

White House press briefing

09/10/21

3:11:13 p.m.

3 minutes and 42 seconds

ANDREA SHALAL: With the 9/11 commemorations, can you tell me what you are doing to sort of go back and — and address the huge, massive wave of hate crimes we saw against Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and those who were taken to be either Arab or Muslim? What is — what is the White House's plan to address that component of the history of the aftermath of the attacks?

JEN PSAKI: Well, first, I would say that ensuring that we are advocating for equity, that we are speaking out, that we are taking actions against hate crimes, verbal abuse of any kind against any group, is certainly central to what we in this administration and what the President believes in. I'd note the President will be releasing a video from him shortly later this afternoon. And one of the messages he's going to convey is about the importance of unity and as we reflect back on 9/11 and look back to that time, 20 years ago and the President was talking about this the other day with some of us and conveying that he remembers that day being on the train on the way to Washington. The first thing he wanted to do was to go to the floor of the Capitol and conveyed to the American people that this is a time to come together. So that will certainly be central to his message. It's not just words. I am not suggesting that, but that is certainly what you will hear him say in this video and what we'll continue to convey. I would say, though, that there will continue to be efforts and actions by the Department of Justice, by agencies across government, to fight hate crimes and speak out against them and take any actions in our power to do that.

SHALAL: Can I just follow up on that? Just in terms of the unity, so — I tried to as the President today at the — at the event at the school whether he is concerned that his actions, you know, we've seen the backlash from Republicans and others in terms of the vaccination mandates, is he concerned that, you know, what's happening now is actually driving the country further apart, both in terms of the vaccinations — there is a lot of controversy and divisiveness also about Afghanistan and how that was handled. You know, are you — are you worried that at this point the country is getting further apart and all the political ramifications it has in terms of getting your agenda through for Build Back Better?

PSAKI: Well, there's a lot unpack [sic] — to unpack there, so let me do my best. I think the President believes the reason he made the steps he did yesterday is because he believes that, beyond politics, that the role of the President of the United States is to protect people and save their lives. It wasn't that we didn't anticipate there would be strong reactions, and there were. But ultimately, 75 percent of adults who are eligible in this country are vaccinated. 80 million people or 25 percent of people who are eligible are not. This is not intended to be a dividing issue. It's intended to actually — or political issue. What his objective is is to deliver on what he promised the American people, which is to save their lives. Ultimately, there are a range of components of his agenda that are moving forward because there's broad support for them across the country, whether that is making sure we have more roads, rails and bridges that are fixed, or making sure that we do more to save money to reduce costs for middle-class and working-class families. So,

yes, we do see some loud, vocal opponents of what the President announced yesterday. That's not a surprise. It's unfortunate. It's disappointing. It's sad because ultimately the steps will save lives, but we remain confident in our ability to move the agenda forward.

(....)

3:15:46 p.m.

3 minutes and 13 seconds

KAITLAN COLLINS: And the President has said previously he did not want to mandate the vaccine, so can you explain why his thinking on this has changed?

PSAKI: Well, first, I know he said that back in December or January. So, eight, nine months ago and I've touched on a couple of the components we feel have changed a bit. One is that we didn't anticipate, once the vaccine was readily, widely available and free to the public across the country, anyone who wants a vaccine has been able to get one for months, that there would be such opposition to it, especially given it was approved under the former President, a Republican President. You know, the second piece of this is that we also anticipated or maybe we didn't anticipate, but we knew a number of people were waiting for FDA approval to get the vaccine, that they said that once it is approved by the FDA, that is what I am really waiting for. There were more people vaccinated in August and July, but they're still 80 million not vaccinated. And the third piece is the vulnerability of children, of immunocompromised optimized and other, given the transmissibility of the delta variant. We've always been open to taking steps that we're going to save more lives, particular people, and that's exactly what yesterday's announcement is a reflection of.

COLLINS: Last question: Is he now considering mandating vaccinations to fly domestically?

PSAKI: We are always looking at more we can do to protect and save lives. Obviously, he made a significant and bold announcement yesterday, so I don't have anything to preview — predict or preview for you. But we'll continue to look for ways to save more lives. Go ahead.

ZOLAN KANNO-YOUNGS: Thank you, Jen. So, just to clarify, is a thing that was preventing the President from issuing these mandating earlier — the fda approval? Is that what the White House was waiting for before announcing these mandates?

PSAKI: There's nothing preventing, but I would say, obviously, the preference is that the 80 million people not vaccinated get the vaccine when it was available. They didn't, so it's our role and it's the President's role as the President of the United States to continue to take steps to protect the American people and save lives. That's what it's a reflection of.

KANNO-YOUNGS: The follow-up would be if — if these mandates are necessary given the risk of the delta variant, given hospitalizations, and ultimately, to save lives, as you were saying, why — why not do this earlier? Why not do it a month ago when hospitalizations were on the rise? You know, this has been a concern for a while now.

PSAKI: This is actually been building on the steps we have been taking. So, we mandated — mandated or testing in the federal government. We took, obviously, an additional step yesterday. There were a number of private sector companies, many we encouraged, who came out and put in place mandates and requirements. This is building on the steps we had taken. But again, there are a range of factors that have happened over the last several months. And it's only natural that we continue to look for more ways to save lives given we're at the point where clearly we are in the most vaccine resistant population. And let me just say, we've also seen it works. We've seen companies put in place a vaccine requirement. We've seen the impact of those in the number of people at United Airlines, at other companies get vaccinated within the timeline required. And, you know, that's something that made sense.

(....)

3:25:50 p.m.
2 minutes and 17 seconds

PETER DOOCY: To follow-up on the call with President Xi last night, exactly two weeks ago when the intel community came up empty trying to figure out the origins of Covid, the President said critical information about the origins of this pandemic exists in the People's Republic of China. When he talked to President of China last night, did he press him like he said he was going to?

PSAKI: Well, I'm not going to go into lists of every topic discussed. [PHONE SIREN GOES OFF] That was a very dramatic entry to that answer. But I'll start again. I'm not going to go into every topic discussed. They did discuss a range of transnational issues, including Covid-19, and understanding its origins is, of course, a primary concern for this administration. We continue to support phase two of the WHO's investigation in China and call on China to allow further studies of Covid-19's origins in China. I will also note that, you know, one of the topics the Presidents also discussed is the importance of being able to have private discussions between the two leaders. This is in contrast to some of the other interactions we've had at lower levels with the PRC. And so, yes, it was a topic raised, but I'm not going to go into further detail.

DOOCY: And so, we should understand that to mean that the President did ask him to let international investigators in to get this information that he says China has?

PSAKI: We have conveyed that many times publicly. I think they know that is our position and view.

DOOCY: But not publicly? On this 90-minute phone call? They didn't talk about —

PSAKI: Again, Peter, this is a topic we have said — conveyed many times and many levels. I'm just not going to have more on the call to readout for you.

DOOCY: Okay. And then, why is it that you are trying to record anybody with a job or anybody who goes to school to get the covid-19 vaccine, but you're not requiring that of migrants that

continue walking across the southern border into the country?

PSAKI: Well, look, our objective is to get as many people vaccinated across the country as humanly possible. And so, the President's announcement yesterday was an effort to empower businesses to give businesses the tools to protect their workforces. That's exactly what we did. But certainly, we want everybody to get vaccinated and more people are vaccinated, whether they are migrants or whether they are workers, it protects more people in the United States.

DOOCY: But it's a requirement for people at a business with more than 100 people and it's not a requirement for migrants at the southern border. Why?

PSAKI: That's correct.

(....)

3:37:01 p.m.

2 minutes and 4 seconds

KATHRYN WATSON: Business owners are already voicing concerns they aren't able to find applicants for jobs. There are a record 10.9 million job openings. Is the administration at all concerned that this new vaccine mandate that applies to businesses with 100 or more employees will cause further staffing shortages for businesses?

PSAKI: Well, look, I think, one, there are a number of businesses across the country who have already applied these requirements. And they could be a model. Some of them — I understand you may be asking about smaller businesses, but it's for employees of 100 or more. And certainly, when the President made the decision to put in place these policies and to announce them yesterday, he made it based on his number one objective, which is to protect people in this country and save more lives. And he also announced yesterday additional assistance for small businesses. That was a part of his plan to ensure they have the assistance they need. But 75 percent of people in this country have been vaccinated — who are eligible have. Know our goal is not to place undue burden. Our goal is to save lives and that 's what we hope this will do.

WATSON: To go off of a colleague's question earlier —

PSAKI: Yeah.

WATSON: — about rapid tests, which the President —

PSAKI; Sure.

WATSON: — mentioned yesterday. He's going to be using the Defense Production Act to add

PSAKI: Yep.

WATSON: — roughly 280 million of these rapid, at-home tests. But, of course, that's only — or at least kits — that's only less than one kit per person in the country. So, what else can be done to ramp up those tests and to bring down the potentially prohibitive cost of these tests if they're going to be used on a regular basis by Americans?

PSAKI; Well, one of the steps we took was to work with big private-sector retailers to make these tests available. And certainly, that's the plan for the next three months where we expect there will be a great need. But we will continue to look as there are needs to make sure people in the country have the resources they need. This is not the end, but this is certainly a significant announcement from yesterday. Go —

WATSON: And is there — is there a goal for how many at-home rapid tests should be available beyond the 280 million?

PSAKI: I think announcing the 2 — the numbers we had yesterday is pretty significant. I don't have anything more to preview for you about additional tests.

(....)

3:46:05 p.m.
15 seconds

EDWARD LAWRENCE: On Afghanistan, I'm curious if there have been any offers of resignation from anyone in the chain of command or anyone involved in the decisions with the evacuation?

PSAKI: No.

LAWRENCE: So the President still has confidence in those folks?

PSAKI: Yes.

(....)

3:47:49 p.m.
1 minute and 39 seconds

UNIDENTIFIED MALE REPORTER: Not to try to shame any vaccine skeptics — in Africa, people are looking for vaccines and can't find them, but in the U.S., there's an abundance of vaccines, but up to 80 million people have refused to receive them and 1,500 people are dying every day. Would you say too much privilege is sending so many Americans to their early grave?

PSAKI: I'm not sure what the question is.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE REPORTER: Is too much privilege sending many people to an early

grave?

PSAKI: Well, I would say, first, that the United States wants to be an arsenal of vaccine distribution to the global community. And we have provided, donated more than every other country in the world combined. We also know, and it is responsibility of the President, to protect and save lives in the United States as well. That's why we announced the steps that we announced yesterday. We need to do both.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE REPORTER: Yeah, no, I was asking if too much privilege killing people in the U.S.? Like, there's so much vaccine available here, but people are refusing to take them while, in Africa, people don't even have access to vaccines and want to have them. Are we to privileged here to the extent that we are ready to die instead of taking the vaccine?

PSAKI: Well, I think that is a hard question. I don't know that I have a comment on that from the U.S. government. I would — I would say that our objective here is to convey to people, not in a political way, whenever we can avoid that, that vaccines will save your life, that everybody should get one and they will save your neighbors, your friends, your grandparents and that's our object. Okay, I think I have to keep going here.

(....)

3:51:19 p.m.

43 seconds

SHELBY TALCOTT: Does the administration consider this latest vaccine mandate for private sector companies to be a workaround for the federal government to require vaccines?

PSAKI: Meaning, to require them for the American people?

TALCOTT: Yes.

PSAKI: Well, this is a tool, a step that, again, there's legal authority for, based on a 50-year-old law and one that we took action on because the President wanted to use every lever at his disposal to protect more people and save more lives. But no, it's not — we — we don't have the ability to tell every American you have to be vaccinated. There's a means of — of encouraging it, of mandating it through certain — through certain pathways, and that's exactly what we've done.