

FNC's *MediaBuzz*

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8 minutes and 45 seconds

HOWARD KURTZ: I was at the White House when word came that Jen Psaki is resigning as White House press secretary next week. Her successor will be her deputy, former MSNBC analyst Karine Jean-Pierre, who was introduced as the first Black and first openly gay presidential press secretary. And then I sat down with the administration's top spokeswoman. Jen Psaki, welcome.

JEN PSAKI: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

KURTZ: President Biden said the other today that, "I have been so focused on whatever the immediate emergency is that we haven't told the American people what we've actually done." Given the huge media megaphone that the President and the White House have, isn't that a pretty big shortcoming?

PSAKI: I think it's always good to take a step back and question what your strategy has been and make changes as you want to. And I would say that we talked a lot at the end of last year about what we wanted to do in the new year. We had our own New Year's resolutions, as many Americans do across the country. And the President said, I want to do two things, I want to be holed up less in the Oval Office, and I want to be traveling out in the country more talking to the American people. That's exactly what we've tried to do and what we're going to continue to do. And that's an opportunity to talk about and sell his programs to the public.

KURTZ: The President and the Vice President have both denounced the leaked Supreme Court draft that could potentially lead to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, as you know. You told reporter it's not a political issue because it's supported by a majority of the American public, that's true. You later amended that to say it's not a partisan —

PSAKI: Right, exactly.

KURTZ: — but a portion of the public is passionately opposed to abortion, and it's a key political battle in every Supreme Court nomination fight. So how can you say it's not a partisan or political issue?

PSAKI: Well, according to a Fox News poll, nearly two-thirds of the public does not want *Roe v. Wade* to be overturned.

KURTZ: What about the others?

PSAKI: Well, two-thirds of the public means that is the vast majority of the public who want a woman to be able to make choices with her doctor about her own health care. Two-thirds of the public doesn't agree on a lot, but they agree that a woman's rights should be protected, and I

think that's pretty significant.

KURTZ: Now Senator Biden said, when *Roe* was adopted back in 1973, that he thought it went too far. Obviously, his views have evolved on this subject. But shouldn't you acknowledge, despite the polls, that there's a strong minority in the country that feels as a moral issue very passionately that abortion is wrong?

PSAKI: Well, look, I think the whole point of *Roe* is a protection of privacy and a protection of the right of individuals to make choices about their own bodies. And I would note that *Roe* is also, as you know, precedent for a number of other important Supreme Court cases that have impacted people's lives hugely, whether it's who you marry, your right to have privacy about contraception. I mean, that is what is on the President's mind, the protection of those privacies and the protection of people's rights to make choices about their own lives and their own bodies.

KURTZ: You said at a briefing that many Republicans, in your view, and I would perhaps add many media conservatives, are focusing less on the impact of blowing up *Roe* — potentially if this is the final decision —

PSAKI: Yes.

KURTZ: — and more on who leaked it, this sort of leak mystery.

PSAKI: Yes.

KURTZ: But why do you think that is? You said it's a distraction. Why do you think that is? This is something the right has been fighting for — for 50 years.

PSAKI: Well, at the same time though, two-thirds of the public doesn't think *Roe* should be overturned. So maybe they want to talk more about the leak than they do about whether a woman should have the right to make choices about their own body with their doctors. I don't know, you'd have to ask them.

KURTZ: But you think they're shying away from what you would suggest is an unpopular position.

PSAKI: It is an unpopular position in the country, including among people who may not even identify themselves as Democrats.

KURTZ: Sure. President Biden is pushing a \$33 billion package in military and other aid to Ukraine. Many Republicans are supporting his handling of the war.

PSAKI: Yes.

KURTZ: Shouldn't a package of that magnitude have been proposed weeks and perhaps even months ago before the atrocities and war crimes that we've seen in this Russian invasion and

before this fierce Russian assault on these eastern provinces?

PSAKI: Well, we're still spending out the \$13.5 billion package that the President pushed for just a few weeks ago, including \$3.5 billion in security assistance that we've expedited to get to the front lines and help the Ukrainians win the battle of Kyiv and continue to battle the Russians. So, this was a package that built on that and is going to allow us to continue to provide security assistance and humanitarian assistance —

KURTZ: If it passes the Hill.

PSAKI: — if it passes the Hill. But I will say, as you noted, there is a lot of support for — there's bipartisan support, I would say even, for the efforts, the bravery, the courage of the Ukrainian leaders and the role the United States is playing, the United States' military in providing this type of assistance, and the American people in many ways in supporting the Ukrainians and standing up against Russian aggression.

KURTZ: Let me circle back, to coin a phrase, to the message question. Now I know your standard answer is that Biden takes lots and lots of questions after events, and let's just agree to disagree that that's a good level of media access. With the President holding so few news conferences and doing very rarely sit-down interviews, isn't he surrendering a key part of the bully pulpit?

PSAKI: I would say the President speaks to the American people nearly every day, sometimes twice a day about —

KURTZ: I'm talking about talking to journalists.

PSAKI: — well, but I think our objective and our role and our focus here is speaking to the public. And certainly, engaging in and valuing a free press, which is something we do and the President does nearly every day by taking questions from the media and speaking out about how we should protect the media, as he did last weekend at the White House Correspondents' Dinner.

KURTZ: I have covered Joe Biden on and off since the 1980s including his first Presidential campaign. He likes to talk. Now, nobody expected as President he would comment on everything under the sun, but doesn't he leave a void by not being in the news all the time, not doing these television interviews or print interviews, for that matter, that is being filled by Republicans, activists, pundits, bloviators, and doesn't about that mean he's often reacting to the news and not driving the news cycle?

PSAKI: Well, we can't determine what the media decides to cover, of course, that's not our role, we're not in China and Russia here —

KURTZ: But a President can always make news.

PSAKI: But — yes, but the President can make news by traveling to a Javelin plant and

highlighting the incredible role we're playing in fighting the war in Ukraine by supporting with military assistance. He can make news by talking about how we lowered the deficit for the first time in a long time.

KURTZ: All right. Well, I continue to think that a sustained questioning from a single journalist with follow-ups is not only better for our profession, we always want more access, as you know

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PSAKI: Of course, that's your job. That's your job.

KURTZ: — but actually — better for the President as well. Now you've been using some tougher language against a guy your boss used to kind of dismiss as the former guy.

PSAKI: Yes.

KURTZ: You said, for instance, the White House policy is not to take advice from people who have praised Putin. President Biden the other day called the MAGA movement the most extreme political organization in American history. Have you and the White House and the President decided that with Donald Trump still being by far the most influential Republican, that you've increasingly got to take him on?

PSAKI: I think what you've seen the President do, he still refers to him as "the former guy," his "predecessor." He did even yesterday — or earlier this week when he made those comments, is about the impact and the hold that former President Trump has on the Republican Party, the influence and the impact that has on what their policies are. And he wants these as a reminder of how these policies can impact people every day. But he's also not going to hesitate calling out what he thinks are extreme positions that are out of whack with the mainstream.

KURTZ: So, are you taking on Donald Trump more?

PSAKI: We're taking on what he represents, what the people who are currently in elected office making policies represent.

KURTZ: What was it like to have Trevor Noah making fun of you at the White House Correspondents' Dinner by saying right now your job is to make the Biden administration look good at all costs and as a pundit your job will be the same?

PSAKI: Well, while I have nothing to say about what I'm going to do in the future, aside from it's now been announced that I will be departing the White House next week, I have a lot of emotions about that, they're all filled together at once, I'm going to sleep, I'm going to read a lot of books, I'm going to watch a lot of movies I haven't seen. What I will say is that you couldn't have done my job. I don't think anybody could do this job as White House press secretary if they didn't value the role of the press and the media, and I do, even on days where we disagree, on days we debate.

KURTZ: And by the way, I'll take it as, you know, laughter at Trevor Noah as the fact that you were a good sport about it.

PSAKI: Yes, I did. I'm sorry, I was asking people, though, I will tell you, did I have a strange look on my face? Because you never know.

KURTZ: After the break, the President's press secretary on criticism of the conflict of interest, Joe Biden's use of Twitter, and more.

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11:45:33 a.m.

4 minutes and 39 seconds

KURTZ: More now of my conversation with White House press secretary Jen Psaki. I know you can't discuss your next job for ethical reasons, but it's been widely reported, you got a lot of criticism over possible conflicts during this period. Did that both bother you?

PSAKI: Of course, because I'm a human being. But what I know is what I try to do every day, and I hold myself to a very high ethical standard. I took steps and have taken steps, as I've had any discussions with any future employer, that go over and above any requirements by government, recusing myself of any discussions as well, and I'm proud of that. And I think and hope, and this is very public in a job like mine —

KURTZ: Yes.

PSAKI: — people judge me by how I engage and interact with reporters. And I think it has been clear, I've treated everybody the same from the beginning, and that has been a point of pride for me.

KURTZ: Speaking of interacting with reporters, do you deliberately try to lower the temperature in the briefing room? *Politico* just had a piece about how journalists now find the White House to be boring. In the process, one correspondent, unnamed, was quoted as saying you're good at your job and "jawing with Jen just makes you look like an A-hole."

PSAKI: Makes me laugh. I'm glad you didn't say the full word because I want my mother to watch this interview, you know?

KURTZ: Yes, indeed.

PSAKI: Look, I would say that when I talk to the President about this job, and Dr. Biden too, the biggest piece of advice or request he, they both had for me is to approach it from the prism of bringing credibility back to the job, of showing respect, even people who disagree with us, with him, with the policies of the administration, and, yes, some of that is taking the temperature down in the room.

KURTZ: But have you bitten your tongue on occasion?

PSAKI: Of course. Of course, I'm human. I'm an Irish lass in my heart. Sometimes I get a little fiery in there. But on most days my hope and my objective is to not make it a got you moment and to make it a place where we are providing information, getting accurate information to the public through the press through tough questions, through debate. That's what that room is for.

KURTZ: You recently said that Twitter is very white, very liberal, and very coastal. And you're right.

PSAKI: That's a fact, yes.

KURTZ: It distorts reality for everybody, including journalists.

PSAKI: Yes.

KURTZ: But have you ever suggested to President Biden that he spice up his rather bland Twitter feed with a few jabs or weigh in on something like the Will Smith slap or Dave Chappelle being attacked onstage just to get people to know more about Joe Biden's personality?

PSAKI: Here's what I will say. Joe Biden has an enormous Twitter following, an enormous Facebook following, and actually so large that it's one of the only flat — one of the only social media platforms or followings that can compete with a lot of the disinformation out there because —

KURTZ: But his tweets rarely make news.

PSAKI: — they reach the public. They don't always have to make news. Sometimes it's about providing accuracy and information to the public.

KURTZ: Again, over this question of aiming for the public versus aiming for the media echo chamber.

PSAKI: That's — that's right. And I think it's important — you know, part of the echo chamber, and this is what the President — and this is why I don't think he will ever become a person who is tweeting all the time, is because he always reminds us of how we can't get focused on the conversation sometimes we're all having with ourselves. And we're all guilty of this, right? Sometimes the journalists in the room are talking about things on Twitter, are talking about things we've seen on Twitter and we've seen on cable, and that may or may not be what the American public really cares about on any particular day.

KURTZ: So, he doesn't want to be drawn into the Beltway bubble chatter?

PSAKI: Yes, yes.

KURTZ: Now, White House press secretary, originally you said you didn't want the job, but you took it after the campaign, it's made you something of a celebrity. Is it hard to walk away from this job given that you are a pretty famous spokesperson for the President of the United States?

PSAKI: I mean, of course it's hard. This is the greatest job I've ever had, maybe the greatest job I ever have, I don't know. And it has surpassed my expectations in so many ways in that I've learned something new every single day. A lot of that has to do with the policy people I work with and the experts, but a lot of it also has to do with the journalists I interact with and the way they ask questions and what they're asking about.

KURTZ: So, you're leaving because?

PSAKI: I'm leaving because I have a 4-year-old and a 6-year-olds. They are the most important people in my life, and my husband, of course. And I always knew that having — having worked in the White House before that this was not a job I could do forever. It is a huge honor to do it no matter where you are in your life. But I don't want to miss things with my kids, and I don't want to miss moments or soccer practices or ballet recitals or anything.

KURTZ: Jen Psaki, thanks very much for sitting down with us here at the White House.

PSAKI: Thank you, it was a pleasure.