly surprised.

(LAUGHTER)

QUESTION:

It almost seems as if he was maybe referring to - I don't know, the debate that went on last night, and was pretty colorful. Did he watch it? Did he?

EARNEST:

The President did not watch the debate last night.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

And also, I shouldn't ask any more questions really. Never mind, I'm good.

EARNEST:

OK.

(LAUGHTER)

EARNEST:

Mark (ph).

QUESTION:

Was the economic reading on the schedule before this morning? Or was it only the pope walking down (ph)?

EARNEST:

The President's economic team was meeting today to discuss a handful of economic issues and the President dropped by that meeting to discuss a couple of them, and we decided to invite all of you in there to attend the President's drop-by, and also give him an opportunity to speak with all of you about the good news from the report.

QUESTION:

On another subject, does the President have any misgivings that we overheard him talking about remaining in Washington after his term in office is over?

EARNEST:

That's an interesting way to ask the question. Not the way I expected you to. I did talk with the President earlier today about some of these reports, and what the President's approach here - you guys have all heard him talk about this to one extent or another over the last couple of years, and the President has previously noted the significant sacrifices that members of his family have made for him, while he's been engaged in public service.

The truth is he's reluctant to disrupt the high school career of his youngest daughter after having disrupted her education at least once before, when they moved to Washington back in January of 2009. There's nothing - there's nothing definitive, that's been decided here, but that - you certainly ...

QUESTION:

He's staying in Washington, right?

EARNEST:

There's nothing definitive that's been decided about where he or the family will live precisely. But that's what I'm trying to convey here. I think you get a good sense based on the President's comments yesterday about how he thinks about this, and I think this is the - this is an opportunity for the President to - again, after having asked his family to make some sacrifices for him as a result of his demanding schedule in public service, that at this point he can be sure that the education of his youngest daughter is not disrupted once again.

QUESTION:

Is there now a concern that the President will be inundated with real estate offers?

(LAUGHTER)

EARNEST:

I'm confident (OFF-MIKE) I'm guessing the President and the First Lady will be able to handle it.

QUESTION:

Are you remaining in Washington after the term's ...

(LAUGHTER)

EARNEST:

Time will tell. Good. Kevin.

QUESTION:

I'm a realtor. I just want to ask you about North Korea and the complicated relationship the U.S. has with China. How much pressure can the Administration realistically put on Beijing to rein in Pyongyang, and is fair to suggest that it hasn't

so well, at least based on the last 36 hours. They seem to just keep doing what they've always done, which is saber-rattle and threaten. What's your assessment there?

EARNEST:

My assessment is that the North Korean government understands how isolated they are. The set of sanctions that were imposed on North Korea by the United Nations were significantly stronger than the sanctions that had been imposed on them before. This includes inspections of all cargo moving in and out of North Korea.

It's an outright ban on small arms and other weapons, and it imposes broader, sectoral (ph) sanctions on those aspects of the North Korean economy that do actually generate some revenue for the government. There aren't many that do, that's why the imposition of those sectorial (ph) sanctions is so significant.

I think it's pretty obvious in the way that we negotiated this so intensively with the Chinese that their support was going to be necessary for this to move forward. I think this is an indication that our diplomacy with China was quite effective, in yielding a set of sanctions that will impose pressure on the North Koreans.

The North Koreans themselves recognize this, and as a result you see the kind of provocative rhetoric and behavior in response. But what is true is that it is not possible to judge overnight the impact of these sanctions. It will be over time that we'll be able to determine what impact they have on the strategy that's laid out by the North Korean government.

QUESTION:

Let me follow up on diplomacy. Do you think it would be more fruitful - or a better way - how much more useful or impactful might it be to focus on Japan and South Korea applying more pressure? On Pyongyang, versus working through Beijing?

EARNEST:

We've talked before, that there's no government in the world that has more influence with the North Koreans than the Chinese. That is why we have sought to gain leverage or to work with China to

try to encourage them to use their leverage and influence with the North Koreans. That's why having Chinese support for this set of sanctions is so critically important.

South Korea and Japan are close allies of the United States. Us being able to reach an agreement about what kinds of sanctions we should impose on North Korea requires some diplomacy but it's not particularly complicated. When we're dealing with China it's much more complicated. The United States and China don't see eye to eye on everything. Fortunately when it comes to North Korea we see eye to eye on the most important things, including the fact that the Korean Peninsula should be de-nuclearized.

That is why we have chosen what is admittedly a more difficult task, to work closely with the Chinese to impose these sanctions because frankly they'll be more impactful if the Chinese go along. Fortunately they have, and they haven't just gone along, they've actually stood shoulder to shoulder with the United States as we have led this international effort to impose these sanctions.

But ultimately time will tell whether or not it will have the desired effect.

QUESTION:

I know part of this will come from the Pentagon. Can you give me a broad assessment of the movement of carrier group into the area? South China?

EARNEST:

I can confirm that the John C. Stennis aircraft carrier group is in the vicinity of the South China Sea. I know the Department of Defense made an announcement about this late in the day yesterday. This is part of the regular movement of that aircraft carrier group. It is not part of an ongoing freedom of navigation operation or anything like that, but rather part of the routine movement of the U.S. naval assets through the Asia-Pacific region.

The number of U.S. naval assets in the Asia-Pacific region has increased significantly under President Obama's leadership so this is not an uncommon occurrence. But for more details about their mission I'd refer you to Asia-Pacific Command.

QUESTION:

So is the President binge-watching House of Cards like the rest of us?

EARNEST:

I know the president has -- has watched earlier seasons of House of Cards. I don't know if that will be part of his weekend plans this weekend or not.

But I think there are a lot of people in Washington that are looking forward to spending some time in front of the television and watching House of Cards this weekend.

So, Margaret (ph)?

QUESTION:

Josh, was the president watching cable news today? What was the reference to O.J. Simpson at the beginning of his remarks?

EARNEST:

Yeah. Yeah. My understanding is that, prior to seeing all of you, the president had been in the Situation Room. He was actually...

(LAUGHTER)

... so, stick with me here.

(LAUGHTER)

He was in the Situation Room, he was actually doing a secure video teleconference with President Ghani and CEO Abdullah of Afghanistan. We'll have a more formal readout of that meeting later this afternoon.

But as the president was coming out of the conference room where they were conducting the video teleconference, there are a bank of television monitors right there as you walk out the door of the Situation Room, and the television monitors are sort -- are regularly tuned to cable news, as I'm sure Kevin and Michele (ph) are pleased to hear.

And so that's where the -- the president saw that all of the -- the networks were covering this bit of news. And...

QUESTION:

He seemed bemused.

EARNEST:

He did seem bemused, didn't he? Are you suggesting that you weren't?

QUESTION:

I was shocked he even (inaudible).

EARNEST:

Well -- no, I mean bemused about the -- the news that was being reported.

QUESTION:

I don't even know where to begin on -- on what I think of that.

EARNEST:

Yeah. Yes.

QUESTION:

You said you are gonna have a readout of what he was discussing about Afghanistan?

EARNEST:

Yes. So we'll have a more formal readout on paper of the -- of the video teleconference with the Afghan leaders.

QUESTION:

On SCOTUS, you have, obviously, personal appeals by the president to Senate leadership. Now you have the vice president having written this op-ed, making a very public appeal.

Is the White House's view at this point that all of this is falling on deaf ears? Or is there any room to think that the conversation's moving forward?

EARNEST:

Well, I -- I -- based on the reaction of at least some senators, it's clear that the -- the message is being heard. And -- you know, I think it's also clear that the public is hearing this message, that there now is ample public data to indicate that -- that a strong majority of the country doesn't support the -- the apparent initial reaction of Senate Republicans to put politics ahead of their constitutional duty.

And -- you know, we're going to continue to make a case, both publicly and privately, directly to senators and directly to the public, that their constitutional duty should come first.

The president is committed to putting his constitutional duty first. That will come before any political considerations that he makes. And we hope they'll -- we hope they'll do the same.

That certainly is what Vice President Biden did in 1988, as he alluded to in his op-ed. And we hope that Senate Republicans will do the same in 2016.

QUESTION:

At a minimum, would you ask or expect the Senate to at least meet with the nominees, even if they won't yet say they'll give a hearing or reverse (ph) Mr. McConnell's decision?

EARNEST:

Yeah. We certainly believe that they should do it that. But -- you know, that -- that -- those kinds of courtesy visits are -- you know, are a sign of a functioning, professional United States Senate.

Refusing to meet with presidential appointees is inconsistent with longstanding tradition. But, look, so would be refusing to have a hearing and a vote. Since 1875, every single presidential nominee to the Supreme Court has gotten a hearing and/or a vote from the United States Senate.

So this would be a stark break from longstanding tradition, and it also would be inconsistent with the expectations of the U.S. Constitution. So we've got a strong case to make here, and we're gonna keep making it.

QUESTION:

Not yet at the point, though, of asking for them to meet with a nominee -- or with a candidate?

EARNEST:

Once -- once the -- once the president has put forward a nominee, that nominee will begin, as previous nominees have -- begin making courtesy visits on Capitol Hill.

And I'm confident that the courtesy visits will include requests to meet with Republican senators, and it will be up to Republican senators to determine whether or not they will accept that invitation.

I -- I do feel confident that the Democrats will. And I would just note, in 1988 -- that was the last time we faced this situation -- you had a Republican president dealing with a Democratic majority in the United States Senate, and that was the last time that a -- any president was asking the Senate to confirm his Supreme Court nominee in a presidential election year.

EARNEST:

And Senators Grassley and McConnell know this, because Senators Grassley and McConnell voted to confirm Justice Kennedy in 1988, in a presidential election year.

So they certainly understand the stakes, they understand the tradition, and they understand the requirements of the United States Constitution. The question now is whether or not they're gonna follow it.

QUESTION:

And is it safe to say that the president has made some progress in his review and consideration of nominees?

EARNEST:

It -- it is safe to say the president has been doing a lot of work on this. I -- it's hard for me to quantify exactly -- it's hard for me to discuss publicly how we would quantify that progress.

But he's devoted significant time to this, and I know that there have been some sleepless nights on the part of his legal team, making sure that he's got the materials that he needs, and that work is gonna continue through the weekend.

OK? Carol (ph).

QUESTION:

And there have been reports lately that -- one, that the president was -- or the administration was vetting a one -- a judge in Iowa who had been supported by Chairman Grassley, and now that -- potentially a relative of House Speaker Paul Ryan.

Is there some directive given to the president's team to find people who have the closest possible ties to some of these top Republicans, or to make it as difficult as possible, or as uncomfortable as possible for them to reject either the nominee itself or not hold any hearing?

EARNEST:

I can't confirm that either of those individuals that have been publicly reported a number of times are part of the process.

QUESTION:

But you're not denying it?

EARNEST:

I'm not -- I'm not gonna confirm and deny any individual candidates.

What I can tell you, though, is I can tell you the instructions that the president has given his legal team, and it's pretty simple. The president has said, "I want to find the best person for the job, and I want to evaluate this person based on their legal credentials, I want to evaluate this person based on their judicial temperament, I want to evaluate this person based on their life experience.

"And I don't care if this person is a Democrat or a Republican. I want the best person for the job." And that's what his legal team is trying to help him do.

And -- you know, it's hard to -- once we have -- once the president has selected that person, it'll be a little easier for me to be in a position to help you explain how he arrived at that decision. But as he's in the midst of that decision, it's -- it's just hard to discuss.

OK? Ron (ph).

QUESTION:

You said a minute ago that there's ample data out there that suggests that the public sees -- sees it your way -- that the Senate should act (inaudible). But were you referring to something specific, or is it just anecdotal? News reports, or is there some...

EARNEST:

It's anecdotal. There are national polls, there are -- you know, polls in individual states that indicate that a substantial majority of people who were surveyed in those polls believe that -- that both the president and the United States Congress should fulfill their constitutional duty.

QUESTION:

How -- how aggressively is the -- is the administration doing its own polling and its own analysis to try and gauge the public sentiment?

EARNEST:

This is a -- not a decision that's gonna be made based on polls. They're -- are not names that are included in polls. They're not -- you know, blind biographies that are...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

... this -- this issue of -- of -- of whether -- how the process should or shouldn't go forward?

EARNEST:

Well, we've -- we've -- you know, I mean, we've been clear since just a couple hours after Justice Scalia's death was announced, that the president intended to fulfill his constitutional duty. So that's not -- you know, fortunately, the constitution is so clear that -- that that's the only place we need to look for direction about what the president should do.

QUESTION:

And the last nomination process, how many -- how many people did he interview personally? Do we -- did he ever reveal that?

EARNEST:

I don't know if we've revealed that. I've been asked that question before, but let me see if we can get you an answer to that. If...

QUESTION:

(OFF-MIKE) get a sense of, like, it's -- whether it's one or two, or 10 or 20, or just what -- where that...

EARNEST:

Sure, yeah. Let me see if that's information that we have revealed about past searches. I don't think that's something we'll be able to get into about this search, at least until it's been completed.

But let me see if I can get you some information about -- about (inaudible) searches.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

... you said this search is gonna be very similar to the last search.

EARNEST:

Yeah. It will, in that the president's evaluating the same kinds of criteria, and -- I guess the other reason to keep the searches at least similar is the last two searches yielded nominees that performed very well during the hearing, it yielded nominees that got bipartisan support in the United States Senate.

And it's gotten two nominees that, even in their short time on the bench, have already demonstrated an ability to serve in that position with honor and distinction, and -- you know, those are the kinds of goals that we have in mind this time, too.

QUESTION:

There's been some reporting out there suggesting that the nominee may play a more public role in trying to move this whole process forward. Is that -- is that -- is that a fair strategy to anticipate?

EARNEST:

Well, there are some that have speculated that that's -- that that would be a good strategy. There are some who have warned about the risks associated with that strategy. So I think it's too soon to tell.

You know, obviously, people are entitled to their opinion, but that also is something that will be easier for us to discuss once we have a -- once the president has made a decision about who his nominee will be.

QUESTION:

And we're still -- and again, what is your guidance, again, as to what the time frame is from now? You had said, I think, for -- just like the other situations, what is -- what can you -- said (ph) 24 hours, two weeks.

(LAUGHTER)

(inaudible) been a number of things.

EARNEST:

Yeah. At this point, I don't have additional timing guidance to share. You know, the -- I think the -- the things that we have acknowledged -- is that the two previous vacancies -- that -- that nominees for the two previous vacancies were announced about four or five weeks after those vacancies occurred.

In his SCOTUS blog, the president noted that he would expect an announcement in a matter of weeks. But unfortunately, I just don't have more specific guidance to share with you at this point.

QUESTION:

Do you think we'll get some more specific guidance before it happens? Or will it just kind of happen?

EARNEST:

My guess is it'll probably just happen. But...

(LAUGHTER)

... but we'll see. We'll -- we'll -- we will at least endeavor to make sure that all of you are in a position to report it when it does happen.

QUESTION:

Well, we're here all the time.

EARNEST:

Well...

(LAUGHTER)

... that's good.

QUESTION:

That's not much.

EARNEST:

That's good. That's probably a wise choice.

QUESTION:

Thanks.

EARNEST:

OK. Laura?

QUESTION:

Thank you. Last night, the debate was watched by Americans, just like (ph) people all over the world. And according to crunch TV (ph), the candidates spend more time on stage inserting (ph) (inaudible) and talking about Syria and problems all over the world.

Is the president, and is the White House, concerned about the degree of gregarity (ph) we saw last night? And the image we saw, that America has now, in the rest of the world, with these type of debates?

EARNEST:

Yeah. Well, look, I think it was widely reported -- I assume, overseas -- that most people concluded that the debate last night was a pretty bad night for Republicans.

My observation was actually -- it was a pretty bad night for journalists, primarily because I think we've used up all the metaphors at this point. We've got demolition derby and slow-motion train wreck and dumpster fire...

(LAUGHTER)

... and we haven't even gotten to the Republican convention yet.

(LAUGHTER)

So I wish you guys luck. But look, the -- there's no denying that, when we get around to the general election, we're gonna have a pretty clear choice. And the -- there will be ample opportunity for the president to make the case that the Democratic nominee is the person who understands the challenges facing the country and understands the value of building on the progress that we've made thus far.

QUESTION:

I have a follow-up.

EARNEST:

OK.

QUESTION:

Is the president concerned that Donald Trump can become the president of the United States?

EARNEST:

The president has previously observed that he does not think that Donald Trump will become president of the United States, and that is...

QUESTION:

He might become the nominee.

(CROSSTALK)

EARNEST:

He might become the nominee.

QUESTION:

... all over the world.

EARNEST:

Yes, and the president has not weighed in on the horse race on the Republican side. But the president has been pretty resolute in his belief that Mr. Trump will not be the next president.

OK. Gregory?

QUESTION:

Thank you, Josh. I want to go back to the Supreme Court. You mentioned, again, for the umpteenth time, the (inaudible) precedent in 1988. One thing I haven't heard is that of Robert Ford, who of course was the nominee who was rejected by the Senate the previous year that led to the election year confirmation.

I went back and I read Vice President Biden's fore (ph) speech that's been oft quoted. He actually cited the Bork nomination 41 times in that speech. And he argued that the problem with Bork was the President Reagan tried to remake the court during a period of divided government.

He said that that -- that the president, during a period of divided government, should moderate his choices in the Supreme Court. He said, "the public has not given either party a mandate to remake the court into a body reflective of the strong vision of our respective philosophies, and both of our parties should finally honestly admit to that fact."

Is the president willing to concede that, in an era of divided government, he does not have a mandate to remake the Supreme Court? And what are the lessons -- are there any lessons to be learned, these many years later, from the -- the Bork nomination?

EARNEST:

Yeah, I think there is -- well, let me start with the lessons, first. I think there is an important lesson to be learned from the Bork nomination, which is that, at the time, then-Senator Biden was the chair of the Judiciary Committee, and he presided over the hearings that Judge Bork participated in.

And what's notable about the outcome is that Senator Biden presided over a confirmation hearing process, even though he didn't support the nominee. So it would have been easy for Vice President Biden -- then-Senator Biden -- to say, "I don't support Judge Bork. We're not even gonna have hearings."

EARNEST:

He could have said that. That's what Republicans are saying right now. That's not what Senator Biden did. Senator Biden moved forward with hearings.

Now, the irony of the difference here is that Republicans have taken the position that they're not going to have hearings even though the president hasn't named who his nominee is. And you know, one thing, Gregory, I'm not going to be in a position to confirm potential nominees. But there was a Republican governor who has the strong support of Republicans in his state who was publicly considered -- publicly discussed as being under consideration and Republicans in the Senate said that they wouldn't give him the hearing either.

So I think it is an indication of just how starkly different the Republican approach in 2016 is from the Democratic approach in 1988. I'll make one other point about this because I think this is relevant, too. So it wasn't just that Vice President Biden, then Senator Biden, presided over those hearings, he allowed a vote in the committee and voted against the nominee. But despite his opposition, he allowed that nomination to go to the floor of the United States Senate for the entire Senate to vote on.

I think that does show a commitment to the functioning of the institution of the United States Senate. That's the kind of commitment to functioning, to governing, that we expect Republicans to show. So it's a little longer answer than I intended, but I think that's an indication that there are a lot of lessons out of the -- out of the Bork nomination and it underscores just how unreasonable the Republican position in 2016 is.

There was an earlier part to your question, though.

QUESTION:

The other part was that the vice president, then senator, in that speech was arguing that a president should not be able to remake (ph) the court in an (inaudible), that that -- that situation necessarily called for more moderate choices to be (inaudible).

EARNEST:

And I think -- I read that part of -- I think a similar part of the speech as well, which is that then-Senator Biden says that the White House should engage in aggressive consultation with the Senate. And if they do, that's when he would consider supporting that nominee.

So again, he didn't rule out hearings. He didn't rule out support prior to any nominee being put forward. He indicated, in fact, that, if there was a vacancy, and there was a commitment to consultation and engagement from the White House, that he could envision a scenario where he could support the nominee.

I think that's a pretty starkly different approach than Republicans have taken thus far, which is to say, "under no circumstances will we support anybody that the president puts forward, and not only will we not support them, we're not even gonna give them a chance. We're not gonna hold hearings. We're not even gonna give them the courtesy of a visit."

And again, that's -- that's just an unreasonable position, and I think that would explain some of the public data that I was referring to earlier -- that a lot of Americans understand that is not at all consistent with how the Senate should function.

And it's an indication that Republicans, after six or eight years in the minority, are having a hard time breaking the old habits of obstruction that are often wielded by the minority party.

When you take the majority in the United States Senate, you have a responsibility to govern. And thus far, Republicans have refused to embrace that responsibility.

OK? Milo (ph).

QUESTION:

Thank you. I have a free-speech question. The late Aaron Schwartz, co-founder of Reddit, said that censorship had a meaning outside of government, when private corporations either invent new kinds of speech, or have a monopoly on certain places online.

It's becoming very clear that Twitter and Facebook in particular are censoring and punishing conservative and libertarian points of view. The president's done -- made some encouraging comments about free speech. He said, for example, that university students shouldn't be coddled, perhaps suggesting that the safe-space and trigger-warning culture isn't -- isn't something he believes in.

Is there anything the president can do to encourage Silicon Valley -- to remind them of the importance -- the critical importance of open, free speech in our society?

EARNEST:

Well, I appreciate the question. I -- the -- you know, obviously, part of -- of what's built into our system is a respect for -- you know, private companies to put in place their own policies.

But I think the president would be the first one to observe that the success of that kind of social media and some of those social media tools is actually predicated on the idea of freedom of expression, and in fact it allows -- many of these tools are so groundbreaking because they give people an opportunity to express themselves in ways that we didn't previously even imagine.

It also gives the average person the opportunity to be heard by the world, and that is -- that's what makes that kind of technology and those kinds of tools so remarkable. And frankly, I think that's part of what makes them so successful.

But yes, it's -- but as -- as you point out, that is predicated on the important protection of First Amendment rights to self-expression.

QUESTION:

We obviously can't enforce the First Amendment on -- on private corporations, but there seems to be a very clear trend -- my verification check was taken away for making jokes about the wrong group of people, conservative commentators and journalists are being -- being punished, being suspended, having their tweets deleted by Twitter.

Facebook is -- you know, removing criticism of immigration in Europe. Are there any mechanisms that the government can use to remind these companies that they have that responsibility? Or do we just have to trust that the market's gonna punish them if they don't?

EARNEST:

Well, I know that -- I'm not sure exactly what sort of government policy decision could have any influence on -- on that.

There -- you know, obviously, there is, though, a third branch of government, which is, you know, our courts. They're supposed to be insulated from politics. They're supposed to be in a position to resolve those kinds of questions. So if there are private citizens who feel their constitutional rights are being violated in some way, that they do have an opportunity to address that before a -- before a judge and a court of law. And that's -- that should be the way our system works, but again, even that is predicated on the idea that our -- that our court system is appropriately insulated from partisan politics.

OK. Let's see, here. Leslie?

QUESTION:

Thanks, Josh. Wanted to...

EARNEST:

I'm trying to anticipate your question.

QUESTION:

Yes, I know. I figured. Wanted to go back to Cuba. And obviously, the secretary's cancellation raised some questions about whether the Havana government was going to be cooperative with the president meeting with (inaudible) discussing human rights, and you had a quite strong statement that the White House will meet with whoever it wants to, that the guest list will be (inaudible) inside the White House.

So I wanted to ask you, is the president planning -- is he -- does he want to meet a wide range of dissidents? And can you give any indication (inaudible) what sort of a setting he wants to do this? Will it be a -- you know, a reception? Will he go anywhere to meet with dissidents? And will he meet with people who are necessarily -- who are dissidents against the government, but opposed to his new policy changes?

EARNEST:

Look, at the questions that you're asking are important ones and the -- the truth is, the president's schedule for Cuba is just not set yet. But as we develop that schedule and it comes into clearer

focus, we'll be able to talk more clearly about where and when and how the president will interact with Cubans who are seeking to express their political views without being subject to intimidation, or in some cases, even incarceration.

The president's interested in lifting up the importance of universal human rights and the importance of the government not just respecting, but actually taking steps to protect the expression of -- of human rights. So you know, that will be a focal point of the president's visit to Cuba, but I just -- I don't have a sense at this point exactly how that interaction will take place. But you know, we'll obviously be interested in making sure you understand how that action -- interaction takes place and hopefully, we'll be able to make sure that you get at least a little flavor of what that -- of how that interaction occurs.

Let me -- one other part of -- of your question. You know, in answering Darlene's (ph) first question, I -- I pushed back strongly against the notion that somehow, the secretary -- that Secretary Kerry canceled a planned trip. The trip was not planned. It was something that was considered, but ultimately, once it became clear that Secretary Kerry would travel with the president to Cuba, a secretary-level trip prior to the president's one was not viewed as necessary.

QUESTION:

(inaudible) sort of sends a signal that the government is going to play hardball in the meeting (inaudible)?

EARNEST:

Not really, because I -- it's not going to have -- certainly, the government is entitled to their opinion, but it's not going to have any impact on the decision that we make about with whom the president will meet. That's a decision that we'll make on our own, without any sort of negotiation with the Cubans. OK?

John?

QUESTION:

Can you, Josh, confirm a meeting that the president may have within the next two weeks with King Salman (ph) of Saudi Arabia here at the White House?

EARNEST:

I'm not aware of -- of a meeting like that that's on the books, but let me take a look at it and see if we can give you some guidance. We certainly haven't announced anything like that and I haven't heard discussion about like -- about something like that coming up. But let me check.

QUESTION:

And on the Supreme Court, have you detected, in your conversations with Republican senators, right now any daylight between Leader McConnell and Chairman Grassley on their approach to any nominee that the president puts forward?

EARNEST:

Well, I -- I did see that -- that Chairman Grassley did acknowledge that there's at least one nominee that's been discussed publicly -- one potential nominee that's been discussed publicly -- that he would meet with. Now, I know he said that he would only meet with her in her capacity as an Iowan, but you know, I -- it doesn't seem consistent with the spirit of his previous declaration that he wouldn't meet with anybody that the president put forward. It sounds like we've already found an exception, maybe there will be others.

Hopefully there will be others because this is a -- this is a long-standing Senate tradition and I don't have to explain it to Chairman Grassley. He's -- he's been dealing with these issues for decades. He has -- he has probably hosted a dozen courtesy visits with Supreme Court nominees, so it would be a pretty stark reversal on his part, even based on his own personal career, to -- to refuse that kind of meeting.

But look -- so -- I get -- my -- but my ultimate point here is Chairman Grassley understands that the stakes are significant, that he's got significant constitutional responsibilities and that the recent precedent, modern history of the Supreme Court is clear. And hopefully, he'll be willing to abide by it. OK.

JC, I'll give you the last one, and then we'll do the week ahead.

QUESTION:

Thank you. Considering that Fidel Castro has lived through 11 presidents, from Eisenhower to Barack Obama, might this administration, might the president, even for historical purposes, meet with -- with the leader of -- of Cuba?

EARNEST:

My understand is it's not likely to end up on the schedule, but we're still working through the schedule, and so if that changes, we'll let you all know. OK?

We'll do the week ahead and we'll let you get started on your weekend. On Monday...

QUESTION:

Josh, do you really think we start our weekend after your briefing?

(LAUGHTER)

EARNEST:

I don't know. I don't know what goes on back there.

(LAUGHTER)

QUESTION:

On behalf of my colleagues, we really don't.

EARNEST:

OK. Well, hopefully, you will -- we will soon get started on your weekend, then.

On Monday, the president will host a meeting at the White House, that Justin referenced, with financial regulators to receive an update on the progress in implementing Wall Street reform. Eight years after the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, the participants will discuss efforts to continue to implement the strongest consumer financial protections in history that have afforded millions of hard-working Americans new protections from the kinds of abusive practices that predated the crisis. They will also update the president on their work to make our financial system safer and stronger, as well as present the kinds of -- the kind of recklessness on Wall Street that we saw lead to devastation on Main Street.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, the president will be here at the White House. I don't have any updates on his schedule for those two days, but we'll keep you posted.

On Thursday, the president and first lady will welcome the right (ph) Honorable Justin Trudeau, the prime minister of Canada, and Mrs. Sophie Gregoire Trudeau to the White House for an official visit with a state dinner. The visit will be an opportunity for the United States and Canada to deepen our -- our bilateral relationship, which is one of the closest and most extensive in the world.

That relationship has shaped -- is based on a shared history, common values and a fast and intricate network of cultural, familial and commercial ties. The visit is also intended to advance cooperation on important bilateral and multilateral issues, such as energy and climate change, national security and the economy.

On Friday, the president will travel to Austin, Texas to participate in South by Southwest Interactive. The president will sit down with the editor-in-chief of the Texas Tribune, Evan Smith, for a conversation about civic engagement in the 21st century.

The audience for that discussion will be creators, early adopters and entrepreneurs who are defining the future of our increasingly connected lives. The president will call on the audience to apply their ideas and talents to make technology work for us, especially when it comes to tackling big challenges like increasing participation in the political process and fighting climate change. In

the lead-up to the event, the Texas Tribune will also source questions for the discussion from its online audience.

Afterward, the president will attend DNC events in Austin. He will then travel to Dallas, Texas, where he will spend the night.

On Saturday, the president will attend a DNC and DSCC event before returning to Washington that evening. We'll have some additional details about the president's trip to Texas early next week.

So with that, I know it's still a couple of hours away, but I hope you have a great weekend.

(LAUGHTER)

See you guys.