

White House press briefing [via CBSN]

01/13/21

3:32:11 p.m.

3 minutes and 51 seconds

JAMES ROSEN: I want to ask about your current policy in this crisis. But, first, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to ask something of a historical nature first. I assume — you'll correct me if I'm wrong — that in preparation for President Biden's first summit with President Putin, held in Geneva last June, the national security team undertook a comprehensive review of the official documentary record of all the interactions that President Trump had with President Putin. You may recall — during the Trump presidency, we saw reporting to the effect that Mr. Trump and/or his aides took some steps to prevent the maintenance of a full record of those interactions. Without asking you to disclose any classified information, can you assure us on two points: Number one, did your review uncover any evidence of any effort, at any point along the way in the creation and storage of those records, to tamper with that process? And number two, did your review uncover any evidence of any impropriety of any kind or severity on the part of President Trump in his interactions with President Putin?

JAKE SULLIVAN: On that question, I've got nothing for you.

ROSEN: Okay. To current policy then. This administration has tried without success to use sanctions to compel the military in Myanmar to abandon its coup d'état. This administration has used sanctions without success to compel China to release the concentration camp inmates in Xinjiang. The Obama administration, of course, used sanctions without success to try to deter a Russian annexation of Crimea. Here you stand again, brandishing the threat of sanctions to try to deter a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Why shouldn't this be perceived as clinging to a failed tactic? And why shouldn't President Putin assess, on that basis, that his adversary is operating from a position of relative weakness?

SULLIVAN: President Putin has indicated that what he does not want to see is further NATO force posture coming closer to his border. President Putin has indicated that what he does not want to see is further American and Allied support to Ukraine. President Putin has indicated that what he does want to see is the further strengthening of Russian strategic industries in the Russian economy. We have laid out on all of those metrics that Russia will suffer costs and consequences in the event of a further invasion of Ukraine and he can make his own determination about what he wants to do. But the United States is going to act; we're going to act with our allies and partners on those issues in those ways. We have the capacity to do that, and we will do that and President Biden has been clear that that's what we intend to do. [TO ANOTHER REPORTER] Yeah.

ROSEN: Have you seen sanctions work?

SULLIVAN: Well, so, first, I would say that if you go back to a personal experience I had, which was the negotiation of the — first, the interim agreement and then contributing to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, we do believe that economic pressure on Iran had a meaningful

impact on bringing it to the table and ultimately putting a lid on its nuclear program. There are other instances where sanctions have worked and, of course, there are instances across administrations, Democrat and Republican alike, where sanctions have not achieved the full result and so, I'm not going to stand before you and say sanctions are a panacea, they're a tool that solves every problem. But remember, sanctions are only one part of the way that we and our allies are talking about how we will deal with a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine. We have other tools to bring to bear as well. Those tools also bear on the interests and the security capacities of the Russian Federation and our goal at the end of the day here is not to get into an escalatory spiral; it is to find a way forward, consistent with our principles, consistent with our interests, and consistent with open, transparent consultation with our allies to pursue diplomacy. If that works, great. If that doesn't work, we're ready.

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3:45:43 p.m.

2 minutes and 31 seconds

ZEKE MILLER: The President announced today that he's going to announce next week that he's going to be sh- — the U.S. government is going to be making free, high-quality N95s available to Americans. There's this — the new testing website, which is launching next — website. Why is it — you know, middle of January right now, when a million Americans are testing positive for COVID a day, roughly — you know, why is the President taking these steps now? Why didn't he take these three months ago?

JEN PSAKI: Well, let me — let me first say that what the President — what we've been working to implement is building on the steps we've taken over the last six months and more. Remember, when the President took office, there was zero or one approved testing — at-home testing option on the market. Now there are nine. We needed to expand the market capacity. The President used the Defense Production Act — \$3 billion invested — to expand that market. The reason he was able to announce the purchase of or the plan to purchase an additional 500 million beyond the 500 million we had already announced is because of the expansion of the market and just since last summer, leading up to December, we had quadrupled the size of the market. So, if you look at the comparison, right now, we're doing almost 12 million tests a day in this country. We were doing under two million tests a day a year ago. There's about 300 million tests that are happening in this country every single day, in part because there's 20,000 sites; because there are federal sites now across the country — new ones we announce every day; because we've sent 50 million tests to community health centers, so all of this is an effort to build on that and make sure that that capacity and need — and we're meeting the unprecedented demand for tests.

MILLER: But the pre — these are steps that the President has taken now because there was an unmet need. Presumably, he could have done the exact same thing three months ago when, you know, maybe it would be in effect now when the need is obviously greater than — than is — than the system has capacity to deliver right now.

PSAKI: Well, I would say, Zeke, that, again, because of the steps we've taken, we're able to —

there's 300 million tests that are happening in this country every single month and that is enormous progress. We're not starting from zero. That is my point, so this is building on that. But in terms of the number of tests available in the market and the expansion of the market, remember, a number of them were just approved at the end of October or beginning of November. The — using the Defense Production Act means we needed to ensure there was manufacturing capacity and build on that. This is all building — a building process and we're continuing to expand and build from here. I would also note that, in recent polls, despite some of the conversations we have in here, it's less than 10 percent of the American public that can't find a test. We've expanded capacity, and you're seeing the impact of that across the country.

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3:56:29 p.m.

3 minutes and 28 seconds

KAITLAN COLLINS: So, what is the President's — I guess, the administration's backup plan when it comes to voting rights and getting legislation passed? Is there a backup plan?

PSAKI: As you heard the President say when he came out of the caucus meeting: We're going to keep at it. We're going to stay at it. The President's not —

COLLINS: But what does that mean, I guess, is what people would like to know.

MS. PSAKI: That means, Kaitlan, that any piece of legislation that's ever passed — that's hard, that's difficult — goes through a — goes through some ups and downs and goes through some challenges. That doesn't mean you give up. That's not what leadership is. Leadership is continuing to fight for what's right, continuing to fight to get something done. That means sometimes it fails. We don't know what will happen next. That means sometimes there are gaps between when you get to move forward. We're going to have to determine what the next steps are, but in the meantime, the President is going to continue to make calls. He's going to continue to engage with his colleagues, and that's where his focus is on at this point in time. [TO JUSTIN SINK] Go ahead.

JUSTIN SINK: Thank you., I have a couple specific ones, but I wanted to kind of follow on that. As you're determining next steps — I mean, frankly, things just seem like they're going pretty poorly right now for the White House. You know, Build Back Better is being blocked. Voting rights is being blocked. Diplomatic talks with Russia doesn't seem to have brought us back from the brink of war. Inflation is at a 40-year high. The virus is setting records for infection. So, as we kind of hit this one-year period, and a period where everything seems like it's in pretty rough shape, or nearly everything — which is not an invitation, I guess, to list off — [LAUGHS] — some other things — I'm wondering, at what point do you take stock and say that things need to change internally, whether it's your outreach with the Hill, whether it's the leadership within the White House. You seem to be stymied on an incredible number of fronts right now.

PSAKI: Well, let me give you a little bit of a different take on this. More than 200 million people

are vaccinated. We've had record job growth, record low unemployment rates — historically, in this country, over the last year. We've rebuilt our alliances and our relationships around the world and right now, as it relates to Russia, as you heard our National Security Advisor convey, we're working with partners around the world to convey very clearly: It's up to them to make a choice about what's next. We're not going to make that on their behalf. It's up to them to determine if there are going to be crippling economic sanctions or not, or — if they decide to move forward, but we also recognize when you have a small margin and threshold in the Senate, it's very difficult to get things done and to get legislation passed and the fact that the President, under his leadership, got the American Rescue Plan passed, a Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill with 19 [Republican] votes in the Senate, about 6 [Republican] votes in the House. The fact that we are still continuing to work with members to determine the path forward on Build Back Better; that we have the vast majority of Democrats in the Senate supporting voting rights. That's a path forward and our effort is to do hard things, try hard things, and keep at it, so we just don't see it through the same prism.

SINK: So, the sense is things are going well; there's no need for change right now?

PSAKI: I think that having worked in a White House before, you do hard things in White Houses. You have every challenge at your — at your feet — laid at your feet, whether it's global or domestically and we could certainly propose legislation to see if people support bunny rabbits and ice cream, but that wouldn't be very rewarding to the American people, so the President's view is we're going to keep pushing for hard things, and we're going to keep pushing the boulders up the hill to get it done.

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4:08:59 p.m.

1 minute

UNDIDENTIFIED FEMALE REPORTER: Also a “one year” kind of question.

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

UNDIDENTIFIED FEMALE REPORTER: When you listen to the President's inauguration address, you hear the words “unity” and you hear “better angels” of America. We didn't hear these words in his speeches at the Capitol or in Georgia. Does it mean that he has changed his state of mind and that he thinks that America can't be unified anymore?

PSAKI: No, actually quite the contrary. I mean, the President believes that protecting people's fundamental rights to vote and participate in the process, whether you're a Democrat, a Republican, an independent — whatever party you are a member of — that that is not a partisan issue. It should be a unifying issue and that is why he reflected, when he went to the caucus today, on the fact that there are 16 Republicans who have supported voting rights in the past, because it has not been historically a partisan issue and he's not prejudging who people support; he is trying to protect people's ability to participate in the process.

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4:15:04 p.m.

1 minute and 27 seconds

PSAKI: I would say, broadly speaking, that when I spoke with the President about this job, I mean, one of our — one of the things he conveyed to me very clearly was resetting the tone with the media was a big priority for him, and ensuring that there was a respect even when there's a point of contention or a difficult conversation, or a back-and-forth — that that is part of democracy, but our objective is to — has been to re-instill normalcy and engagement with reporters, whether we agree or disagree, whether there is a partisan tilt to an outlet or not and I think we have conducted ourselves accordingly and always we're working to continue to be responsive. I would say — I would — I would say to inquiries of probably tens of thousands, if not more, does not to me sound like a data point, but I will look closer at the report. The other thing I would say is that, you know, the President has taken questions at about two hundred- — on about 250 occasions over the past year. If you average about three questions per time, that's about 750 questions he's taken. That does not include the formal press conference he did in March, other press conferences he's done. That's about three. So let's say 1,000, just to be generous there. That's about three questions a day. I think the American people have seen him out there answering questions. He will continue to be. That's an important part of his engagement with the press and the public, and that will be a part of how we continue to conduct ourselves.

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4:16:40 p.m.

3 minutes and 36 seconds

ROSEN: On the economy: In yesterday's briefing with Mr. Deese and in today's briefing, you have both cited economic metrics that showed great progress across 2021, from the unemployment rate to job creation to a rise in real household income and when citing the progress in those areas, both you and Mr. Deese attributed that progress to specific administration policies and legislative initiatives. Yet, when it came to the highest inflation in 40 years, both you and Mr. Deese attributed this to a variety of external factors, from the pandemic to supply chain constraints to inaction by the Congress on Build Back Better. So, to be clear, for the American people in this midterm year who are going to be assessing the performance of the President and his party, where specifically inflation is concerned, does the buck stop with the President?

PSAKI: Well, I would say, James, first that the President has spoken to the fact that costs for Americans and the squeeze that puts on Americans is a top concern for him and I think Brian Deese also conveyed that yesterday and that's why he put in place a Supply Chain Task Force; why we've prioritized taking steps, including having a port czar, including ensuring there are more truckers on the roads, to ensure there are more goods moving and more goods on the shelves and we've made a lot of progress in that regard. Of course that's his responsibility and the responsibility of the economic team. I also think it's notable that if you go back to earlier this [last] year, there were not the projections of the economic growth we have seen or the decrease in

the unemployment rate we have seen. And that is, in part — not just according to us, but many outside economists — to the bills that have passed, some of them bipartisan, and the work of this administration to get the economy up and going again and address COVID.

ROSEN: So your answer is: Yes, he owns the job creation, he owns the low unemployment rate, and he also owns inflation. Correct?

PSAKI: I think any President should own everything happening in the country and the President certainly sees it that way.

ROSEN: To the pandemic: The President's remarks this morning included yet another exhortation to the unvaccinated population to get vaccinated. He has, since assuming office, made dozens and dozens, perhaps hundreds, of these kinds of appeals to that particular population. Do you have any evidence — indeed, do you have any sound basis for determining at all whether he is having any success in urging that population to do as he counsels?

PSAKI: We do. If you go back to December of 2020, just over 30 percent, maybe 35 percent of people in this country was open to getting vaccinated. Now we're at the point where more than 80 percent of the country has gotten at least one dose. What the President also recognizes is that he's not always the most effective messenger. Everybody in the country is not looking for him to tell them what to do. He certainly knows that. What's most important here is for people hearing from local leaders, pediatricians in some cases, doctors, people who have different political beliefs out there conveying clear, accurate information about the effectiveness of these vaccines. We think all of that has had an impact and a lot of that is stuff that we've implemented.

ROSEN: But how do we know that 35 percent of the American population was willing to get vaccinated a year ago?

PSAKI: I can give you the data. I'm happy to give that to you after the briefing. It was a public — public poll.

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4:23:20 p.m.

1 minute and 40 seconds

DAVID SMITH: Just on the President's first anniversary in office: What does he regard as his single-most important achievement? And does he acknowledge that any mistakes have been made? And if so, what's the biggest mistake?

PSAKI: Well, I would say first that, you know, the President is very proud of the progress we've made in getting 200 million Americans vaccinated, very proud of the work we have done to cut the childhood poverty by 40 percent to help Americans who needed a little extra help get by through a challenging economic time, the work we did to get a Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill passed, and to rebuild our place in the world. There are many others: I think confirming —

nominating and confirming historic judges across the board, ensuring that our administration up and down the ranks looks like America and I could go on from there. Fighting to take steps on climate in a historic manner; that has been more than any administration in the past. In terms of — in terms of what we look back, you know, I'm not going to speculate on that from here. I will — I will let the President speak to that the next time you all see him.

SMITH: But did he underestimate Donald Trump's continued grip on the Republican Party and how difficult that would make it to work across the aisle and unite the nation?

PSAKI: You know, I will tell you that hearing Kevin McCarthy talk today, for an example, and seeing what he said on January 21st last year is a pretty stark reminder of how much sway the former President has over members of his party. I think that's disappointing for everybody, not just people who work here.

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4:26:23 p.m.

1 minute and 24 seconds

BRIAN BENNETT: Given that he's ending his first year underwater in the polls, Americans — more Americans disapprove of his job in office than approve of his job in office — what is he planning to do differently in the approach to the job in the second year that shows that he's listening to that disapproval?

PSAKI: Well, I think what you see in most of these polls is a real frustration and exhaustion with COVID, and the fact that it is not over. We share that. We understand that. People are fatigued across the country. It's impacting how they live, how they work. There are worries about their kids — their ability to experience joyful things in life, like concerts and going to restaurants and seeing friends. We understand that. The President knows that the best, most important step he can take is to continue to fight to get the pandemic under control, and also to lower costs for Americans across the country. So, I would say it's a continuation of the fights that he built a great deal of a base for over the course of the last year.

BENNETT: So the President doesn't think that the disapproval rates are a reflection of the way he's approached the job?

PSAKI: Again, I would point you to what most data shows you, which is a frustration about COVID and prices and he believes — and he's believed from the beginning that addressing COVID and the economy are number two — one, two, three, four issues and that continues to be the case today.