

WHITE HOUSE DAILY BRIEFING TRANSCRIPT

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

EARNEST:

Good afternoon, everybody. I do not have any announcements at the top, so we can go straight to questions. Darlene, would you like to start?

QUESTION:

Great, thanks.

Do you have anything to add to reports that U.S. special forces are questioning the head of the Islamic State group's unit (ph) that's trying to develop (inaudible) weapons?

EARNEST:

Unfortunately, I do not. I've -- I've seen those reports at this point. I'm still constrained -- I'm still constrained by some operational security considerations from commenting directly on the reports, or even being in a position to confirm them.

You do know, however, that there are U.S. military forces that are on the ground in Iraq that are part of these forces that are dedicated to carrying out raids, collecting intelligence and, where possible, getting access to high-value targets.

But as it relates to any specific operation, I just don't have any information for you about that. Any information that does come from those kinds of operations will be distributed by the Department of Defense.

QUESTION:

OK. Next question. Was the president surprised by Hillary Clinton's upset last night in Michigan?

EARNEST:

Well, I haven't talked to him about the results of yesterday's election, but I think many people have expressed surprise that the outcome of the election was different than was -- that the outcome was predicted by the pre-election polls.

EARNEST:

Certainly, there's been a lot of analysis that's been devoted to figuring out why the polls were wrong, I think what's more important is for us to acknowledge that there's a spirited debate on the Democratic side. And I think that's a really good thing for the party.

I think we saw two candidates on the Democratic side yesterday that have a demonstrated ability to energize and inspire passionate Democratic voters. And when you're talking about a state that sometimes is a swing state, that's a -- an important characteristic to have in your candidate, and on the Democratic side, we're fortunate to have two of them.

QUESTION:

Lastly, I wanted to follow up on a question you got, I think it was last week, and it was about some legislation on the Hill that you hadn't -- the White House hadn't seen the bill. It is -- the Senate today finally passed a bill that will require the White House to set up teams for the transition. Do you have any update on whether they're -- the White House's position on that? Or do you even think legislation to ensure a smooth transition is necessary at all?

EARNEST:

Well, I can tell you even absent any legislation, the -- this administration is committed to making sure that President Obama's successor has the full cooperation of his staff in ensuring a smooth transition.

We've talked before about how President George W. Bush directed senior members of his team to ensure that proper planning was in place to allow President Obama to transition to office as smoothly as possible. That, of course, is the responsibility of the incumbent, but in the case of President Bush, it demonstrated a commitment to the smooth and effective operation of the government, even when it means cooperating with somebody who's in a different political party. And President Obama certainly hopes and expects to be succeeded by a Democrat, but either way, the incoming president can certainly count on the full cooperation of this administration in ensuring that the next administration can get off to a running start.

QUESTION:

And on the question of -- about the bill itself.

EARNEST:

Yes. On the bill itself, I don't have a question -- I don't have an answer for you in terms of whether or not we believe it is necessary, but at this point, I do not anticipate that the president will veto the bill. I would anticipate that he will sign it. OK, Tim. Nice to see you today.

QUESTION:

Thank you. Nice to be here. On ISIL and chemical weapons, how concerned is the administration that they're getting closer to developing more dangerous nerve gases, and how far away might they be if they are?

EARNEST:

Well at this point, there has been some evidence and some discussion and even some reports about potential use of chemical weapons by ISIL. We're reviewing those reports, and obviously, the use of chemical weapons by anybody is an atrocity and one that the international community will not stand for.

However, if those reports are correct, it would not be an outlier in terms of the tactics that we know that ISIL uses. We know that ISIL is an extremist organization that seeks to achieve their aims by terrorizing innocent people. And so their use of chemical weapons, if true, would be consistent with those kinds of tactics. It's certainly something that the United States and our international partners take quite seriously, so I think I'd leave it there.

QUESTION:

What can the U.S. do to prevent the development of nerve gases?

EARNEST:

Well certainly, one of the things that we have done already is we worked effectively with the Russians a couple years ago to ensure that the declared chemical weapons stockpile of the Assad regime was faithfully rounded up and destroyed.

That was important, not just because it took one dangerous weapon out of the arsenal of the Assad regime -- that was important because the Assad regime was using that arsenal to attack innocent people.

It also made it less likely -- basically, at this point, impossible -- that that declared chemical weapons stockpile could fall into the hands of terrorists like ISIL.

So eliminating that proliferation threat was another key benefit of our success in destroying the Assad regime's declared chemical weapons stockpile. So that certainly is one thing that we have done.

Obviously there are a whole host of efforts that we've undertaken as a part of the international community to limit that kind of proliferation, and we're mindful of how important that is when it comes to the kind of chaos that we're seeing in Iraq and in Syria.

QUESTION:

Turning to Iran, IRGC fired a second day of missile tests. Will the -- does it look like the White House will raise it at the U.N. Security Council? When and what are the kinds of things that might be an appropriate response?

EARNEST:

Well, we are aware of reports about additional missile launches today in Iran. We're gonna -- we're gonna take a close look at those launches in the same way that we're continuing to review the details around the launches that were carried out by Iran earlier this week.

Unfortunately, Iran's insistence on developing a ballistic missile program outside of widely-recognized international standards is a long-standing concern, not just of the United States, but of the international community.

It is, in fact, one of the reasons that the United States led the way to develop, negotiate and implement successfully a diplomatic agreement to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

The reason that was significant is we know that Iran is working aggressively to try to enhance their ballistic missile capability, and preventing them from being able to nuclearize their missiles is -- is obviously important to our national security here in the United States. It's also important to the national security of our allies and partners in the region.

So we are pleased that we've been able to successfully implement that diplomatic agreement to prevent them from obtaining a nuclear weapon. That makes our country and the region safer.

But we will continue to redouble our efforts with our allies and partners in the region to try to limit Iran's ability to continue to develop their -- or to develop their missile program outside of -- of international conventions.

And -- you know, there is more that we can do to enforce sanctions that are in place. There are also a set of restrictions about what kind of equipment and materials can be shipped to Iran. And there's more that we can do to work with our partners to interdict those kinds of shipments that may include some of those illicit products.

So that's something that we've been mindful of for quite some time. It's the reason that we pursued the international agreement to prevent them from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and as we learn more information about what exactly they have done, we'll determine an appropriate response.

The other thing that I will point out is that -- you know, we know that Iran is in a season of carrying out a number of military activities, and so it certainly -- certainly would not be a surprise if there are additional launches over the next several days that are similar to the launches that we've seen already a couple of times this week.

EARNEST:
OK?

QUESTION:

Yeah, and lastly, on the primary yesterday. In Michigan, Senator Sanders came through with a surprise win.

Should that be interpreted that the Obama administration is out of step with a large chunk of the Democratic base on trade? Is this a sign that the White House should delay a push in Congress for TPP approval?

EARNEST:

Well let take that in a couple of different steps. I think we've acknowledged that there are a lot of Democrats who have a reflexive opposition to any discussion of expanding international trade, and that does make the politics of this particular issue complicated. But it doesn't in any way undermine the case that we make on the merits about how agreements like the Transpacific Partnership that have stronger than ever standards that relate to the environment, to labor rights and to human rights, those kinds of agreements are good for the U.S. economy.

The reason that they are a net positive for the U.S. economy is that it begins to level the playing field and it gives American workers and American businesses more of an opportunity to compete on that level playing field, and the president is confident that when American businesses and American innovators and American workers are given the -- a fair playing field, that American -- that Americans are going to win more often than not.

So, you know, there is this concern that is legitimate that is articulated by many leaders in the Democratic Party about the impact that the broader forces of globalization are having on middle class families and middle class workers across the country. Those concerns are entirely legitimate.

We have seen that there are certain sectors of our economy and even certain communities that have been more negatively affected by the forces of globalization. And so the question that the president has and that he asks himself as the leader of the country, what can we do about it. As the leader of the United States, I have a responsibility to look out for the economy of this country and to look out for every community in this country.

So what are going to do about those forces of globalization? We haven't heard opponents of the Transpacific Partnership articulate really a legitimate or realistic strategy for doing so. The president on the other hand has laid out a very clear strategy for making sure that the United States does more to engage with those countries, including some countries in Southeast Asia that have some of the more -- the most dynamic economies in the world, and that by leveling the playing field, we can make sure that U.S. businesses are not -- are not at a disadvantage when they are competing with those businesses in Southeast Asia.

The other thing that we're doing is we're also making sure that those growing economies are going to -- that we can do away with the 18,000 taxes that are currently imposed on goods that are stamped Made in the USA, and that by cutting those taxes, we can actually make it easier for U.S. businesses to do business overseas. That is going to only expand economic opportunity, expand economic growth and expand job creation right here in the United States.

The other thing that we know from economists is that jobs that are directly connected to international trade, on average, pay more than jobs that aren't. So if we're looking to create good jobs in the United States, including good-paying jobs, then we need to look for ways that we can open up more markets to U.S. goods and services. So all of that is a good thing, and that is the strategy that the president has for confronting this significant challenge.

EARNEST:

I recognize that this is not going to immediately overcome the decades of Democratic Party orthodoxy when it comes to opposing trade, but for people who are willing to consider this specific trade agreement, on the merits, there is no mystery why the president and at least some Democrats in Congress are supportive of it and we're going to continue to make that case across the country, OK?

Mary.

QUESTION:

On Robert Levinson, of course, today is the ninth anniversary of his disappearance, and back in January, the Iranians agreed to help with this case. But since then, there doesn't seem to be any changes or strides made.

Has Iran provided any useful information or leads? Are they cooperating at all?

EARNEST:

Well, you saw that the White House issued a statement on paper for me earlier today, marking the anniversary of Mr. Levinson's disappearance and noting our continued efforts to determine his whereabouts.

As a part of securing the release of a handful of Americans that we know were unjustly detained in Iran, we secured a commitment from the Iranians to cooperate with the United States in our efforts to determine his whereabouts.

The reason their cooperation is important is the last time Mr. Levinson was seen, he was in Iran. And so, you know, we got some pretty pointed questions that we're asking the Iranians about what they may know about his current whereabouts.

I don't have a lot of information to share about those discussions. I can tell you that those discussions are ongoing. And I can tell you that we take quite seriously the U.S. government's responsibility to try to find Mr. Levinson, but we also are going to take seriously Iran's commitment, and we're going to hold them to that commitment, to work with us to determine his whereabouts.

QUESTION:

And following up on the discussion we had in here yesterday, the Attorney General has taken her name out of the running to be the president's Supreme Court and in doing so, she suggested that the nomination process would be too cumbersome.

Does it figure into the president's calculus that whomever he nominates has to be willing to essentially get kicked around by Republicans for a couple of months and ultimately may not go through the whole confirmation process?

EARNEST:

Well, let me answer that question two different ways. The first is, I think the reference to the cumbersome nature of the nomination process is the fact that Ms. Lynch has quite an important job already and to put her through that nomination process would prevent her from doing the important work that she is currently tasked with at the Department of Justice.

And that is the circumstance that we are seeking to avoid. It's a circumstance that she's seeking to avoid and that's why she's taken her -- that's why she has made clear that she did not want to be considered.

More generally though, I do think that -- you know, this is something that we discussed a little bit yesterday. That we see a leading Republican in the United States Senate indicate that Republicans would treat the president's nominee as a pinata.

Now, he offers up this rather colorful description, despite the fact that he doesn't know who the president's nominee is. I think that is a clear indication that Republicans in the United States Senate have no intention of being fair to the president's nominee.

And I don't think that fits with anybody's description of what the Senate's constitutional responsibility is. It certainly doesn't sit with Senator Cornyn's description of that responsibility. Because I'll note that Senator Cornyn used similarly colorful language back in 2006 when talking about the Senate's treatment of President Bush's nominees to the court.

Let me just quote once again from Senator Cornyn, who said, "The current regime treats Supreme Court nominees more like pinatas than human beings." This is from 2006. "And that's something that none of us should be willing to tolerate," Senator Cornyn continued. Let me just point out, Senator Cornyn was actually referring to a nominee from President Bush, Justice Alito, who received courtesy visits from Democratic Senators on Capitol Hill.

EARNEST:

Judge Alito, when he was nominated for the Supreme Court, received a timely hearing. You got a -- an up or down vote in the United States Senate and he was confirmed to the Supreme Court. So if Senator Cornyn believes that Judge Alito was unfairly treated like a pinata, what he is vowing to do to President Obama's as yet unnamed nominee is far, far worse, and that's why we make a strong case that what Republicans are proposing to do and have been doing in this process thus far is an unprecedented and unwarranted escalation of partisan politics when it comes to the one branch of government that's supposed to be insulated from it, and that's the Supreme Court.

So, you know, obviously, we've got -- Republicans are going to have a difficult time, I think, trying to defend both the way that they have handled this thus far and I think they're going to have a tough time defending following through on their threats to treat the president's nominee as a -- as a pinata.

QUESTION:

As you try to sway Senate Republicans to consider the president's Supreme Court nominee, how much has the state of the presidential race -- how much has -- what role is that playing in your argument? I mean, are you suggesting or arguing that the Republicans may have a better chance trying their luck with the president's pick as opposed to, say waiting down the road for anyone who's nominated by, say a Clinton administration?

EARNEST:

Well, I do think that Republicans are in a bit of a curious position, primarily because President Obama has had an opportunity over the course of his presidency to nominate two individuals to fill Supreme Court vacancies. Both of those individuals have received bipartisan support.

That is an -- and I would note that that was bipartisan support they receive even though Democrats had a healthy majority in the United States Senate. So even though he wasn't necessarily required to seek someone who had the kind of credentials and temperament and judgment that would earn bipartisan support, the president felt that was an important part of the job description, that's what's required by the Constitution and that's what the president did, even though Democrats were in charge of the Senate.

What Senate Republicans now are -- are in the position of doing is saying that they're going to oppose President Obama's nominee, no matter who it is, regardless of who he chooses because they're going to let the next president decide. The reason this is a curious position is each of those members of the Senate didn't run for five- year terms, they ran for six-year terms.

They've got a responsibility in their final year in office, in the same way that President Obama has responsibility in his final year in office. He didn't run for a three-year term when he was running for reelection in 2012. He was elected to a four-year term and he's fulfilling his constitutional duty,

as described in the Constitution, that -- that the president is given, which is that the president -- where the Constitution says that the president shall appoint a nominee to fill a vacancy in the Supreme Court. That's what the president's going to do and the Senate has a responsibility to give that person a timely consideration in -- in the context of a hearing and a yes or no vote. Let's move around. Mark?

QUESTION:

Josh, does the White House regard Robert Levinson as a hostage?

EARNEST:

Mark, right now, the -- the White House does not know the whereabouts of Mr. Levinson. The last time we knew of his whereabouts was nine years ago today and he was in Iran. And that is why we have compelled the Iranians, in the context of the agreement that was reached earlier this year, to work with us to determine exactly where Mr. Levinson is.

QUESTION:

The FBI issued a statement today referring to Robert Levinson as the longest held American hostage ever. Is -- is that not part of policy with the White House?

EARNEST:

Well I haven't seen the FBI statement. I can tell you what the -- you know, what the White House view of this is, and it's simply that we'd like to know of Stuart Levinson's whereabouts, we are legitimately concerned about his well-being based on the fact that we don't know his whereabouts. And we are working with the Iranians who have agreed to provide us information about his location, and we're working with that to try and determine exactly where he is.

QUESTION:

And on the Supreme Court nomination, did the -- has the president started meeting with prospective nominees?

EARNEST:

I will not be in a position -- I do not anticipate being in a -- in a position to confirm any individual meetings or conversations that the president has. I can tell you that the process is ongoing, the president does continue to meet with his -- with members of his team to discuss this issue and to discuss this important decision. But I don't have any updates for you in terms of whether or not he has talked to any of the potential nominees.

QUESTION:

Can you waive (ph) us off an announcement today?

EARNEST:

I would not anticipate any significant Supreme Court news from the White House today.

QUESTION:

Or tomorrow?

EARNEST:

I don't have any guidance for tomorrow.

QUESTION:

OK.

EARNEST:

OK, Byron.

QUESTION:

Thanks Josh. I saw reports that the president had endorsed in an Illinois state legislative race this week, last week, he endorsed in two Senate primaries. The president -- you've said that the president wants to give Democratic voters a chance to have -- to weigh in on the presidential race, what's the -- what's the difference here?

EARNEST:

Well, you know, each of them is -- each of them is a little bit different. I can -- I can take the Illinois one first, and it's sort of relevant to the question that you asked me about the Ohio Senate race.

One of the reasons that the president weighed in on the Illinois state house race is the incumbent Democrat was somebody who had not demonstrated a commitment to pursuing common sense gun safety legislation. And the president made a promise earlier this year that he would ensure that his name would not be associated with -- or he certainly would not support or advocate for the election of Democrats who don't support common sense gun safety legislation. And this is an example of the president following through.

Now what's also true -- now I'm just on the front end -- is that we're not going to scrub the records and the campaign statements of every single Democrat at every single level of the ballot all across the country, but obviously, the president's home state of Illinois is a -- is a place that he knows well and he knows some of the individuals well. And the president felt like it was an important race for him to weigh in on.

As it relates to, you know, Mr. Murphy and Governor Strickland, Congressman Murphy and Governor Strickland, you know, the president is interested in doing as much as he can to support Democrats in their effort to re-take the majority in the United States Senate. And he certainly has put his endorsement alongside who he believes are the strongest candidates in those two key states.

QUESTION:

But philosophically, what's the difference between intervening in a Senate primary and endorsing in a presidential race?

EARNEST:

Well at this point, we haven't ruled out endorsing in the presidential race. The president hasn't either at this point. However, we do not plan to. And look, I think the dynamics of each race are different, and I think some of it also has to do with the president's view that particularly at the

presidential level, the Democratic candidates are likely to benefit from having a longer-than-expected campaign.

EARNEST:

That certainly was true when he ran in 2008. You know, we were remarking earlier today that, you know, after the elections -- you know, after the outcome in Michigan that many people are observing, once again, that the Democratic contest is likely to last a little bit longer than most people expected. People were observing the same thing eight years ago today.

We're about a week -- week out of the -- the Texas and Ohio contests in 2008. Of course, Secretary Clinton won in Ohio and she very narrowly won the primary in Texas, but lost the caucus. They have a rather peculiar system in Texas for choosing their delegates. And there had been -- the thinking had been if -- if then Senator Obama had won one of those two states, that he might be able to seal the nomination, but because Secretary Clinton -- then Senator Clinton emerged victorious, that this was going to be a (inaudible) campaign.

And there were many people who worried about the impact this would have on Democrats' prospects in the general election. But as we've -- as you've heard me observe on a number of occasions, both Democratic candidates, particularly the -- eventually the Democratic nominee, benefited significantly from that longer than expected campaign. That gave him and the party the opportunity to build a campaign apparatus in states where Democrats had not previously had an aggressive general election effort. I singled out Indiana as probably the best example of that kind of state because Barack Obama won Indiana in 2008 and that was a place the Democrats hadn't even competed in quite some time.

So those who are concerned that the presidential election in at the Democratic contest in 2016 is - - looks like it's going to last longer than was anticipated, that's not necessarily bad news and I think that would also be part of the explanation for the president not weighing in on that race.

QUESTION:

One more topic, Congress is in the final stages of passing a bill that would deal with the opioid crisis. I know the White House has a statement (ph) of administration policy related to asking for additional funding in the bill. Is the White House prepared to sign the bill in its current form if it came (inaudible) the president?

EARNEST:

Well, my understanding is this is something that's still being -- being negotiated up on Capitol Hill. At this point, you know, our view is that we welcome recognition on the part of both Democrats and Republicans that opioid abuse is a significant problem in too many communities across the country. The problem with this bill is that it doesn't include nearly enough resources to begin to address that problem.

So what we'd like to see the Congress do is do more than just pay lip service to the problem and actually put forward some specific ideas with funding to address it. The president, in his budget proposal, laid out about \$1 billion in resources that he believed could be used to effectively combat

this scourge in communities large and small across all across the country. And Congress should consider legislation that includes the necessary resources, rather than just passing a bill that observes there's a problem.

QUESTION:

But if this came to your desk -- the president's desk, would he sign it? Would he support it as a first step?

EARNEST:

Well, again, we're going to -- we'll take a look at the bill as it works its way through the legislative process. You know, but our view is that Congress should just -- should actually pass some legislation that has the necessary resources to begin to confront this issue. And if they're wondering about what sort of good ideas are out there in terms of programs that deserve funding, well, we've included them in our budget, and I suppose if the Republicans on the Budget Committee hadn't canceled the budget hearings before the President even released his budget, we'd have had more of an opportunity to talk about those ideas.

EARNEST:

Ron?

QUESTION:

Back to the trade issue and the Michigan vote and this whole idea of (inaudible) kept saying how the TPP levels the playing field. One of the arguments that Bernie Sanders makes and that his voters apparently agree with is that there can't be fair trade when workers in Vietnam earn 56 cents an hour minimum wage versus what American workers make, which is much more. So to that specific point, how do you get a level playing field in the trade deal when workers some place make \$0.56 an hour, and that's the cost of labor, versus American workers, making, you know -- at a time when wages are flat or not increasing significantly.

It's one of the weakest -- the weaknesses in the economy. How do you get a level playing field in that paradigm?

EARNEST:

Well, I'll tell you what doesn't level the playing field at all Ron. Doing nothing. Complaining about it. That's not going to have impact on policy in Vietnam. None.

What will have an impact on policy in Vietnam is telling the Vietnamese government that if they want to have more access to the U.S. market, which we know they would like, that we're going to tell them, you need to do something about labor standards in your country. You're going to have to raise them.

And if you don't, you won't have access to our markets. And we're going to go back to them and we're going to say, you need to start observing legitimate, environmental standards in your country. And if you don't, then you won't have access to U.S. markets. You need to start protecting human rights in your country and if you don't, then you're not going to have access to U.S. markets.

QUESTION:

How is any of that going to raise the \$0.56 an hour wage for a woman? It is anywhere comparable to what an American worker makes. And again, the basic argument that Senator Sanders and others are making is that, with that kind of disparity, which is pretty striking, you can't have, what you say, is a level playing field.

EARNEST:

My retort to that Ron is, what are they doing? What do they propose? There's no strategy that's being laid out by the anti- TPP forces about what exactly they would do to counter the forces of globalization and actually stand up for middle-class workers in this country. And we have laid out a clear strategy for how we're going to do that.

We're going to impose enforceable standards on Vietnam. If they want to have access to this country, they're going to have to put in place, higher standards when it comes to labor rights, when it comes to environmental rights and when it comes to human rights.

The other thing that they're going to have to do, is they're actually going have to treat U.S. goods fairly, when we want to do business in their country. That's significant because Vietnam has a rapidly growing middle class and we are actually seeing significant economic growth rates in Vietnam.

That is a tremendous opportunity for U.S. businesses to invest in Vietnam, do business in Vietnam, in a way that will yield economic growth, job creation and higher wages back here in the United States. We're going to cut taxes on 18,000 American goods that are imposed by other countries as a result of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

That is a coherent strategy for countering the forces of globalization, increasing wages, expanding economic opportunity and creating jobs here in the United States of America. That's what we should do. And, you know, it's not just that I disagree with the argument that's being made by the other side. There's no counterproposal. There's no argument that's being made by the other side. So we all share concerns about the impact of globalization. There are communities in this country that are hurting as a result. But the question really is, not whether or not that's occurring. The question is, what are we going to do about it. And President Obama has laid out a clear strategy for how we can tackle this challenge.

QUESTION:

And on the official state visit tomorrow. What is the criteria that gets a visit to that level? Really, this is the 12th -- will be the 12th during the presidency. And is it -- do Trudeau's just comments about Donald Trump and him being an anti-Trump, as you've read, have anything to do with the fact that he's visiting the White House at this time?

EARNEST:

No, there isn't -- that Prime Minister Trudeau is in the White House is that he is invited by President Obama back in November to do so. And he is the leader of America's closest economic partner. And he is the leader of a country that does some really important work that's critical to the national security of the United States.

EARNEST:

The United States of America has a strong interest in cultivating strong ties with the nation of Canada, the people of Canada and the new prime minister of Canada, and we're -- we're looking forward to his visit here tomorrow.

QUESTION:

That's been the case for many years and there hasn't been a visit for 20 years until now. The timing just seems perhaps political.

EARNEST:

I think the timing is that it coincides with the election of a new prime minister in Canada. I think it's pretty straight forward.

QUESTION:

Anything about the guest list or the (inaudible)? I know there's a preview of a source (ph) this afternoon.

EARNEST:

We'll have more information on the guest list tomorrow. We'll release the guest, as we usually do.

OK?

April?

QUESTION:

Hi, Josh. Two subject. I want to -- Wednesday afternoon, (inaudible) on Michigan last night, how did the auto industry bailout factor into the Michigan vote last night? (inaudible) think about that, especially as Hillary Clinton ties herself supposedly to this president.

EARNEST:

Well, look, all of your news organizations have hundreds of people on the payrolls who are doing post-election analysis. It seems like pretty good work if you can get it. Maybe someday, I will, but not today. So I'll -- look, I -- the president made a very strong case about the positive impact that the -- that his policies that he put in place had on the auto industry in Michigan.

That industry, this great American industry, was on the verge of collapsing, and because of very difficult and in some cases politically unpopular decisions that this president made very early on in his presidency, we've seen the American auto industry come roaring back. That is thanks, primarily, to the grit and determination of American workers, but it wouldn't have been possible without the policy decisions that this president made that and that this is administration implemented.

And I don't know what impact that had on the -- the primary. I can tell you it had a pretty significant impact in the general election in 2012 when this came up. You had a pretty stark contrast between President Obama's record of trying to support the American auto industry and a Republican candidate who famously wrote an op-ed suggesting that we should just let Detroit go bankrupt.

When faced with that stark choice, even the Republican nominee's close ties to that state didn't make it particularly competitive.

So I think that's the latest available evidence that we have in terms of a referendum on that policy decision, but I -- you know, we'll have to see how things shake out in 2016. But I wouldn't be surprised if we are faced with a general election choice between a Democratic candidate who believes strongly in the value of having invested in American manufacturing and Republican candidates who -- a Republican candidate who don't recognize why that should be a priority.

QUESTION:

And looking at the communities in Michigan that are touched or impacted by the auto industry, how does this administration look at that community economically? Where do they stand economically, in your opinion?

EARNEST:

Well, there is no denying the tremendous progress that the state of Michigan has been in -- in digging out of the hole created by the great recession. In many ways, the state of Michigan was hurt as badly as any other state because of how closely tied their broader economy is to the American manufacturing sector, to the auto industry in particular.

EARNEST:

And look, the -- you can go back and look at the news reports at the time. The American auto industry was, you know, weeks or even days away from totally collapsing and that just wouldn't have affected the big three U.S. automakers, it would've had an impact up and down their supply chain. You know, more than one million jobs potentially at stake here. And you know, that's why the president believes that bold action was required to go and support that industry and make the recovery that we see today possible.

And, you know, the reason that the Michigan economy is doing quite well now is that we do see that the American auto industry is performing at unseen levels. Their profits are higher, they're making more cars and they're selling more cars than ever before, and that's a really good thing for the -- for the Michigan economy, it also happens to be a pretty darn good thing for the U.S. economy too.

QUESTION:

And lastly, on the -- on the Supreme Court nominees, could you talk to us about these letters that the White House has been getting from organizations -- there are reports that the Black Women's Roundtable gave a list of names, and other organizations -- and this is something that's happened before.

Can you talk about the process, once you give the names, you know, do you compare them to the list that you already have, the binder of nine, or the open binder that continues to get new names or do you add any names? Could you talk about the process, how these letters are handled?

EARNEST:

Well, you know, the -- obviously, the process of filling a vacancy on the Supreme Court is something that a lot of people are quite interested in; that's understandable when you consider the broad impact that the Supreme Court has in policymaking.

You know, we've seen that some of the policies that this administration prioritized were at risk until, you know, the Supreme Court made a final ruling. And I have in mind the -- some of the Affordable Care Act rulings that would have significantly changed our ability to implement that law had the Supreme Court ruled in a different way.

So the stakes are high, and obviously, there are a lot of organizations that exist here in D.C. that are trying to influence policy that have some ideas about who should serve on the Supreme Court. And what you've seen the administration do is something that we do on a range of issues, which is to engage with people outside of this building to have a conversation with them about their views. And that's part of the reason that the president has consulted with so many members of the United States Senate.

I can tell you that there are Democrats and Republicans across Washington and across the country that have been consulted by the White House on this specific decision that the president has to make. And, you know, that -- all of that is fed into the process that's being run by senior members of the president's team to present him with the information that he needs to make a decision. And this kind of consultation and outreach is part and parcel of what we do here every day at the White House.

QUESTION:

So you said that these groups in D.C. are trying to influence, and then you just said it's fed into a process. So you're saying to me they have some level of influence on the process, or is that too strong a...

EARNEST:

Well, no. I think what I'm saying is that there -- that there has been a concerted effort on the part of White House officials to reach out beyond the White House to consult with interested parties on this decision. And we obviously take that feedback seriously and we welcome the kind of input that we've received out of the -- out of the many conversations that have occurred thus far.

QUESTION:

So you take seriously the feedback from the Congressional Black Caucus, the Black Women's Roundtable and even the NAACP and some other groups that say Loretta Lynch should be your nominee. You take that seriously?

EARNEST:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Now Ms. Lynch has also indicated that she does not want to be considered for the appointment because she's got a lot of important work to do at the Department of Justice. That certainly is an understandable position because she does have a lot of important work to do

at the Department of Justice, and serving as the nominee of the Supreme Court would interfere with her ability to get all that done. So...

QUESTION:

So you're taking her off the list.

EARNEST:

She has indicated that she does not wish to be considered, and we've granted that request.

QUESTION:

She's off the list.

EARNEST:

Yes.

QUESTION:

OK.

EARNEST:

(OFF-MIKE)

QUESTION:

Can you tell me a little bit more about the incident that happened yesterday, the arrest of Kyle Andrew Odom here at the White House who was suspected of shooting at the pastor in Idaho, whether or not the White House was a target, the president. And the list -- there was a manifesto regarding the pastor's name, members of the Senate as well as the House and Israeli officials that he was targeting in some way. What can you tell us about that?

EARNEST:

Susan (ph), I don't have much of an update on the case. You saw that the Secret Service put out a statement yesterday, or maybe it was earlier today, detailing what exactly happened. This individual was apprehended by United Secret Service personnel after he threw some material over the south fence line of the White House. And you know, once he was detained and questioned, they ran his information through the database and learned that he was wanted for -- in connection with an attempted murder in Idaho.

Those are obviously serious charges and, you know, I'll defer to the local officials in Idaho for their ongoing investigation. But obviously, given where this individual was detained, you know, the Secret Service has some questions for him as well. But I don't have any update for you in terms of -- of their investigation.

QUESTION:

Is there any concern that in light of the fact that local officials did put him on that database right after they had surveillance video showing the incident -- the shooting of the pastor, that he was

able to board a plane in Boise and get to Washington, D.C.? Are the discussions happening between the White House and TSA involving that?

EARNEST:

I'm not aware of any discussions along those lines right now. I think that's more of a matter for local law enforcement.

QUESTION:

OK. On other matter, the vice president yesterday condemned the Palestinian leaders for not coming out aggressively and strongly, saying that this terrorist attack at Tel Aviv was something that -- that shouldn't have happened. He's meeting with Mahmoud Abbas today. Is that something that you anticipate is going to be front and center of their conversations?

EARNEST:

Well, you know, the reports of this particular incident were just emerging prior to my briefing yesterday, and at that point -- you know, I've heard strong condemnations we routinely do when these kinds of terrorist incidents occur. At the time, we weren't aware yet that the -- that an American citizen was the victim of this crime. You know, the -- this kind of attack would be outrageous even it didn't -- even if it didn't involve an American, but clearly, it does, and that's why the thoughts and prayers of everybody here at the White House are with the family of the young man who was killed yesterday.

The vice president spoke to this when he had an opportunity to do so in his public appearance with Prime Minister Netanyahu and it does seem hard to imagine that this issue would not come up when the president meets with President Abbas.

QUESTION:

Is the expectation...

EARNEST:

When the vice president meets with President Abbas.

QUESTION:

Sure. Is the expectation that he would publicly condemn this attack, that that is what is required of Abbas?

EARNEST:

Well, you know, our expectation would be that you would -- that public officials, and particularly those who are in position of leadership, would condemn any act of terrorism and would condemn any effort to carry out an act of violence against innocent civilians, that that is worthy of condemnation, not just on the part of the United States and Israel, but by countries around the world, including by the leader of the Palestinian people.

QUESTION:

And finally, following up on April's question, is there a concern from the White House that you've now seen Attorney General Lynch decide that she doesn't want her name in the nomination process -- you've also heard from Governor Sandoval (ph) and now today, Judge Jordan -- that you are losing potentially good candidates, good nominees to the Supreme Court before the process even begins because of the contentious nature and the fight that's looking forward with Republicans?

EARNEST:

No, I'm not worried about that at all. And simply I think what I would do is I'd just refer you to the public statements that were -- that have been made by each of those individuals, and none of them have indicated that they are concerned about the contentious nature of a potential hearing. They had their own individual reasons for choosing not to be a part of the process.

But I continue to be confident that the president will choose the very best person in America for this job. OK, Margaret.

QUESTION:

Josh, can we expect outreach by the White House to the family about this U.S. Army vet, Taylor Morris (ph) who was killed in Israel yesterday?

EARNEST:

I don't know if there has been any contact with his family at this point, but we'll try to keep you posted on that.

QUESTION:

And I want to come back -- when you were talking about Levinson, you made the point, I think twice at least, that the last time he was seen was in Iran. Are you speaking about the proof-of-life video of him in an orange jumpsuit that was released a few years ago? Because around that time, Hillary Clinton said he was in southwest Asia.

Are you differing from that? Is there a change in view?

EARNEST:

No. I think our view is that the last time that we knew definitively where he was was in Iran, and that was nine years ago today, unfortunately. There have been -- you know, other evidence has been put forward that -- that don't make it precisely clear exactly where he is. And that's what we're working with the Iranians to determine, is to try to find out exactly what his location is and determine his whereabouts.

The Iranians have committed to do that, and we've held them to that commitment.

QUESTION:

So it wasn't that then -- the then-secretary of State was being intentionally imprecise, it's that you were opening the door to him being outside of Iran now.

EARNEST:

I think what I'm doing is I'm explaining why we believe that Iran has an obligation to assist the United States in determining his whereabouts. The reason for that is the last time that we knew definitively where he was, he was in Iran. And we believe that places upon the Iranian government an obligation to work with us to try to find him and to determine his whereabouts, to determine his location.

And that's what we're seeking to do. The Iranians have agreed to do that in the context of this agreement that was reached earlier this year, and we're holding them to that commitment.

QUESTION:

You say you hadn't seen the FBI's statement that used the word "hostage." That statement -- that phrase was not in the State Department print statement, that was not in the White House statement. Are you saying, though, beyond the PR statements that the White House does not view him as a hostage?

EARNEST:

What I'm saying is that it's difficult to reach a conclusive statement like that when we don't know where he is. And that's why we're working so hard to determine his whereabouts. And, you know, again, we are -- the Iranians have made a commitment to help us determine his location and we're holding them to that commitment, we continue to engage in conversations with them.

You know, obviously, this is a very difficult time for the Levinson family, and, you know, as the statement that I issued earlier today indicates, you know, our thoughts are with them as they go through what is an unthinkable situation. And, you know, obviously, that is a very difficult thing for any family to through. They are concerned about their loved on, they're missing their loved one, and it why the United States is going to great lengths to try to determine the whereabouts of this American citizen so that we can bring him home.

QUESTION:

So it's been widely reported that there is a difference in view between law enforcement and the White House and some of the administration as to Mr. Levinson's status. Do you dispute that?

EARNEST:

Well I don't know what the latest law enforcement assessment is. You can go talk to them about that.

QUESTION:

As a hostage. That's what the FBI says.

EARNEST:

OK. And what I'm -- what I'm saying is that, you know, that our -- that our policy from here is to hold the Iranians accountable for helping us determine his location, and the reason that we hold the Iranians accountable is that the last time that we knew definitively where he was, he was in Iran, and that places an obligation on the Iranian government to assist us in that effort. Fortunately,

they've committed to cooperating with us and we're going to, as I mentioned, as was included in the statement, we're going to spare no effort to try to secure his return.

QUESTION:

So he could be a hostage, but you just don't know definitively?

EARNEST:

We don't know definitively where he is and it's what makes it hard for us to determine exactly what his status is. Obviously, we're very concerned about his safety. Obviously, we're quite interested in learning his whereabouts. Obviously, the Levinson family has gone through a great deal of turmoil and pain, and you know, that's why we have placed such a priority on finding him and bringing him home.

QUESTION:

Different topic, Cuba. There was an op-ed in a communist party paper -- editorial, I should say -- with Cuba demanding and making clear that they're not going to change their policies for the U.S. and saying that President Obama could do more. Are you disappointed at this? Does it set a negative tone for the president's upcoming visit?

EARNEST:

No, I'm not particularly concerned about it. We've obviously got a -- a pretty long agenda for the president's trip to Cuba, and that long agenda includes visiting with political opponents of the Cuban government and standing up for, in a very tangible way, the universal human rights of the Cuban people. And that, after all, is our priority here, is that by more deeply engaging the Cuban government, the Cuban economy and the Cuban people, we can more effectively advance the interests of the Cuban people. That certainly has positive economic benefits for the United States, as my friends in the Chamber of Commerce and American Farm Bureau and other places would tell you.

But you know, this also is an opportunity for us to use the moral influence of the United States to advocate for greater freedoms for the Cuban people. That's something that the United States does around the world and it certainly make sense that we'd be doing that in a country just 90 miles off our shore. OK.

Kevin?

QUESTION:

Thanks, Josh. Back on Attorney General Lynch. Would agree it's possible the president informed her before she made that statement yesterday that she simply was not going to be the nominee and allow her the -- the dignity of issuing a statement on her own?

EARNEST:

I'm not aware of -- of the president having done that. My understanding is that she contacted the White House to make clear that she has a lot of important work to do at the Department of Justice, and for that reason, asked not to be considered for an appointment to a new job.

QUESTION:

It's curious because when I asked you back on February 19 about the same topic, you used Solicitor General Kagan as an example of someone who had lieutenants who could certainly do the job, and that would not interfere with her ability to go through the process while still conducting the business of the people (ph) of the United States. So I'm just curious, what's different here?

EARNEST:

I think what's different here is that the scope of responsibilities for the Attorney General of the United States are much broader than the scope of responsibilities for the solicitor general. Not as...

QUESTION:

But you used that as an example when I asked you to say that...

EARNEST:

Yes.

QUESTION:

You know...

EARNEST:

Because I think it's a relevant example. Obviously, Ms. Kagan served in the Justice Department. Obviously, that's where the solicitor general is. And she is somebody who turned out to be -- has turned out to be an excellent Supreme Court Justice. So in that situation, we were able to design a solution that allowed Ms. Kagan's deputy to assume some responsibilities while she went through this process.

EARNEST:

But when you consider the scope of responsibilities, particularly some of the more challenging things that are being dealt with over at the Department of Justice right now, and things like, you know, fighting ISIL.

There are a number of prosecutions, including the FIFA prosecution, that are ongoing, and to remove Ms. Lynch from the equation would be unnecessarily disruptive. And that's why she made an affirmative request to not be considered for a -- the appointment to the Supreme Court, and the president granted that request.

QUESTION:

I want to follow up also on her comments about the ongoing investigation into the Clinton email scandal. She made a recent comment suggesting that under no circumstances did they confer to the White House, there was no sort of back-and-forth. Can you just sort of again reiterate from the administration's perspective, has there been any conversations during this -- during this investigation at all, has there been any updating done by the DOJ? Are you aware of anything, have you seen any sort of back-and-forth?

EARNEST:

Well obviously, I have not been part of any of those conversations, and the attorney general who leads that department says they -- that they did not occur, so I wouldn't have any reason to disagree with her or to think that she's not correct when she says that the Department of Justice has not been communicating extensively with the White House about this.

QUESTION:

And you haven't had any conversations with anyone and no one's given you any guidance...

EARNEST:

Of course not.

QUESTION:

OK. Lastly, I want to also ask you about -- and this is sort of a broad sweep, Judges Srinivasan...

EARNEST:

I've heard...

QUESTION:

... just going down the list here, Kelly, Wafford (ph), a broad brush. What do they have in common? What makes them interesting possible nominees?

EARNEST:

Well, at least, you know, a couple of the names that you mentioned there are individuals who were appointed by President Obama to the federal bench. And in those cases, these were individuals who were confirmed with bipartisan support by the United States Senate to serve on the federal bench.

I would be the first to acknowledge, as I have on previous occasions, that an appointment to the Supreme Court is certainly a unique case, that's why we would expect for the Senate to undergo a process of interviewing these individuals or interviewing the nominee and giving them a hearing and giving them, subjecting them to tough questioning and scrutiny of their background for this position.

But I think what I -- the observation that I would have is that these are all individuals who have already served the country in the judicial branch with distinction. And having that kind of background, I think, certainly does give us an indication that they could be good Supreme Court nominee.

But at this point, I'm not in a position to confirm that anybody is actually under consideration by the -- by the White House, so I don't want to lead you astray there, but certainly, the three individuals you named are people that the president was proud to have appointed to the federal bench.

QUESTION:

Last one if I could follow. Have any of the conversations that you can't talk about, that we're not privy to, is there any possible way that we can get more than "I can't confirm, I can't deny, I can't say they have, they haven't" because people -- the American people want to know where are we in this process. I'm glad Mark asked about today because each day, we're on pins and needles trying to figure out where are in this process.

EARNEST:

It's exciting, isn't it?

QUESTION:

Well, yeah.

(LAUGHTER)

So we want to know. Can you give us more than "I can't say, I'd love to help you out." I mean, where are we in the process?

EARNEST:

Unfortunately at this point, I don't have additional information that I can share. But what I can tell you is that once the president has made a decision, I do think that we will be able to provide you at least a little bit more insight into what went into his making that decision, what are the kinds of things that he's been thinking about over the last several weeks here.

And I think that will be -- that will also be something more easy to illustrate once the president has made a decision. And we can certainly have a conversation about that, and I anticipate we'll have more than one.

QUESTION:

Thank you.

QUESTION:

Is he closer to a decision?

EARNEST:

The president's made some progress.

Tolu (ph)?

QUESTION:

I wanted to ask you about trade. You've laid out the administration's policy in your argument, but it seems like -- in terms of just a PR strategy, it seems like folks like Bernie Sanders who have accused the TPP deal of being something that's going to kill jobs, it seems like he's won that argument pretty handily, especially if you look at the results in Michigan.

So does the president -- does the White House need to do more, especially since this TPP deal hasn't been voted on and it seems to be in limbo at the point? Do you need to do more to win the

PR deal -- the PR battle before we get to the general election where it becomes even a higher (inaudible)?

EARNEST:

Well, with all due respect, Tolu (ph), there's one aspect of your argument that I would quibble with just a little bit, which is that Senator Sanders was appealing to Democratic voters in a Democratic primary that have a long known institutional reflexive negative reaction to discussions about expanding international trade. So it's not surprising that -- that Senator Sanders has adopted this rhetoric, and you as you said, successfully to appeal to at least some of the voters in Michigan.

I think what I would point out is that we had an opportunity to test this last summer when the president was working aggressively to build a bipartisan coalition in the United States Congress in support of trade promotion authority that would essentially allow the president to complete the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations.

And there was a lot of hue and cry about how candidates on the campaign trail that even back in May and June and July were getting a lot of attention, that they had opposed it, including Secretary Clinton, who at the time, and continues to lead in national polls. And there was concern among some in Washington that this would be the final nail in the coffin of our efforts to secure trade promotion authority legislation, when in fact, we actually succeeded in building that bipartisan majority, and there were twists and turns along the way.

It's -- the death of that legislative effort was predicted more than once. We encountered a few snafus, but we were able to overcome them, and that's why I would encourage you to not be distracted by the debate on the campaign trail when it comes to evaluating the prospects for our -- our trade legislation.

I would also make the point that the argument that we have to make to Congress now is actually much more powerful than the argument that we could make around trade promotion authority. At the time, trade promotion authority was essentially asking a bunch of Republicans in Congress to give the Democratic president the authority necessary to negotiate this agreement.

Now, we're in a position where we actually have tangible benefits of an agreement to present to individual members of Congress and make a persuasive case to them about how the country and their constituents will benefit from the trade agreement. And you know, it may be time to bring those slides back out again, but we can document how products in every single state of -- of the country will see the taxes that are imposed on them by other countries cut as a result of this agreement.

That's a good thing for our economy. That is a good thing for the -- for the companies that are in the business of exporting those products overseas. That will expand economic growth in America, it will expand economic opportunity in America, it will create jobs in America and it will even put upward pressure on wages, according to some studies. That's all good -- those are all good things.

EARNEST:

And that is all part and parcel of the president's strategy for countering the forces of globalization that have had a negative impact on some communities across the country.

And rather than just complain about it, rather than just wring his hands about it, the leader of the free world has stood up and said this is the strategy that we're going to implement to look out for middle class families in America. That's a persuasive case that we'll take to the United States Senate and the United States House to get them to support this agreement.

The last thing I'll say is because we were able to reach trade promotion -- because we were able to pass trade promotion authority, a vote that required 60 votes in the United States Senate in order to ratify this agreement only requires 50 votes in the United States Senate. So not only is our argument stronger, the hurdle that we need to climb is a little lower.

QUESTION:

And you mentioned this was the Democratic primary, but it seems like on the Republican side, Donald Trump is making sort of a similar argument, that the president's trade deals haven't been good, he hasn't been a good deal maker and they haven't helped jobs. So it does seem to be that he won Michigan pretty handily as well, so it does seem to have some bipartisan support, this argument. So I'm wondering...

EARNEST:

The Freedom Caucus, my friends who hang out at Tortilla Coast, they oppose trade promotion authority legislation too. And again, that didn't prevent us from building the bipartisan majority that was needed to get trade promotion authority legislation, and as I observed, you know, this time around, we've got a stronger argument and we've got a -- less of an obstacle to overcome in terms of getting it passed.

So there's no denying that there is opposition in some quarters of the electorate to trade deals, but Mr. Trump certainly hasn't articulated a specific proposal for how to counter the forces of globalization and ensure that middle class families in America can compete and win in a 21st century global economy.

President Obama, on the other hand, has put out a specific strategy. And he didn't -- isn't just making empty proposals, he actually is going out and engaging in the world and using the influence of the United States of America to reach these agreements, and now we need -- you know, we're getting close to a situation where we will be asking the Congress to pass it.

QUESTION:

So the results in Michigan last night don't change your strategy at all for how you're going to roll out your plan to get a vote onto the floor...

EARNEST:

No, because I -- I just don't think the results in Michigan tell us something that we didn't already know about the public's view of this, particularly in the state of Michigan.

QUESTION:

And just one more question, following up on my colleague's question yesterday about President Erdogan. Do you have any information about whether or not he's going to come to the U.S. for the nuclear security summit? His office apparently said that he's coming. Have you looked into that at all?

EARNEST:

I don't have any way to independently confirm his travel plans. I can just tell you in general that we expect a number of world leaders to travel to the United States to discuss this important national security priority. The president is looking forward to hosting a number of those leaders, but we'll have some information later this month about who precisely we expect to attend.
OK, Jared.

QUESTION:

Josh, you said that it isn't appropriate or Constitutional for Senate Republicans to block a potential forthcoming Supreme Court nominee. Isn't there a political upside for Democrats?

EARNEST:

Well I don't know. I guess Democrats themselves will have to -- have to decide that. I suspect that a member of the United States Senate who's willing to make the case that they're going to abide by their Constitutional duty is likely to fare better than a member of the United States Senate who is publicly refusing to fulfill their Constitutional duty. But, you know, maybe that's a little more election analysis than I should do, but, you know, there'll be an opportunity to -- there'll be an opportunity for all of you to take a look at that question.

QUESTION:

Shouldn't Democrats around the country take this as another reason to get out to the polls in the -
- in the fall?

EARNEST:

Well, again, the -- I do think that there is a challenge that Republicans who are on the ballot in the fall will face about having to try to defend the record of a United States Senate that, certainly in the first months of this year, has routinely not just opposed the president's proposals, but rejected their basic responsibility to govern.

And setting aside the Supreme Court, that is true of Republicans' refusal to even consider the plan that we put forward the close gitmo, to refuse to even consider a hearing on the president's budget. They were -- they canceled that hearing before the president even put his proposal out, to say nothing of their long-standing promise to offer up an alternative to Obamacare, something that they have failed to do, even though they've now voted 60 or so times to repeal it.

The same applies to immigration reform or gun control. On so many of the important issues facing the country, it's not that Republicans are just saying no, it's that Republicans are refusing to do their job, and that's particularly problematic when I think most Americans understand that once

you assume the majority in one of the legislative bodies of Congress -- in this case, Republicans have the majority in both legislative bodies in Congress -- that means they have a responsibility to govern.

Ostensibly, that's the reason they ran for the job in the first place is because they wanted to have some influence over running the country. But they have totally abdicated that responsibility and that's a reputation, I think, that's going to be hard for many Republicans to shake.

QUESTION:

You said earlier that you're not worried about losing the candidates for the Supreme Court. So you don't think the Senate is having a chilling effect on this process?

EARNEST:

No, I do not, at least not on the president's ability to choose the right person for the job.

QUESTION:

So if there's no tangible ill effect, I guess no -- no harm in legal parlance (ph), what is actually wrong with what the Senate's doing? I mean, they're -- they're essentially just taking a political posture, which you can't really fault them for. And since they're not having an ill effect and they're not having an -- there's no nominee that's actually out there, what have they actually done that the White House thinks is wrong?

EARNEST:

Jared, I think we -- I think the administration, and more importantly, I think the American people fault the Republicans in Congress for putting their political considerations, as you've described them, ahead of their constitutional duty. That's really the -- that's the problem, and I think that's something that even some of the polls that your organizations have conducted are further eroding the already meager support that -- that the Congress has when it comes to evaluating their standing with the public.

QUESTION:

You've been asked -- you've been asked a lot today about the results of Michigan last night. You've cited reflexive and institutional reasons why Democratic voters might be against the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Does the White House see any difference between Senator Sander's position and the one held by Hillary Clinton on TPP?

EARNEST:

Well, I'll let the candidates describe their individual positions.

QUESTION:

You don't have a -- there's no White House stance on whether or not there's any substantive difference between their mutual opposition for the deal?

EARNEST:

No. I'd refer you to their public comments. OK?

EARNEST:

Yes, ma'am?

QUESTION:

Thank you, Josh. (inaudible) Obama executive order for new sanctions against North Korea. Do you know when do the administrative order released or sooner or later, President (inaudible) of these executive orders? Do you know when or how you will take this action (inaudible)?

EARNEST:

Yes. I can tell you that within the last couple of weeks, the Treasury Department has announced a number of -- of actions against the North Korean government. And so I'd refer you to the Treasury Department for information about those actions. In some ways, what's important, and some ways maybe even more important, is the kind of response we've seen from the international community. We have seen Russia, China, South Korea and Japan come together and -- in support of sanctions that go farther than ever in isolating the North Korean government. These are sanctions that are intended to make it harder for the North Korean government to collect revenue that could be dedicated to advancing either their nuclear or their missile program.

We also know that some of these sanctions that are put in place could have an impact on the extravagant lifestyle that's enjoyed by some members of the North Korean elite. That's significant because right now, it's the decisions that are being made by the North Korean government that are condemning millions of innocent North Koreans to a life of poverty and hardship, and that's immoral and it certainly is inconsistent with the responsibilities that come with leadership. And the international community has spoken out strongly against this and we're going to continue to apply pressure to the North Korean government until such time as they give up their -- give up their nuclear program and begin to abide by the kinds of broadly accepted international standards that every other country abide by (sic) -- abides by.

QUESTION:

So U.S. will take this action to North Korea (inaudible) after the president (inaudible) this order?

EARNEST:

Well, for information on timing, I'd refer you to my colleagues at the Treasury Department. They can speak to that. OK?

Chris, I'll give you the last one.

QUESTION:

Great. After 39 hours of filibuster from Democrats, the Missouri senator early today approved a measure seeming (ph) to discriminate against (inaudible) by allowing religious organizations and individuals to refuse services to same sex couples. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have come out in support of that filibuster and opposed the (inaudible). Will the president do the same?

EARNEST:

Chris, I have to admit that I have not seen the particulars of the legislation, but the way that you have described it certainly -- it certainly sounds as if that particular bill would be inconsistent with the values of justice and fairness and equality that this administration has long pursued.

And you know, -- again, I'll -- if we have a more specific response to the actual bill, I'll let you know. But you know, the president is quite proud of how over the last seven years, we've sought to advance equality in this country and it'd be a shame if -- if a bill like the one that you described were to deal that a setback.

QUESTION:

As a Missouri native, would you be personally offended if your home state passed a measure that would allow LGBT discrimination in the name of religious freedom?

EARNEST:

Well, it certainly would not be -- I'll say it certainly would not be the first thing that I'd be bragging about if -- if that were something that my home state were to choose to do. Alright?

Thanks, everybody.