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PRESS BRIEFING
BY PRESS SECRETARY JOSH EARNEST

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

11:48 A.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good morning. Nice to -- I'm going to savor it for all it's worth. It's nice to see you all. Happy Friday.

Before we get started, I did want to follow up on one aspect of the discussion that we had in yesterday's briefing. I don't see Alexis here, but at one point she did ask me yesterday -- I believe it was Alexis, correct me if I'm wrong about this -- but was asked about what evidence we could point to to indicate some movement in a positive direction from our standpoint on the ongoing gun debate. And I know earlier this week we'd had a discussion about whether or not the President's suggestion to close the no-fly, no-buy loophole was a partisan one.

There's some new data that's out this morning -- it's just one data point, I would acknowledge, but a relevant one in answering both of those questions. There was a poll that was conducted by the NPR affiliate in

Boston -- these are a group -- a sample of Republican primary voters in New Hampshire, so Republican voters in New Hampshire, almost half of whom has a gun in their household. So a substantial number of gun owners, presumably Republicans in New Hampshire, they were asked, "Would you support or oppose a federal law that would prevent people on the terror watch list from purchasing guns?" Eighty-five percent said that they support that notion. These voters were also asked whether or not they would support or oppose a federal law requiring universal background checks for anyone seeking to purchase a gun; 75 percent support that kind of law.

These are the kinds of common-sense steps that the President has been calling on Congress to take, and the support that we're seeing is not just growing among Democratic voters. It's actually growing among Republican primary voters, too. So this is the kind -- again, this is one data point, I'm sure this is not going to be determinative in the overall debate, but it is, from our perspective, good news that there continues to be increasing intensity behind support for the kinds of common-sense gun-safety measures that the President has long advocated.

That was WBUR, the NPR affiliate in Boston. That is 90.9 on the dial. (Laughter.)

All right, Josh, with that, let's go to your questions.

Q Thanks, Josh. Congress is preparing to send the President a short-term extension to keep the government up and running while they have some more discussions on this deal. I know that you've said I think in your Twitter chat that the President would sign that. But Speaker Ryan is saying that they may need even more time. He's not putting a hard deadline on it. So I'm wondering if that short-term extension -- is that a one-shot deal? Is there any chance the President entertains yet another kick the can down the road for a few more days?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, I've tried to be as clear as I could about this, and the President was pretty clear about this when he signed the last CR back in late September, I believe that was. And what the President agreed to do was to sign the CR in September that would bring us through mid-December. That would give Congress ample time to negotiate a bipartisan budget agreement. And as I noted yesterday, Congress has made a lot of important progress in negotiating that agreement, including coming to some agreement about the top-line numbers included in the budget that would include a substantial increase in funding for our national security and economic priorities. That is what the President has been advocating for, for a long time. We obviously welcomed that bipartisan announcement.

So we've made substantial progress in completing this objective. At this point, the President doesn't believe that -- well, let me say it in the affirmative. Congress has had ample time to negotiate this agreement. And as I noted earlier this week, I do not envision a scenario -- I still do not envision a scenario where the President would sign a

continuing resolution that would give Congress additional weeks and months to negotiate a bipartisan agreement.

So we're still -- I recognize that some in Congress may bristle about the notion of a deadline, but I haven't been in Washington very long, but I've been in Washington long enough to know that without a deadline, Congress doesn't do anything. So we've got to have a firm deadline, and the President is going to insist on one.

Now, what's also true is that sometimes the legislative mechanics in the Congress take a couple of days to execute and pass an agreement that's been reached. And so it certainly would not make sense to shut down the government just while Congress is going through the mechanics.

Q But that's not really the case even with this extension, is it? I mean, it's not a matter of everything is decided, House, Senate, Republicans, Democrats agreement. We just got to have the votes, get the bill signed, and get it up to 1600 Pennsylvania.

THE PRESIDENT: That's true, but there are indications that we are making a lot of progress and we have made a lot of progress in these negotiations. And, again, the President continues to be serious about the idea that we're not going to spend several more weeks or several more months negotiating a bipartisan budget agreement. So much progress has already been made and the truth is, Josh, it seems likely that I would actually be in a position today to be talking about an agreement that had been reached if Republicans would abandon their continued insistence on including ideological riders in the budget agreement. And that continues to be the sticking point.

Q As you pointed out, Congress tends to go right up to a deadline, and given that you've been reluctant to go down a whole list of specific riders that the President would or wouldn't accept, if a deal comes together at the last minute, how will we even know whether that's something that's palatable to the President? Or are you confident that any deal that the Democratic leadership in Congress signs off on will ultimately be something that the President will be able to sign?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, I tried to describe to you the mechanism through which these negotiations are taking place. And these are negotiations between Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill because ultimately it's their responsibility to reach the agreement. But the White House has been kept closely in the loop on those negotiations and we, frankly, have been in conversations mostly with Democrats, but there have been some conversations with Republicans as well. So everybody who is at that negotiating table is aware of two things: Both that the President ultimately is going to have to sign off on the agreement, and they're aware of what our views are on some of the critical issues that they're discussing.

So we feel confident that that's a mechanism that can succeed in producing a bipartisan budget agreement that hopefully will be something

that the President can support. And I say that with the warning that any time you have a bipartisan negotiation like this, an agreement is only produced when both sides compromise. And that means the President will have to compromise a little bit, too, and there will be some things in this bill -- presumably some funding levels or other things that we don't enthusiastically support -- but the President is not going to let a disagreement over one issue become a deal-breaker over all the others. And so that's our posture heading into what hopefully are the final hours and days of the negotiations.

Q And Secretary Kerry will be heading to Moscow to meet with President Putin.

MR. EARNEST: That's correct.

Q Did the President ask him to take that trip and does he have any specific message he is asking Secretary Kerry to convey regarding Syria, diplomacy, or other issues?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Josh, our posture about our communications with Russia have been quite consistent over the course of the fall. The President had a high-profile discussion with President Putin at the U.N. in New York back in September. Over the last couple of overseas trips that the President has taken this fall, he has had private, relatively informal conversations with President Putin. The most recent one was in France; I believe the previous one was in Turkey, as I recall. And the reason that the President participated in those discussions is that we've been quite clear that it would be irresponsible not to pursue a resolution to our differences that could be available in high-level talks. So that's the reason that the President has chosen to engage in some conversations with President Putin, and it's why Secretary Kerry is going to do the same.

I'll say the first item on Secretary Kerry's agenda is the item that's been at the top of the President's agenda in each of his interactions with President Putin, and that simply is Russia's continued resistance to following through on their commitment to implement the Minsk agreement, continuing to provide support and encouragement to Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine is destabilizing that country, and is undermining their territorial integrity. And that has isolated Russia from the rest of the intelligence community, or almost the rest of the international community.

There are other rogue nations that are standing with them in other pursuits. But there are significant sanctions that the United States and our European allies have put in place against Russia that persist to this day that we know are having a negative impact on the Russian economy, and that have hurt Russia's standing in the world. We have now, over the last 16 months or so, we've participated in two G7 meetings. Those were originally scheduled as G8s, and I think that's an illustration, as any, of Russia's isolation. In fact, one of those meetings was actually supposed to take place in Russia and got moved. And I think that is a

pretty clear indication of how solid our international coalition continues to be in terms of impressing upon Russia the need to respect basic international norms and the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

I'm confident that Secretary Kerry will also have an opportunity to talk about Russia's involvement in military actions inside of Syria, and repeat our view that Russia should focus their efforts on ISIL and seek to integrate their efforts into the broader international coalition that's led by the United States to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

Jeff.

Q Josh, to follow up on the phone call today between the President and President Xi, can you tell us who called whom? Did the President place the call?

MR. EARNEST: Jeff, I don't have information about who initiated the call. I can tell you a couple things about it, though. The first is, the call lasted for about half an hour, and when President Obama had an opportunity to sit down with President Xi in Paris a little over a week ago, the two leaders talked about a pretty broad range of issues in our bilateral relationship. Because they were in Paris and because these conversations were taking place at the start of the international climate talks, the climate agenda was at the top of their meeting agenda.

And in the context of that face-to-face conversation, both leaders agreed that they would stay in touch with each other as the talks in Paris progressed. So that was the focus of their conversation last night.

So, in some ways, that's why I would, I guess, describe the motivation for the call is their mutual interest in continuing to consult as we get to what's hopefully the end of the ongoing Paris climate talks.

Q One of the sticking points, apparently, in those talks now, is China, among others, are resisting calls for early reviews of their plans to curb rising emissions. Is that something that the President pressed President Xi on during this call?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jeff, I think there has actually been -- given all of the differences between the United States and China on a variety of issues, the view of our two countries when it comes to completing a climate agreement have been quite similar. And I do think that there is broad agreement about countries making a substantial commitment to reducing their carbon pollution, about specific transparency measures so that people can demonstrate their commitment to those commitments.

There has also been obviously discussion about the importance of investing in renewable energy and in other technology that could assist countries that are experiencing the impacts of climate change already, and are poised to experience even more impacts in the years ahead.

Q My question is about China, though, Josh -- whether the President is pressing China to show leadership and allow reviews to its commitments to curb emissions.

MR. EARNEST: Well, my point, Jeff, is that the things that I have laid out are things that China and the United States agree on. And there's on other one, which is a commitment that's relative to your question -- which is a commitment to, in the years ahead, on a regular schedule, to consider the commitments that have already been made, and whether additional commitments can be made by each of those countries to further reduce carbon pollution.

And, on principle, there is an agreement between the United States and China on this. But any time you're talking about an agreement that's significant, involving this many countries, there are going to be some details to work out.

So I guess to get to your direct question, the United States and China have been playing an important leading role in getting the talks this far, and there continues to be agreement in principle on what an outcome should look like. But there's more work to be done before we're going to be able to come to that final agreement, and that means there will presumably be continued discussions between U.S. and Chinese negotiators, and the negotiators with countries, including the Brazilians on this issue -- the President had an opportunity to call President Rousseff earlier this week -- and with the French, who obviously are leading the negotiations. And President Obama made clear his views on those variety of issues to President Hollande in a telephone conversation earlier this week, as well.

Michelle.

Q Thanks, Josh. On another big deal, the TPP. Mitch McConnell is now saying that this might not be taken up until possibly after the presidential election, or even after President Obama leaves office entirely. What do you think of that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there have been others that have floated this prospect, and I've observed that while Congress did pass something that some have described as fast-track legislation earlier this year that would allow prompt consideration of a TPP agreement, looking at the results of that legislation, it's clear that Congress's definition of fast is quite different than most people's definition of fast.

The fact is, there is ample time, and already has been quite a bit of time, that Congress has had to consider the details of what I would acknowledge is a rather long and detailed agreement. So our view is that it is possible for Congress to carefully consider the details of this agreement and to review all of the benefits associated with this agreement for states and communities all across the country without kicking the vote all the way to the lame duck period.

There's no reason that we need to wait that long, and particularly when you consider the views that have been shared by some leaders in the business community about how important it is for this agreement to get implemented so that American workers and American businesses can start reaping the benefits. Hopefully that is a message that members of Congress will listen to. And again, I think if they listen to leaders in the business community, they, frankly, won't want to wait for a year from now before taking action.

Q And we've heard some pretty interesting language from you on Donald Trump this week, saying that his proposal --

MR. EARNEST: I think Mr. Trump's language is more interesting than mine.

Q I know, you have to consider the source, though. Saying that his proposal to bans Muslims from entering the U.S. is disqualifying, that it goes against American values. But then this poll comes out showing that one in four Americans supports that very proposal. So you could only assume that this is surprising to the administration since you denounced it so strongly and kind of separated it from mainstream thinking.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think -- I haven't seen the specific poll that you cite, but based on what you have just described, it sounds like three out of four Americans agree with the position that was expressed by the President and other members of his administration about Mr. Trump's offensive and divisive comments.

I know that Mr. Trump is new to politics, but I don't think that he's going to -- I don't think any candidate, frankly, is going to be satisfied with a poll that shows that only one in four Americans supports your position. And I think that's, frankly, why the President and I have both expressed some confidence about how, in the end, the American people are going to stand behind and stand up for American values, and recognize that the values that are central to the founding of this country are worth fighting for.

Q Does that number surprise you, though? I mean, as much as you can separate out one particular view from a majority view, the numbers don't lie. That's a big chunk of people. And to what would you attribute that amount of support of something that you described as morally reprehensible?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess I'd say two things about that. I can only imagine the kind of role reversal that you and I would have if I were standing up here trying to make the case to you that only 25 percent of the American public supported something that we believed. I think you'd be quite skeptical of the suggestion that if I were to make it -- and I don't think I would --

Q But this is something you called morally reprehensible.

MR. EARNEST: It is.

Q And it's 25 percent.

MR. EARNEST: It is.

Q It's not a proposal that is something --

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's not a proposal that a majority of Americans support. I think that's mostly my point. I think the second thing is that what we are seeing here is a pretty cynical attempt on the part of one Republican politician to capitalize on people's fears and anxieties, and divide the American public solely for personal political gain. And that's offensive.

But here's the thing, though -- and I'm going to go back to this, because I think this, in some ways, is the most important part of this little episode that we've all witnessed and, to some degree, participated in over the last few days. The continued insistence on the part of Republican candidates for President and other leaders in the Republican Party that they would vote for somebody, potentially, for President of the United States who holds such offensive, divisive views that run counter to the very values of this country is in and itself alarming and does not bode well for the future of the Republican Party.

As I noted -- and again, I think this is substantiated by the poll that you cited -- I do think that the dustbin of history-like quality of Mr. Trump's campaign persists and the risk of the rest of the Republican -- modern Republican Party being dragged into that same dustbin of history along with him also persists. And it will until we see the courage -- until we see some Republicans somewhere demonstrate the courage to stand up and say that they wouldn't vote for him for President. And we haven't heard that yet, not just from his fellow candidates but from other leaders in the party.

Q Given that you describe it as capitalizing on fears and anxiety, and you look at that number that I cited as well as just his support numbers in other polls, you can't deny that there must be a lot of fear and anxiety out there, though, that is swelling up behind this sort of movement, if you want to call it that.

MR. EARNEST: I think the President of the United States convened a -- well, delivered an address to the nation from the Oval Office on Sunday night, spoke to 46 million Americans, to discuss exactly this concern and fear and anxiety that is evident in many communities all across the country. And I actually think in some ways it is a testament to the character and courage of the American people that so many of them are resisting the effort by at least this one Republican politician to capitalize on their fears for his own political gain. And, again, that's part of what makes this the greatest country in the world.

Q And maybe sort of along with that, there's a group that now is organizing on the Internet. They wanted to hold something called a Koran roast outside the White House tomorrow. It's unclear whether they're actually going to burn Korans but the Secret Service believes that they're permitted to do that, and we're waiting to hear from the Park Service or whatever. But what do you think of that? They're allowed to do that, but do you think that's a dangerous thing to do now?

MR. EARNEST: Well, my understanding is that in applying for permits like this, individuals agree to abide by rules that prevent setting fires on federal property. So the Park Police can walk you through those details, but I think that warrants mentioning.

Q So you're pretty sure it's not going to happen?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not making any predictions. I'm just sort of laying out what I think is the rules that govern those kinds of permits. Let me just say more generally that religious freedom and religious tolerance are fundamental American values, and President Obama has repeatedly described the valuable role that Muslims play in the United States and globally, and has stated unequivocally that the United States is not in conflict or fighting a war with Muslims around the world. The United States and the rest of the civilized world is at war with ISIL. And we have laid out a strategy and are pursuing a strategy that is showing some progress to degrade and ultimately destroy that terrorist organization. And that international coalition includes Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and it includes the efforts of United States military service personnel, thousands of whom, representing the United States around the world, who are themselves Muslim. And I think that is an indication of, frankly, what our view as a nation is to defeating this extremist terrorist threat.

Bob.

Q Negotiators on the Hill, back on the omnibus spending bill. Negotiators on the Hill may unveil something Monday, the understanding is, with apparently most of the veto bait out of it. Are you telling Democrats to get rid of what might be described as poison pills from their side as well to get this deal through? And it may center on taxes, from what we understand.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I mean, Bob, I think we've been pretty clear about what we believe should be included in the bill. The levels have been negotiated. There are obviously some details that have to be worked out in terms of funding levels on specific programs. As I've noted before, it's not uncommon for other policy items to be included to ride along with the budget process. What we object to is the inclusion of riders that seek to advance an ideological agenda that doesn't enjoy strong support in the Congress and isn't supported by the President who is supposed to sign off on the bill. And that has been the primary sticking point in these negotiations. And it's been the insistent on the part of Republicans to include in those kinds of measures in the agreement.

So I'm not suggesting that the administration is opposed to anything else being included in the negotiations. I'm suggesting that the administration is strongly opposed to the inclusion of controversial ideological riders in the bill.

Q Well, I guess what I'm driving at first maybe the gun-control legislation the Democrats have wanted to attach to this bill also -- that might be a poison pill from the Democratic side.

MR. EARNEST: Well, again, I think what Leader --

Q It would be considered ideological.

MR. EARNEST: Well, maybe. I think what Leader Pelosi has advocated is ending the ban on research by the federal government into gun safety -- or gun violence. That sounds to me like she wants to remove an ideological rider that has historically been included in this process. And obviously that is a sentiment that the President agrees with.

Jordan.

Q Thanks, Josh. I have a couple of follow-ups on TPP. Under the terms of fast-track, I believe that the earliest the President could sign the agreement and send it up to the Capitol is February 4th. So given what Leader McConnell said, will the President sign it at the earliest possible date and send it up to Capitol Hill?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a date to share with you in terms of when the President will sign it. The reason that this is structured in this way, Jordan, is that the President believes that the Congress and the American public should have ample opportunity to take a look at the agreement that's been reached and to consider all of the details. When they do, they'll see that among the things that's been agreed to in the context of the TPP trade agreement is tax cuts on 18,000 -- or 18,000 different tax cuts on American goods that could be shipped overseas.

And we've sort of gone through the variety of things that that would include. And the point of all that is that there are a lot of reasons for members of Congress representing communities all across the country to support this agreement for purely economic reasons. That it's going to lead to a strong economy and job creation and expanded economic growth in communities all across the country. And so we welcome ample time for people to take a look at the details because we believe that the more that people understand exactly what's included in the agreement and what impact that will have on cutting taxes on U.S. products, that the more likely they are to support the legislation.

Q Have Leader McConnell's comments changed the White House's calculus at all about the timing of when the deal will be signed? Or is that not playing a factor?

MR. EARNEST: That's not a factor. I mean, our view is we want Congress to take a look at this closely. The President will sign it once he is ready and certainly not before February 4th. And once that's done, we're going to urge Congress to get started on the process of getting this passed and approved.

But, again, it's not just the White House that's advocating for this. There are some leaders in the business community who were here at the White House just within the last week or so, who spent some time talking to senior White House officials about the importance of this agreement, what impact this agreement would have on their business and on their workers. And I think you heard the expression from some business leaders that it's important for Congress to not waste time; that they should carefully consider this agreement and then hold a vote and get this approved so that U.S. companies and U.S. workers can start reaping the benefits.

Q And on the business leaders, I know you're citing their support, but bigger trade associations like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers haven't yet publicly endorsed the deal. Do you think that's hurting your effort to win over members on Capitol Hill, considering those groups hold a lot of sway with lawmakers?

MR. EARNEST: Those groups do hold a lot of sway with lawmakers in some quarters, and I do anticipate that we'll see influential representatives in the business community speak out in support of this bill. I'll just note again that these are leaders in organizations that don't often agree with the President of the United States. But when you find that kind of common ground, it's important to seize it forcefully. And that's what we're hoping that the United States Congress will do.

Jim.

Q On ISIS, it's been reported today that ISIS has, in fact, seized another city in Libya, Sabratha, which is an important city both historically and also strategically because of its proximity to Tripoli, the capital. What is the United States doing? I know that yesterday that DOD held a briefing where it was talking about progress that's being made in Syria. But it does appear as though ISIS is making progress in Libya? Are we turning more attention to that now? Is the United States turning more attention to Libya?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jim, the United States has been concerned about extremist organizations capitalizing on the political chaos inside of Libya. And that's why you've seen a number of military actions inside of Libya against extremists.

In fact, just earlier this week, the Department of Defense confirmed that a U.S. airstrike had taken out the top ISIL official in Libya. I think that's an indication that this is a challenge that we're focused on,

and that we are taking tangible action that's yielding some progress. But we do continue to be concerned about the security situation inside of Libya. And it's one that we continue to be focused on.

Q Do you think that Tripoli is in danger of falling, as well, because it's 50 miles away?

MR. EARNEST: I haven't heard that assessment. The Department of Defense maybe can give you a better sense of the risks, if any, that are facing that capital city.

Q Has the United States found any allies on the ground that it trusts that it can use on the ground and that we're supporting there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there are some important counterterrorism relationships that the United States and our partners have with some in Libya. But there's obviously more to be done to try to deal with the security situation inside that country and also deal with the significant political instability there.

Libya continues to be a dangerous part of the world.

Q One final thing on Cuba. The Cubans have just announced that they've reached agreement with the United States to reopen postal service, direct postal service -- a pilot program between the United States and Cuba -- for the first time in 50 years. Can you talk about the significance of that from the United States' side?

MR. EARNEST: Jim, I hadn't seen that announcement, so I'm not in a position to confirm it. If it's true, it certainly would be part of the series of steps that President Obama has committed to taking in conjunction with the Cubans to being to normalize relations between our two countries.

But for confirmation of an agreement like that, I'd refer you to the State Department.

Bill.

Q Are there any new U.S. threats from ISIS on U.S. soil?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Bill, for an assessment like that, I'd refer you to the intelligence community. What I can tell you is that our law enforcement, national security, homeland security, and intelligence professionals remain quite vigilant in applying pressure to extremist organizations and mitigating any threats that they may pose to the United States or our interests around the world.

The Secretary of Homeland Security has announced that they are working on some reforms of the NTAS system, this is the National Terror Alert System, that would enhance the ability of homeland security officials to communicate with the American public on this. Ultimately,

it's their responsibility to put out any specific information or guidance that they have for U.S. citizens in this regard. So if they have information like that, then they'll be the ones to share it.

Q But if that information were to come out, would the White House comment on it?

MR. EARNEST: It's possible. What we would do, though, is we want -- in terms of people seeking information, they should seek information from the State Department about potential foreign travel. And they should seek information from the Department of Homeland Security about any steps that the U.S. government believes that U.S. citizens should take to protect themselves here in the United States.

In all instances, we want people to remain vigilant. We certainly want people to say something if they see something. And that is something that Secretary Johnson I think regularly encourages people to do. And the President surely does, as well.

Q You're not aware of anything at the moment?

MR. EARNEST: There's not any information -- specific information that I have to share that certainly would relate to any steps we believe that American citizens should take to keep themselves safe. They should continue to be confident that our national security professionals, our homeland security professionals, and, frankly, everybody else in the federal government is oriented to the top priority that President Obama has identified, which is keeping the American people safe.

Kristen.

Q Josh, thank you. I want to follow up on some of Michelle's questions about Donald Trump. You have been more aggressively responding to some of his comments in recent days. Secretary Clinton said last night, "I no longer think he's funny." There seems to be a shift in thinking within the Democratic Party when it comes to Donald Trump. Does the President, as the leader of the Democratic Party, think that the party should prepare for the possibility that Donald Trump does, in fact, become the nominee?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'm not sure what kind of preparations that would entail. Ultimately, Republican voters will have to determine who they would like to represent their party. And there's a vigorous contest ongoing right now to make that determination.

Q Well, the question is, I guess, has there been a shift in thinking. Is the President taking Donald Trump's candidacy more seriously than he was, say, over the summer, as Secretary Clinton indicated that she was?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Kristen, I think the President on a number of occasions, has spoken out quite forcefully against the divisive, offensive

rhetoric that we've heard not just from Mr. Trump, but from other Republican candidates for President. And I think, when appropriate, the President will continue to do that.

Q Let me ask you about something that the President said from the Oval Office. He said, "Muslim leaders here and around the globe have to continue working with us to decisively and unequivocally reject the hateful ideology that groups like ISIL and al Qaeda promote." He really called on them to get engaged in that. What type of outreach, what type of actions can we expect from this administration to follow through on that? Will you be holding meetings here at the White House, for example? And then conversely, there have been reports that there'd actually been an uptick in attacks against Muslim Americans. What can the administration do to try to prevent that at a grassroots level?

MR. EARNEST: Well, there's a lot there. Let me walk you through a couple of things. As it relates to our efforts overseas, the State Department is very focused on enlisting countries around the world, particularly Muslim countries, to be a part of the effort to stand up, to speak out, and to push aside those voices of extremism that are seeking to infiltrate Muslim communities not just in the United States but around the world. And there are a number of countries that have demonstrated their commitment to exactly that effort. In fact, that is one way that some Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East are supporting our broader coalition against ISIL. The UAE, for example, houses one of these fusion centers that essentially is a hub of information that is communicated through social media around the world, but also in the region, to try to counter ISIL's radical ideology by promoting a more authentic view of Islam.

This is actually something that the President discussed in Malaysia. The President met with Prime Minister Najib in Malaysia, where they talked about how Malaysia had also agreed to host one of these fusion centers. There's obviously a substantial population of Muslims in Malaysia and in Southeast Asia more generally. And by locating one of these centers in the region, we're hopeful that it can be more effective in countering ISIL's ability to spread their radical ideology in that region of the world.

Back here at home, we know that there is ongoing work not just in law enforcement but in other government agencies to reach out to leaders in the Muslim community and to enlist them in the effort, as the President described it, to prevent those who are vulnerable to ISIL's ideology from being radicalized.

Q Can we expect the President to play a role in that outreach?

MR. EARNEST: I certainly wouldn't rule it out. The President played a role when we hosted a summit on countering violent extremism here at the White House earlier this year. This obviously is a priority of the administration, and that was an event almost a year ago that the President hosted, where we brought in not just government leaders from Washington,

D.C., but law enforcement leaders from across the country and leaders in communities across the country, including some Muslim leaders.

Q And just finally on Paris. There was a self-imposed deadline today. That didn't happen. You have said that there are still remaining sticking points. Do you anticipate there might be a deal over the weekend? And would the President agree to something that didn't include an outside auditor?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I loathe to predict the timing for an agreement being reached among more than 180 nations; that would be going out on a limb, particularly when I'm not even there. I can tell you that we are pleased with the momentum that continues to be moving in the right direction, but when reaching these agreements, the details are important and I know that's what our negotiators are focused on right now. And I know that they're having a variety of discussions not just with the Chinese and not just with the French, but with other countries that have demonstrated a commitment to reaching a good agreement, including the Indians, the Brazilians, and others.

So they're moving forward aggressively with this effort, and we continue to be pleased with their progress. I don't know when they'll be done.

Q But would the President agree to a deal that didn't include an outside auditor -- that level of transparency that you're seeking?

MR. EARNEST: Well, in terms of where things stand in the negotiations, I'd refer you to my colleagues who are out in Paris who can give you a little more granular understanding of where the negotiations currently stand.

Byron.

Q Thanks, Josh. A Gallup poll today found that trust in the government's ability to protect Americans from acts of terrorism has reached a new low of 55 percent. That's down from about 70 percent when the President took office. Is this a reflection on the President's leadership or the administration's policies?

MR. EARNEST: Let me just start by noting that the Gallup organization is the one that consistently predicted that Mitt Romney would be President of the United States, so I'm not sure how they feel about President Romney's performance in protecting the homeland. Maybe that will be a poll question next time around.

I think, more seriously, I do think that the President is keenly aware of the concern across the country. And when we see an attack like the one that we saw in Paris, and we saw so many young, innocent lives taken, and when that's combined with the heinous terrorist attack that we saw in San Bernardino, that people's concerns are elevated. And I think that's entirely understandable, and that's why the President took the

extraordinary step of asking the U.S. television networks for a short amount of time on a Sunday evening when 46 million people were watching television to address the nation and make sure they understood all the steps that we had been taking to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, and that they are keenly aware of the steps that we are taking here at home to protect the homeland. And so, again, I think the sentiment that's reflected in that poll, regardless of how accurate it may be, I think is part of what prompted the President to address the nation on Sunday night.

Q Regardless of the public perception, is it the White House view that government is better able to protect Americans now than when President Obama came into office? Is the country safer?

MR. EARNEST: We certainly believe that that's the case, Byron. And there are a variety of reasons why. I don't know if I can give you a comprehensive list, but let me give you a few ideas.

The first is that the United States has succeeded in building the kind of international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL that ensures that the United States is not in this fight alone and that we're getting strong support from the international community for our ongoing efforts. Of course, the United States is leading that effort and we're making a substantial commitment in that regard, but we're not doing it alone. We're doing it in a way that involves a substantial commitment from some of our closest friends.

Under President Obama, there has been an historic commitment in tightening our border security, both in terms of personnel and technology that's been deployed to secure our borders. There's been a historic investment made in that regard. There would have been even a more substantial investment had Republicans not succeeded in blocking the passage of comprehensive immigration reform, but even without that, even despite congressional Republican obstruction, we've made a substantial investment in our border security that makes us safer.

I think, Byron, the fact that there aren't -- when you combine the numbers of American servicemembers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, that there aren't more than 150,000 troops on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan I think is an indication that our priorities are oriented in a direction that better reflects our national security interests.

We obviously have an enduring presence -- or at least a presence that remains in both those countries today that they're focused on counterterrorism, and they are focused on supporting central governments that are trying to take responsibility for the security situation in their own country. And that better reflects our broader national security interest and has an impact in our security here at home.

I would anticipate that the reforms that Secretary Johnson is prepared to make to our NTAS system would further enhance our ability to communicate with the American public and further enhance our ability to keep the American people safe.

So those are a few ideas off the top of my head. I'm sure there are some others. But those are some examples that substantiate my confidence in the assertion that the United States is safer today than when the President took office.

Q One more topic. You mentioned border security, which segs perfectly into my next question.

MR. EARNEST: Good.

Q The Border Patrol has seen an uptick in the number of families and unaccompanied children crossing the southern border. This is typically a pretty quiet season for migration and crossings. Is the White House worried that the migrant crisis is about to pick up again to 2014 levels?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Byron, I think one thing about your question that reflects what I've been saying is that the statistic that we're seeing is an increase in the number of individuals who are apprehended at the border. And that is an indication, we believe, at least in part of the greater commitment of resources to securing our border.

But you raise a question that we are carefully considering. We have seen an uptick in recent months in these apprehensions. And that is the source of some concern. Now, I will go to great lengths to note that the levels that we're seeing right now in terms of the size of the uptick is not as substantial as the uptick that we saw in the summer of 2014.

But the administration is oriented to trying to prevent the kind of uptick that we saw last year. So that is why, for example, you saw the HHS and DOD make some announcements about steps that they were taking to prepare facilities where those who are apprehended could be held.

And it's why the administration is continuing to strongly advocate that Congress follow through on the kind of investment that we believe would be really beneficial, which is investing in tighter security, and even some economic development programs in Central America -- the countries precisely where those who are being apprehended trying to enter the United States are leaving. And we believe that that would have an impact on the situation, as well.

So we are trying to stay ahead of what is source of some concern.

Q All right, just give me one more, many of these Central American migrants -- they're mostly from Central America -- are crossing the southern border are fleeing political violent or bad economic conditions. Does the White House believe that these immigrants are refugees just like the Syrians? And if so, why is the administration deporting many of them?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's hard to paint with a broad brush. There are essentially case officers and others who work for the U.S. government who carefully consider the cases of these individuals and determine whether it's appropriate for them to remain in the United States or whether it's appropriate for them to be returned home.

The thing that we have continually encouraged people to do is to be mindful of the significant risks of the dangerous journey between those Central American countries and the southern border of the United States. And there are all too many tales of terrible tragedy, of children, or teenagers, or young women being victimized as they set out on that journey. And that's why we have strongly urged people not to entrust the care of themselves and/or their children with human traffickers who frankly are preying on people who are in a desperate situation.

And that's why you've seen the Department of Justice and other law enforcement agencies redouble our efforts to double down on those human traffickers. And that effort continues unabated. But we're mindful of the situation and hopeful that the kind of steps that we are taking now can be done with the support and in conjunction of members of Congress and can prevent further innocent loss of life.

Pam.

Q Josh, is it even realistic to expect the government to be able to stop every terrorist attack perpetrated by a lone wolf, like a shooting or a bombing or something like that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Pam, it is fair to say -- and this is something that the President has observed many times over the years -- that preventing a lone wolf attack is one of the most difficult charges that is given to our intelligence and law enforcement professionals.

That said, we've seen the Department of Justice respond quite aggressively to that threat. Over the course of this year, the Department of Justice has taken into custody 15 -- more than a dozen -- the shorthand is HVEs, these are homegrown violent extremists, individuals who are accused of being radicalized and planning to carry out acts of violence.

The Department of Justice has also, according to their statistics, detained more than 60 individuals who were seeking to travel to Syria to take up arms alongside ISIL. Again, that's based on evidence that was collected by the Department of Justice, and I think is an indication of how vigilant they are about this threat.

Our concern, of course, Pam, is that once individuals leave the United States and go fight alongside ISIL in Syria, that they could use their U.S. passport to come back to the United States and use their training or further radicalized ideology to try to carry out acts of violence here in the United States. So we're quite vigilant about this threat and have taken a number of steps to prevent it.

Q On the climate conference, even before it started, the President acknowledged that the individual commitments of the different nations would not be enough to adequately slow the warming of the planet. If China and other nations dig in their heels and don't agree to that five-year recurring review of their commitments, is that a sign of a long-term failure of the plan?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Pam, the kind of agreement that's being contemplated in Paris would be historic if it is reached, because it certainly would make a substantial contribution to reducing carbon pollution and the kind of factors that lead to climate change.

But what we hope will be agreed to in Paris will, as you point out, not be sufficient to entirely solving the problem. And that's why we believe a core component of the agreement should be a commitment on the part of the countries who are signing on the dotted line to review that commitment that they have made at a regular interval. And the President continues to be confident that if countries are willing -- do sign up to that commitment and follow through on it, that what they're likely to see is that even after five or seven years, that they're prepared and capable of making an even more substantial commitment, as they invest in technology that would make their economies more efficient or less polluting, as they develop alternative sources of renewable energy, that further investments in those would allow them to make even greater commitments.

So there is some optimism that once you get the ball rolling, that you can start moving momentum in a positive direction in terms of cutting carbon pollution. And essentially that is the crux of the Paris agreement, is trying to get movement in a positive direction when it comes to energy efficiency, investments in renewable energy -- the kinds of things that ultimately resolve in cutting carbon pollution.

Kevin.

Q Josh, thanks. I want to ask you about executive action on guns. Much was made of Governor Malloy's decision. Is that something the White House hopes happens all across the country that other governors will enact similar executive action?

MR. EARNEST: Kevin, I haven't looked at the details of the proposal that Governor Malloy announced today. Obviously, based on the news coverage that I've seen, it seems consistent with what we've been advocating for at least a few weeks now, which is preventing those who are on the no-fly list from being able to purchase a gun. And we obviously would welcome steps from cities and states across the country to implement laws, pass laws, implement laws that are consistent with common sense and that could potentially make their cities and the country safer. And we believe that there are a number of things that could be considered and implemented that wouldn't undermine that basic constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans.

Q You're walking through a few of those -- because when you say common-sense, other people say if it's common sense, why not either let Congress have a hand in it, or if it flies in the face of the constitutional right to obviously bear arms, we ought not do it. So can you walk me through a few common-sense ideas that the President would have that might make sense in an executive action on guns?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the first idea is this idea that there should be a law on the books that prevents individuals who are deemed too dangerous by the government from boarding an airplane from being able to buy a gun. That's common sense. That's consistent with our national security interests. And at least 85 percent of New Hampshire Republicans agree with that notion. According to that poll that I read at the top, about half of those households have gun owners in them. So I think that's an indication that there is certainly strong bipartisan support for a common-sense measure like that.

Another example would be closing the gun show loophole. This is essentially a loophole that allows some individuals who purchased firearms at a gun show being able to purchase that firearm without submitting to a background check. Again, this is the kind of proposal that would make it harder for criminals, for those who are the subject of a restraining order, or those with mental problems from being able to buy a gun. And again, it would not undermine the basic constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans.

I know that there's a similar proposal that applies to individuals who seek to purchase firearms over the Internet. There's a similar loophole there. And again, according to this latest poll of New Hampshire Republicans, about half of whom are gun owners, 75 percent of them support closing that gun-show loophole. So I think that's an indication that -- again, these are consistent with commonsense. They're consistent with protecting constitutional rights. They're consistent with national security. They have strong bipartisan support. We just need to get Congress to act.

Q Will the President then propose that? Will he do that in an executive order? Because if you're saying, on the one hand, listen, we think this is all legal, we think it's well within our right, then why not just have him do it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the question about whether or not the President has the authority to do it is a different one. And the President has asked his attorneys, both here at the White House and at the Department of Justice, to look carefully at the law to determine what kinds of authorities the President does have to pass executive actions that would implement some of these common-sense steps. And this is something that is currently under consideration by the President's legal team.

Q Any timetable on when he might get a review from his legal team on that?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have an updated timetable for you at this point. Obviously this is something they've been working on for quite some time, and hopefully that's something that we could see in relatively short order.

Q Just a couple more. Is the White House aware of an intelligence assessment that ISIS has the potential capability to create fake Syrian passports? Have you heard about this? And if so, do you have a comment?

MR. EARNEST: I've seen some published reports on this. I don't know how accurate those reports are. But for an assessment about this risk, I'd refer you to the intelligence community.

Q And lastly, do you have a response to what has happened apparently in Kabul? The Spanish Embassy apparently has come under attack. Has that raised any sort of watch for our folks there in Kabul, as well?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we certainly condemn that kind of violent terrorist activity. I know that U.S. personnel were responsible for assisting the Afghans in their response to this specific incident. And it certainly does raise ongoing security concerns that we have all across Afghanistan. And we continue to be confident in the commitment that has been shown by the Afghan government and by Afghan security forces to preventing these acts of violence. But the United States and our personnel who are there are certainly going to be supportive of their efforts as they work to do that.

Angela.

Q Yesterday afternoon, after you spoke at the briefing on the crude oil export possibilities, Senator Durbin said that the White House is involved in the talks on the Hill as part of the omnibus to potentially include a lifting of the export ban in that bill. Is there a scenario that the administration would support that as part of the omnibus bill, potentially in exchange for things that the administration does want?

MR. EARNEST: Angela, I don't have a lot of details on the ongoing omnibus negotiations to share with you. I think I have been quite clear for a number of months now. Your colleagues at Reuters have often asked about our position on this policy, and I think this is reflected in their reporting that our position on this has been quite consistent. We have opposed legislative action that would lift the ban on crude oil exports, primarily because this is already authority that rests with the executive branch. And so we do not believe that it is necessary for Congress to take legislative action in this area, and that's why we've been pretty consistent about opposing legislative action in this area.

We have seen Republicans float all kinds of proposals of things that the administration opposes that they would like to see included in the eventual budget bill. And we haven't been shy about saying that we disagree with legislation that would lift the crude oil export ban, or

that we would oppose legislation that would undo, for example, an NLRB ruling that would make it easier for fast-food workers, for example, to form a union and advocate for higher wages.

The fact that we've seen some Republicans suggest that we should shut down the government unless the President makes it harder for fast-food workers to get a raise is crazy and certainly is indicative of some misplaced priorities. So unfortunately, you and I aren't going to be able to just negotiate it from here. I think if we did, we'd probably be able to find a pretty common-sense solution before the end of the day, if we were doing that. But ultimately, a number of other people are involved. And what we're hopeful for is that we'll see the kind of budget agreement that accurately reflect our need to keep the government open and adequately fund both our economic and national security priorities.

Q The one who is involved is Senator Durbin, who of course is a Democrat, and he is saying that the White House is participating in the talks that may potentially include the lifting of the ban in the omnibus. Are you disputing what Senator Durbin said? Or are you saying that even if it is included, there's no way that the White House would sign the bill? Help me unpack some of that.

MR. EARNEST: I didn't see his precise quote. The negotiations are taking place between Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill. Passing a budget is a congressional responsibility, and they're the ones who are conducting the negotiations.

The White House of course is in the loop. We've been in touch with all parties sitting around the table. Our interests and our preferences and our priorities are well known, and they're reflected in those negotiations precisely because the President ultimately is going to have to sign off on it, quite literally. So, unfortunately, I'm not able or at liberty to share information about those ongoing discussions. But I've tried to, over the course of the last several weeks, as they negotiations have been ongoing, to be as clear as I can with you about our position on the range of issues that are reportedly under discussion in those talks.

Lauren.

Q Pope Francis said that he's considering speaking out forcefully if the climate change talks start to fall apart. And considering his support of climate change, saying that the ecologic crisis is near suicide, has the White House reached out to the Pope to help in this effort either now or in the past?

MR. EARNEST: Lauren, I'm not aware of any communications between the administration and the Vatican on this issue recently. Obviously during Pope Francis's high-profile visit to the United States earlier this fall he had some powerful comments to make about why he considered fighting climate change a top priority. And I think he spoke quite movingly and persuasively about his moral conviction around this issue.

So often we sort of spend a lot of time talking about the politics and even the economic implications of this issue. And those are not insignificant -- I don't mean to belittle them -- but it also does seem like we should also spend some time talking about the moral question at stake here. The President talked about that a little bit when he did an interview with Bill's colleague, Norah O'Donnell, on CBS, where he talked about how climate change policy would fit into his legacy. And the President envisioned a time down the road when he hoped to be enjoying the outdoors with a grandchild of his. And I think it is the President's moral desire to ensure that people all around the world have that same opportunity -- that motivates him every bit as much as these other considerations related to politics and the economy.

Q One other question. You mentioned before that in February the White House convened the summit on countering violent extremism, and that was in February, that was before we had an attack on American soil. Can you give us any indication what the White House is going to do specifically around this issue again? Closer now, a year later?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I don't have any new announcements to share with you right at this point, but I do think that this terrorist attack that we saw that took place a little over a week ago does highlight the need for not just the U.S. government but for leaders in communities all across the country to redouble our efforts to counter violent extremism. This is something that we're going to continue to focus on and so I'd encourage you to stay tuned.

Ron, I'll give you the last one.

Q In Chicago, while you've been speaking, the family of Laquan McDonald have been holding a press conference, and they say that they want to convene a summit about police brutality and they want the White House to send a representative. Is that something the White House would consider?

MR. EARNEST: Ron, I obviously -- I'm just hearing about this for the first time so we'll have to get back to you on that.

Q Is there some level of -- I think I asked you this the other day, about the President's level of engagement. We're aware of the situation in Chicago. Is the President -- do you think he will become more engaged, despite the investigation, so on and so forth, or would the White House think that there's enough concern now that there should be some more engagement at some level from the White House, if not the President himself?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Ron, as you know, the President did engage quite deeply in the creation and work of the task force on 21st-century policing. This was the panel that the President and the White House assembled of leaders in law enforcement and leaders in -- this included prosecutors, academics, and even some civil rights and other advocates to try to come together around some specific policy recommendations that

could be made to law enforcement organizations around the country about steps that they could do to rebuild trust between them and the communities that they serve.

That process that was operating a pretty tight deadline did yield some important results that have been implemented by communities across the country that have borne some fruit. And so I think the President has already demonstrated what I think is a pretty serious commitment to this issue. And I think because we have seen that so many African Americans have been the victims of some of this high-profile violence, that people understandably are interested in the views of the first African American President when it comes to discussing these issues. And the President has repeatedly spoken out about his views on this.

His views, by the way, include his belief that the overwhelming majority of our men and women in law enforcement do an excellent job; that they are critical to the safety and security that millions of American families enjoy every night. And that's only possible because these men and women in uniform get up every morning, in some cases walk the beat at night, to keep us all safe. And they do so by putting themselves at risk. And the President's appreciation for what our men and women in law enforcement do every day is something the President has also had an ample opportunity to discuss.

Q Along with the DOJ investigation, I believe that there are DOJ community relations people -- I'm not quite sure what level. Do you know what level they are? They're not the Secretary, obviously, but I would think -- that process continues, correct?

MR. EARNEST: It does. So you highlight something that is important, and I have only some topline knowledge of this, but I'm confident that the Department of Justice could talk to you a little bit more about this. In addition to the ongoing investigation into what's called a pattern or practice investigation into the Chicago Police Department, there are officials in one division of the Department of Justice that are focused on essentially community outreach and working to organize the effort of both law enforcement and civil rights activists to come together to try to hear concerns that are expressed by either side and implement practical, very tangible, practical solutions to the concerns that are expressed by either side.

And I know the leader of this office is a gentleman named Ron Davis, who has done a lot of important and good work on this issue in Baltimore. I know that personnel from this department were actively engaged in Minneapolis and helping that community deal with a high-profile act of violence that had raised some significant concerns in the African American community in Minneapolis. And I know that that office is also engaged in some important work in Chicago as well. But they can certainly give you some more detail about the services and assistance in expertise that they bring to trying to help solve these problems.

I want to do a week ahead and then I'll let you guys get started on your weekend, which hopefully will be a quiet one. It's been a while since we've had one of those.

On Monday, the President will travel to the Pentagon to chair a National Security Council on the Counter-ISIL Campaign. He'll receive an update from the President's national security team on the campaign to degrade and destroy that terrorist organization. After the meeting, the President will make a statement from the Pentagon briefing room.

Q Will he take questions?

MR. EARNEST: Last time he made a statement from the Pentagon briefing room, he, without previous planning, took a couple of questions. So that is not part of the plan, but I wouldn't rule it out based on our recent experience.

On Tuesday, the President will deliver remarks at a naturalization ceremony at the National Archives.

On Wednesday, the President will attend meetings at the White House.

On Thursday, in advance of the holidays, the President will travel to the National Counterterrorism Center for a threat briefing. The President and his national security team will review efforts across our entire government to prevent attacks and protect the homeland. Many of you will recall that a week or so before the holidays every year, the President pulls together his national security team, including our counterterrorism and intelligence professionals, to get a briefing about this. Obviously, there's heightened awareness about that in advance of this holiday season, and so the President will travel to the National Counterterrorism Center next Thursday to get that briefing.

And then on Friday, the President will attend meetings at the White House and, if everything goes according to plan, will depart that evening with the rest of his family for his annual trip to Hawaii.

Q How about a year-end news conference Friday?

MR. EARNEST: We'll keep you posted if the President decided to schedule a news conference.

Q Josh, on the Pentagon. Is that just an update or is this an indication the President is going to do some serious reevaluation of his counter-ISIL strategy?

MR. EARNEST: At this point, Mark, it is an update. But as you know, the President has tasked his team with constantly assessing the performance of different aspects of our strategy. And if there's an opportunity for us to intensify efforts behind one aspect of our strategy, then that's something that he wants his team to be prepared to do. So we've done this in a couple of ways. We've ramped up our assistance to

some of the opposition fighters in Syria. We've made recent announcements about activities that some Special Operators -- U.S. Special Operators in Iraq could carry out that would be intensification of some elements of our strategy that have yielded some progress in the past.

So my point is, they're always assessing whether or not there are some intensifications that can be used to benefit our strategy, but there is no specific announcement of a change that I know of that's planned for Monday but we'll see what the meeting yields.

Q And you've heard the calls for a major overhaul -- this is not in the cards?

MR. EARNEST: No, but I would just note that those who are most frequent in voicing those calls do not themselves have alternative solutions that they have put on the table. I know just to cite one example, I know that after the President delivered his address to the nation from the Oval Office, that Senator Cruz, in the thoughtful medium known as Twitter, suggested that if he were President of the United States, he would order the Department of Defense to destroy ISIL. This, of course, is the mandate that the President has given for our entire national security team and all of our allies and partners in the coalition since September of 2014. So it's a pretty good illustration that we hear a lot of rhetoric and a lot of -- in some cases, even outrageous claims, but not a lot of tangible or specific realistic alternatives.

Thanks, everybody. Have a good weekend.

END

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