

White House press briefing [via CBSN]

03/09/22

1:21:38 p.m.

4 minutes and 50 seconds

STEVEN NELSON: I have two questions. First, about the Florida bill that just passed restricting the speaking about of homosexuality and gender identity up to third grade and then I have a question about surveillance matters that have been in the news. Regarding the Florida bill: In 1994, when many of us in this room were in school, President Biden actually voted for a much broader restriction that banned federal funds from being used for, “the promotion of homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative.” Why did he do that? And can you describe how his thinking has evolved over the years?

PSAKI: Well, I think that you have seen the President speak passionately about his view that a bill like this — a bill that would discriminate against families, against kids, put these kids in a position of not getting the support they need at a time where that’s exactly what they need — is discriminatory. It’s a form of bullying. It is horrific. I mean, the President has spoken to that. In terms of his views and comments from 25 years ago, I think the most important question now is: Why are Florida leaders deciding they need to discriminate against kids who are members of the LGBTQI community? What prompts them to do that? Is it meanness? Is it wanting to make kids have more difficult times in school, in their communities? I would pose that question to them, and we can talk about it more tomorrow if you get an answer.

NELSON: That’s not [INAUDIBLE].

CHRIS JOHNSON: [INAUDIBLE] legality of that bill?

NELSON: Was there a reason he supported the same policy, though, in the ’90s when we were all in school?

PSAKI: I think what’s important to note here is how outspoken the President has been against discrimination against kids, against members of the LGBTQI+ community and what we’re looking at here is a bill that would propagate misinformed, hateful policies and impact children — so that’s the question I hope — maybe you can pose that to some of the leaders in Florida. Maybe they’ll return your phone calls and I’ll look forward to having a conversation with you.

NELSON: On this —

JOHNSON: Can I follow up on that?

NELSON: — well, perhaps Chris could follow up afterwards. But I’d like to ask about the surveillance matters as well.

PSAKI: Sure.

NELSON: Senators Wyden and Heinrich, who are Democrats, recently alleged that the CIA is conducting a mass surveillance program that implicates American data and that it's outside of the statutory bounds that people think it's within. First, could you say anything about that to reassure Americans regarding their data and secondly, according to a recent court filing by Special Counsel Durham, there was a technology executive who was, "mining" the Executive Office of the President's DNS traffic and other data. CISA, the federal agency for cybersecurity, said in a 2020 document that DNS data can be sensitive and that's important to secure. There are competing narratives, of course, about what data was actually implicated. So could you share with us what data was implicated in this and whether the White House has any security or privacy concerns regarding this alleged review?

PSAKI: I have nothing further to comment on your questions. Obviously, this is an investigation. I point you to the Department of Justice, members of Congress. Obviously, we have serious respect for people's privacy in the country. [TO PHILIP WEGMANN] Go ahead.

PHILIP WEGMANN: Thank you, Jen. A quick follow-up. You mentioned the logistical challenges about flying planes —

PSAKI: Yeah.

WEGMANN: — to Ukraine, through contested airspace. Why can't the United States put those planes on trains or automobiles? I guess, are we really to believe that when we're sending — or preparing to send billions in aid, that, you know, this is the logistical bottleneck that is stopping us from getting them those planes?

PSAKI: Well, it is a serious logistical bottleneck, right? Obviously — there's obvious concerns that the Department of Defense has spoken to about flying planes from U.S. airbases — right? — that they spoke to yesterday. These planes — carting them down the street, I think, is not as easy as you may think it is. Planes — if they have to be taken apart and put back together, you have to have people who are able to put those planes back together. You have to ensure that there's — they can be safely moved through the course of a contested country, or not — you know, a country where there is a war going on with the — with the Russians, you know, who implemented that war, so there are a range of logistical and operational challenges. Those are important conversations to happen between military experts and our Defense Department leaders and officials — Secretary Austin, Chairman Milley, and their counterparts.

WEGMANN: And then, should we expect that the U.S. Export-Import Bank is going to continue to underwrite loans that would support commerce with Russian companies and corporations, given the tranche of sanctions that we've seen against them?

PSAKI: I would have to check and see how these sanctions are implemented. Obviously, we're going to abide by all of our — our own sanctions and we've tried to implement them as quickly as possible, but I can see if there's any specific impact on them.

(...)

1:30:10 p.m.

5 minutes and 43 seconds

S.V. DATE: And more broadly, is there any concern that making the lives of average Russians miserable — you know, with all these companies pulling out and things that are designed to hurt the economy, as opposed to Putin personally, as opposed to his oligarchs personally — is there a worry that that's going to consolidate his support within the country rather than make him — rather than diminishing?

PSAKI: Well, I would say that our view and the view of our global partners is that when a president like President Putin, you know, launches a war of choice where he is brutally killing, injuring people in a sovereign country, there have to be consequences. Those consequences are economic and significant, no question about it. Our — our target is not to hurt the Russian people; it is to squeeze President Putin and the leadership around him, but what the impact is, is certainly having a devastating impact on the Russian economy and our view is that over the — over the medium and long term, that that is not going to be sustainable for President Putin and the team around him. [TO EDWARD LAWRENCE] Go ahead, Ed.

EDWARD LAWRENCE: So, I'm starting to hear the administration talk about gas prices — as a way to speed up the lowering of gas prices, to speed up the transition to those clean energy. Gas prices have risen month over month, every month since the President has been in office. So, is the feeling then from the President that the American people just have to wait until 2030 when the President set his goal for zero emissions — or to have cars being sold with zero emissions —

PSAKI: No.

LAWRENCE: — [INAUDIBLE] higher gas prices.

PSAKI: That's never been our theory or our belief. I would say that, since President Putin began his military buildup on Ukrainian borders, the price of gas at the pump in America has gone up 75 cents, which is significant, of course. There is widespread consensus that the sharp runup of energy prices since January was called by — caused by the building of Putin's troops at Ukraine's border. The reality, as we know, is that Russia is the world's third-largest oil producer and energy supply disruptions and market volatility are a result of his aggression. Don't — you don't have to take my word for that. There have been a number of assessments. Back in January, Federal Chair — Fed Chair Powell warned that there was a risk to our economy based on, "what's going on in Eastern Europe." In early February, JP Morgan analysts projected that disruptions of oil flows from Russia could push oil prices to \$120 per barrel, which is what has happened. Our approach has always been twofold. One, we need to ensure the supply meets the demand out there in the marketplace. There's a couple of ways to do that. Obviously, we're engaging with big global oil producers around the world to meet that demand. But there are also, as we've talked about a few times in here, 9,000 unused oil leases that oil companies could certainly tap into, and we've encouraged them to do that. So that's certainly a way to address.

LAWRENCE: But the price of gas on February 14th was at a high — highest level since 2014, so

it was already at an elevated level. I want to ask you —

PSAKI: And the build-up of troops was even before that.

LAWRENCE: I want to ask you about tomorrow. We're going to get a CPI inflation number that's expected to be pretty big. It's supposed to rise from the 7.5 percent that it was month over month, so gas prices are part of that. I want to know what specifically the administration has done, they've been working on that has worked to bring down inflation.

PSAKI: Well, I would say first because while we don't have the data at this point yet, but as we're looking ahead, we certainly assess that — that we expect to see a high headline in — headline inflation in tomorrow's February inflation data. A key reason, as you touched on, are energy prices. We've seen the price of gas increase, as I noted, 75 cents since the beginning of the year as Putin built up his military near Ukraine and took increasingly aggressive measures that were felt in the markets. We also expect some increases in pandemic-affected sectors given our strong recovery from Omicron in February. That's a positive sign for our economy and for Americans who are going out again, traveling, going to restaurants, and getting back to normal and we also expect to see continued moderation in used car prices, so that's what our prediction, our assessment is at this point in time. In terms of steps we have taken to address inflation —

LAWRENCE: But what has worked?

PSAKI: What has —

LAWRENCE: What has worked? So October 13th is when you announced the port initiative.

PSAKI: — yeah.

LAWRENCE: What specifically can you point to that has worked to bring down inflation?

PSAKI: Well, there are a number of steps we've taken. If you've seen — if you compare a month-to-month, we've seen inflationary pressure — or inflationary numbers go down month to month — even as we looked at the year-to-year numbers go up, which we entirely predicted. One, we've taken steps to address bottlenecks in the supply chain, to reduce those bottlenecks. Those are steps we've taken not just since October but since earlier this year. There's no question that we've seen impacts as it relates to getting goods and supplies out to the American public. We've also taken steps to address what we see as shortages and issues in the semiconductor space. We — I just opened this briefing by pressing for the passing of the competitiveness legislation that the President would love to sign into law, because we know that one of the big pressures is, of course, from the car and manufacturing sector or the car sector and then, third, we know that because of the pressures on the — the energy sector that that has been an area where we've continued to see have an impact on inflationary pressure. We believe in the last few months that has been because of President Putin's invasion of Ukraine. But as I've noted, there are a number of steps working to address that.

(....)

1:40:31 p.m.

1 minute and 12 seconds

ED O'KEEFE: A high-ranking member of Juan Guaidó's team told the *Miami Herald* this week: "It is foolish to think that Maduro will quit Russia when a great deal of the corruption funds have been deposited in Russia and when Russia, furthermore is its greatest ally... This is a mistake. To buy oil from Maduro is the same as buying oil from Putin." Two things. I think I know where you'll go on the first one, but I want to give you the opportunity to respond. If the United States

PSAKI: We spend so much time together, Ed. I appreciate it.

O'KEEFE: — if the United States recognizes Guaidó as the leader of Venezuela, why did the U.S. feel it necessary to negotiate with the Maduro regime? And was the Guaidó team made aware of the plans for U.S. officials to go to Venezuela to meet with the Maduro government before they went?

PSAKI: On the last, I just don't have anything more to convey to you about private diplomatic conversations. I would note that one of the steps that was announced yesterday was Maduro saying he was willing to resume talks with Venezuela's interim president. Certainly, we would note that and, obviously, we — part of our effort here, as you now know, was related to the health and well-being of American citizens detained in Venezuela, hence we had discussions with those who are detaining them.

(...)

1:42:48 p.m.

4 minutes and 9 seconds

PETER DOOCY: Why did you guys decide to rebrand the rise in gas prices as the "#PutinPriceHike?"

PSAKI: I mean, if you want to use that on Fox, I welcome that. But —

DOOCY: Oh, I think it'll get a lot of airtime because we have heard the President warn for months that gas prices were rising because of the supply chain and because of post-pandemic demand. If you guys knew for months that this was going to be the #PutinPriceHike, why are we just hearing that now?

PSAKI: — well, Peter, if we go back to six months ago, I don't think anybody was predicting we would be exactly where we are as it relates to Russia and Ukraine, as you know that events in the world, including the invasion by Russia of a foreign country, does prompt instability and volatility in the global oil markets and there are all sorts of different issues that can impact that.

That's what we're seeing now. Outside economists and analysts have conveyed and said publicly that Russia's invasion, Russia's buildup of troops, President Putin's decision to do that very early this year led to a lot of the instability and volatility in the oil markets. You don't have to take my word for it. So, therefore, if President Putin's buildup of military troops is leading to volatility and an increase in oil — in prices, hence you have "Putin pump — gas price pump —

DOOCY: Okay. You and the —

PSAKI: — rise." [LAUGHTER]

DOOCY: — you and the President are both talk — thank you.

[PSAKI LAUGHS]

DOOCY: You and the President are both talking about —

PSAKI: Spit that out.

DOOCY: — you and the President are both talking about producing energy here, saying that oil and gas companies "have 9,000 permits to drill now. They could be drilling right now." Would President Biden cut red tape to make that possible?

PSAKI: What red tape needs to be cut when they have the permits? They have the capacity to do it? What's holding them up?

DOOCY: Does President Biden think that each of these 9,000 leases that are available have oil or gas in them? Because industry experts are saying that "that accusation is a complete red herring"; "some permits are viable and some are not"; and that when you say that, "This represents a fundamental misunderstanding as to how this process works."

PSAKI: Well, first of all, the — nearly 60 percent of leased acres remain non-producing — that's a lot — in the range of 20 million acres, so there are 9,000 unused approved permits to drill in. They should not require — that should not require us inviting them to do that. They should do that themselves.

DOOCY: But you said they can't get the additional permits, so would the President —

PSAKI: What additional permits do they need? There's no — they have — the leases are there. The permits are there. I don't think they need an embroidered invitation to drill. That is their oil companies. What is — what is happening —

DOOCY: It's not an embroidered invitation, it's a federal permit.

PSAKI: — what is happening — what is ha- — but what was is — the permits have been granted, Peter.

DOOCY: It's not just one permit though. Would you —

PSAKI: What is happening here is that we are seeing — these are private sector companies. We recognize that. Many of them are making record profits. We see that that. That is all publicly available data. They have pressure to return cash to investors and their shareholders. What we're saying right now is: There is a war. We're asking them to go use the approved permits, use the unused space, and go get more supply out of the ground in our own country.

DOOCY: Okay and then just a quick yes-or-no, because there's a lot of gray area here.

PSAKI: Oh.

DOOCY: Is a restart of the Keystone XL construction completely off the table as long as Joe Biden is President?

PSAKI: Well, why don't you tell me what that would help address.

DOOCY: I'm asking you if it is an option. You guys say all options are on the table. Is restarting Keystone construction one of them?

PSAKI: If we're trying to bring about more supply, that does not address any problem.

DOOCY: It's supply from Canada, a friendly ally, instead of Saudi Arabia or Iran or Venezuela.

PSAKI: That — that's already — we're already getting that oil, Peter. It's — the pipeline is just the delivery mechanism. It is not an oil field., so it does not provide more supply into the system. It does not address —

DOOCY: Is it off the table? Is it possible that Joe Biden will ever say, "you guys can go ahead with construction of Keystone XL"?

PSAKI: — there's no plans for that, and it would not address any of the problems we're having currently.