

FNC's *Special Report with Bret Baier*

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10 minutes and 41 seconds

BRET BAIER: Let's talk about this and other issues with Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. Do you feel like weighing in on any of this?

PETE BUTTIGIEG: You know, I can't really speak to what's going on in the House. I can only speak to the administration. But I will tell you, we had a great day yesterday. We were announcing the large bridge investments, one of the biggest pieces of the President's infrastructure vision. The President was in Kentucky and Ohio with Speaker Mc — Leader McConnell, demonstrating the bipartisan work that went into that. I was in Connecticut celebrating an investment we are making in the I-95 bridge there that's going to help the supply chain. So we're going to stay focused on our job, and hopefully they can figure out there.

BAIER: I know you don't want to talk about this part. Let me get to some specifics. Today the President talked about an effort to deal with migrants coming in. One of the things he said was an app, that there could be a legal process, and if they get approved — we'll take a listen. The President said there are some stipulations, but listen.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Let me reiterate, you need a lawful sponsor in the United States of America, number one, and you need to undergo a rigorous background check, number two. If your application is approved and you show up at a U.S. airport when and where directed — excuse me.

BAIER: On the specifics, the reason I ask you, I know it falls under DHS specifically, but it deals with airports. Are you worried that migrants are going to be showing up at airports? Are there going to be new offices, new TSA agents? How are you going to deal with this?

BUTTIGIEG: I trust Secretary Mayorkas and the Department of Homeland Security to make sure that there are the right resources on the security side. And I haven't had a chance to see all of the details of the action today, but I did see part of the President's remarks where he challenged Republicans on Capitol Hill to work in a bipartisan way to help address these issues. So he is taking these executive actions today to help address this, and, also, inviting anybody who legitimately cares about solving the problem and not just the politics of it to work with the administration to get a more permanent resolution as we have been calling for for years, to have real immigration reform.

BAIER: Obviously your critics say that the administration hasn't really dealt with it for many, many months, and this just gets around the edges and not the big issue with the influx along the border, but again, I know that falls under DHS. I want to talk about what falls under you. Holiday travel. In September you were on *The Late Late Show with James Corden* and you said that you thought that this was going to get better, that it was going to get better by the holidays, and that so many people had been delayed and canceled, and that the fact is the airlines need to be ready

to service the tickets that they're selling. Why did you miss the mark so bad? Is there anything that the DOT could have done differently ahead of what we saw this debacle at the holidays?

BUTTIGIEG: Let's be clear, we have made a ton of progress since this summer. And the evidence of that is we had an epic storm hit the United States, and within a few days almost all of the airlines had recovered. As a matter of fact, every airline recovered except for one.

BAIER: Southwest.

BUTTIGIEG: Southwest Airlines, that's right. They failed to invest in the kind of I.T. systems that they needed and made a number of other operational mistakes.

BAIER: So was the DOT aware of Southwest Airlines antiquated system for scheduling prior to Christmas?

BUTTIGIEG: I don't run Southwest Airlines's I.T. systems, but what we do —

BAIER: Understood, but you said back on *The Late Show* that you were confident that they'd be ready to service the tickets that they're selling.

BUTTIGIEG: — and the airlines have made major improvements, largely because we pressed them to do that. Now, what we do — again, I don't run Southwest Airlines, but I do regulate them. And so what we're doing right now is using the full force of this department to make sure customers get taken care of. I made clear to Southwest Airlines that they will be required by our department — by the way, this is something that wouldn't have been possible before the work we did this summer. They are now required to cover lodging, to cover ground expenses, to cover hotels for these delays and cancellations that were their responsibility. The reason we're able to enforce that is because of the stepped-up customer service standards that we were able to get over the summer. So while, obviously, I can't reach in and fix one company's I.T. system —

BAIER: So you're not going to call for leadership to resign or something like that?

BUTTIGIEG: Look, I think leadership has some serious questions to answer. I know the CEO is pretty new, but we have got to look at why over the last few years they didn't make the investments that could have helped prevent this. But what I know for sure is that — and this is important for anybody who is watching this to know, you are required to get your money back if your flight was canceled, and you're required to get it within seven days in terms of your refund. And you were required to get your expenses covered. I know a lot of passengers right now still having issues. They have gotten to where they are going, but they are still having issues getting their bags reunited with them. We are enforcing a requirement you will get up to \$3,800 in compensation for any of the kinds of expenses you have to run while you don't have your baggage. And again, a lot of this is pursuant to things that weren't impossible before.

BAIER: OK, I want to deal with a couple of controversies that are getting attention from your critics. Basically, they are saying that you kept a low profile during the Southwest debacle. Never

did a press conference from the Transportation Department. You were in Portugal during the rail strike crisis. You were on paternity leave during the 2021 supply chain crisis. This is what they say. And that — how do you address that criticism?

BUTTIGIEG: Sure. It's nonsense.

BAIER: And obviously, the paternity stuff, you are allowed to do. But they say several weeks, and it was during the supply chain crisis.

BUTTIGIEG: It's nonsense. Let's start with the supply chain crisis. I worked that issue before, during, and after the time that I was focusing on my children, before, during, and after their hospitalization. And what happened with that supply chain crisis? Well, before the holidays last year, there were all kinds of news organizations, not just this one, running stories, saying Christmas was going to be canceled. What actually happened, an all-time record high in terms of the amount of goods moving through our ports and in terms of retail sales that year. Let's talk about what happened during these travel disruptions.

BAIER: How about rail strike, and we will go backwards. Rail strike crisis, you were in Portugal.

BUTTIGIEG: OK, let's do the rail strike. So the legislation passed in December, and in the days and weeks leading up to that legislation passing, I was on the ground. I was on Capitol Hill. I was on the phone working that issue. Not solo. I was part of a team with other cabinet secretaries, under leadership of the President to get that done. Two months before that, there was the tentative agreement. And in the days leading up to that, where was I? On the ground, on the phone. I think the night before the tentative agreement I remember going to bed at 1:00 and then being back up to check my phone at 4:00. Now, people want to —

BAIER: OK, here is the criticism.

BUTTIGIEG: Hold on.

BAIER: We talked about Southwest.

BUTTIGIEG: No, no, this is really important, because there are people out there with a straight face denying that I was on the ground in the United States working this issue in the days leading up to the tentative agreement and then later on the bill. Now, it is true that, like a lot of people in Washington, in late August, I was ready to get out of Washington for a few days, and I did. But in a job like mine, even if you are on vacation, even if it's a holiday, even if you are on leave or a weekend or whatever, you are always available because the job is 24/7.

BAIER: All right, here's the other criticism. You've been a big advocate for the environment, the administration's climate change policy. What do you say to people who ask is it environmentally responsible to fly on private government jets when commercial options are available?

BUTTIGIEG: When we're making a decision about what aircraft to use, we weigh a lot of things.

That's one of the things we consider. So is saving taxpayers money. Now, I fly the majority of the time on — in economy class on an airliner just like everybody else. In fact, I think I should say that again, because I'm not sure everybody has read past the headlines, but, as you know, even this network's reporting has made clear that the majority of the time I travel on an airliner in economy class just like everyone else. But there are cases where we use an FAA jet, a jet that's assigned to my department. I'll give you an example. I went to Wisconsin recently. This was last year, I think. A lot of good paying jobs that are coming in. We're working with the operating engineers there to make clear to high school students that whether they want a college degree or not they can get good paying construction jobs because of the work that we're making possible.

BAIER: Yes, and I understand, and —

BUTTIGIEG: Hold on. We saved taxpayers \$2,000 by using the FAA's jet instead of flying buying those airlines tickets.

BAIER: So 18 flights to Nevada, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Ohio, New Hampshire, using a private flight to travel to Montreal.

BUTTIGIEG: Not a private flight, a government aircraft.

BAIER: Well, understood, but the taxpayers are still paying for it.

BUTTIGIEG: Right, and the taxpayers are usually saving money when we do that. I will give you an example.

BAIER: Well, you know, that is one of the controversies that led to other secretaries leaving. For example, Secretary Price of HHS sat at this very desk and defended a government trips, and he then left.

BUTTIGIEG: Did Secretary Price save taxpayers' money by doing it? I don't think he did.

BAIER: He originally said he did. You also brought your husband Chasten on a military aircraft to attend a sporting event in Netherlands. Is that —

BUTTIGIEG: That's quite a spin to put on it.

BAIER: No, no, no. But was that reimbursed? Because that was one of the controversies with Price.

BUTTIGIEG: Of course not. I lead a Presidential delegation to support American wounded warriors and injured service members —

BAIER: The Invictus Games.

BUTTIGIEG: The Invictus Games, as has been tradition for many years. I led the American

delegation. It was one of the great honors of my time in this job. And the diplomatic protocol on a Presidential delegation is that the principle is often accompanied by their spouse. It was a great trip. It was incredible. It was also a few weeks into the Ukraine war. So we had a chance at the U.S. embassy to engage with the Ukrainian competitors, also wounded service members. Some of them went from the games back to the battlefield to fight for their country. I also took the opportunity to sit with the prime minister of the Netherlands to look at port infrastructure, Dutch port infrastructure. But here's what I want you to understand. Before me it was the Secretary of the Army under President Trump who took that trip with his wife. Before that it was Mrs. Trump as first lady who went to the Invictus Games. Before that, Mrs. Obama did the same thing. And I guess the question on my mind is, if no one's raising questions about why Secretary Esper and his wife led that delegation, as well they should have, then why is it any different when it's me and my husband?

BAIER: Understood. So the last thing I wanted to ask you is that tonight secretary — rather Senator Debbie Stabenow from Michigan announced that she is not going to run in 2024. You are now a resident of Michigan. You have put out a statement today that you will not run for that seat. Is that correct?

BUTTIGIEG: Right now, I'm completely focused on the job that I have, for some of the reasons we talked about. It's demanding job, but it's also in my view the best job in this city and the best job in the federal government, and proud to be doing that.

BAIER: And can you say that you'll rule out running for any elected office in 24?

BUTTIGIEG: I'm completely focused on doing this job, and I'm not planning to run for anything.

BAIER: We wanted to give you the opportunity to directly answer some of these critics, and they are talking about it. And we appreciate you coming on —

BUTTIGIEG: Same here.

BAIER: — and answering these questions. And we want to talk about infrastructure and what comes next because there's a lot of people interested in that topic.

BUTTIGIEG: I would love to.

BAIER: Okay. Mr. Secretary, thanks for the time.

BUTTIGIEG: Thank you.