

White House press briefing [via *Washington Post* Live]

03/03/23

1:15:15 p.m.

4 minutes and 5 seconds

COLLEEN LONG: So, moving right along, I wanted to ask about the D.C. crime — criminal code. Again, we're — we've been hearing that some of the House Democrats feel like they got thrown under the bus a little bit by the President's decision not to step in on the effort to stop the overhaul — which is a lot of negatives, I understand, but I think you know where I'm going. So, I wanted to know, you know: Did the President give them a heads-up on the decision? Was there any sort of back-and-forth about it?

KARINE JEAN-PIERRE: So, first, let me just say that the White House notified the — notified the members at the House retreat, as you know, back — that was earlier this week — or is still happening — in Baltimore, so that's number one. Number two, I do want to lay out that the President and the administration has a very close relationship with House Democrats and Senate Democrats as well. We have worked together. The President has worked very well with the members on delivering bold, historic pieces of legislation in his first two years of his administration and is very proud of the relationship that he has with them. And our teams are constantly in communication with them and so, I'll leave that there. This is a very strong, important relationship for all of us here, including the President. I also want to state that, look, the President supports D.C. statehood. That is something that you saw in his SAP for this particular D.C. crime bill and if Congress sends him a bill making D.C. a state, he'll always, always be sure to sign it, because he's been talk- — he's been talking about that for the last two decades, but, you know, vetoing the bill headed to this — his desk now won't make — make D.C. a state and so, those are the things that the President is really — has been very clear about when it comes to D.C. and their statehood and so, I'll leave it there, but as it relates to the House, as it relates to Senate Democrats, it is a very important relationship to — for us and, clearly, very important and with the Senate Democratic Caucus, as you know, when he met with them yesterday, he provided what he was going to do and made it very clear to them, and they had that discussion.

LONG: I just also want to ask — so, you know, Biden and the Democrats have talked a lot about the need to stem, you know, rising crime, but also the need to reform a criminal justice system that still disproportionately affects, you know, Black Americans. So why not engage in some sort of compromise or why not let the D.C. bill — because, you know, the mayor vetoed the criminal code but she also proposed some changes that she thought would have made the system, sort of, better on the whole.

JEAN-PIERRE: So, I just want to be very clear here and if you look at the D.C. bill itself — and I know that there was a little bit of — I was asked a couple of questions of what else does it do besides armed carjacking and I don't normally go line by line on — on legislation, especially legislation that we haven't introduced, but I did talk to the team, and we have a couple of things that I just want to lay out for all of you and — on what the D.C. bill does. It reduces maximum penalties for offenses like murders and other homicides; armed — armed home invasion

burglaries; armed — armed carjackings, as I mentioned; armed robberies; unlawful gun possession; and some sexual assault offenses and so, look, the President has been very clear we need to do more to reduce crime, to make communities safer, to save lives. And that's why he put together — he put forth his Safer America Plan that does just that — that we believe does exactly that. So, the way that we see this bill, it doesn't actually reform policing practices. That's not something that it does — reform like the ones the President has put forward at the federal level — you know, about the executive order. When it couldn't be done on the Senate side, making — doing — moving forward with police reform, the President put forth a historic piece — piece of — an executive order to get — to try to do what we can at the federal level and so, we believe that this bill does not actually do that.

(....)

1:27:40 p.m.

3 minutes and 14 seconds

M.J. LEE: Just following up on Colleen's question on the D.C. crime bill. The House Democrats who are expressing anger and frustration, they are in part saying that they wish they had known sooner what the President's position would be. As you know, a whole bunch of House Democrats already voted against the bill. Why didn't the White House make this position clear before that vote had taken place in the House?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, look, when we put out the SAP — I think it was around the State of the Union; I think that's when the SAP came out — we were very clear on where — in what — where the President was, which is making sure that he continues his commitment to D.C. statehood and that's what you saw in that SAP, in that support for D.C. statehood and at the time, you know, many times — many of — even earlier this week, many of you were asking me — I think your colleague was asking me which direction the President was going to go and he never made that clear in that SAP and I think as it was becoming — we always let — we always let the process in Congress go through — right — whatever mechanism they take, however it moves forward, so we never — we're always very clear and careful about that, but as it now looks like it was going to come to his desk, we wanted to communicate where we were going to go. We wanted to communicate how the President was going to move forward with — with this particular bill and we did and we — we laid that out. He — we're explaining that now — why he — he is moving forward in that way and the White House and congressional Dem- — Democrats, as we have known, have come together on many different things to deliver for the American people, and the President wants to continue to do so.

LEE: But I guess, you know, the President supports D.C. statehood; he's been clear about that, but he's not going to veto this bill from Congress, which does amount to Congress sort of meddling in D.C. own governance, right? So how do you square that circle? Both things can't be true.

JEAN-PIERRE: No, we believe both things can be true. Look, right now, D.C. is not a state. This is coming to the President. Right? This is something that's coming to his desk, and he has to

take action. I just laid out, a moment ago, to Colleen why we felt that this bill doesn't actually deal with police reform. This President has been someone, for many years, many decades, who has always put the safety of American, American families, certainly across the country, first. That's why he put together his Safer America Plan that lays out 100,000 cops in communities to work with communities, to make sure that communities feel safe. The COPS — the COPS plan, that is something that the President started as senator. It's something — it's actually a policy that Republicans want to not fund and take that away — take away — away an option to make communities safe, so this is something that the President cares about very strongly and the way that we see it is that this is coming to the President's desk. This is not a legislation that he put forward. D.C. is not yet a state, even though he supports D.C. statehood and he had to make a decision and, look, again, we let the process move forward in Congress, and we felt this was the time to make that decision.

(...)

1:32:51 p.m.

8 minutes and 8 seconds

WEIJIA JIANG: You mentioned the SAP that the administration put out on February 6. But it's not a broad statement about D.C. statehood. It specifically says that the administration opposes the resolution that would dismantle the crime bill. So when was this policy reversed? And why weren't House Democrats notified about the reversal?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, from — I'll say this: There was never a change of heart on where we were with — with the SAP. The SAP, the way that it's laid out, speaks to the President supporting D.C. statehood. That is what — that is where we were. That's what we were at the time. Wanted to make sure that we, again, lifted up where the President has been for the past decades, making sure that D.C. — you know, fighting for D.C. to become a state and we actually say in the SAP that if — you know, if — you know, if Congress wants to move forward in that way, we should pass H.R. 51, make D.C. the 51 state and so, we never laid out where we — where the President was going to — was going to go once that — once it came to his desk because we wanted to allow Congress to move forward in a way that they normally do with a mechanism — when a — when a piece of legislation moves forward and so, we never said anything at this time. Now we're communicating very clearly. Now that we know that this legislation is going to be in the President's — at the President's desk, we're making very clear and communicating that — where the President is on this — on this legislation.

JIANG: But do you — wait, I'm sorry. It specifically says the word "opposes." So is it that the administration wasn't aware of the content, the specifics of the crime bill, and now you are aware and the President says he doesn't support some of the changes that the D.C. Council put forward? Because when you released the SAP, I'm assuming, maybe incorrectly, that you were very aware of what the Council was proposing.

JEAN-PIERRE: We were aware what the Council proposed — were proposing. What we're saying was that we wanted to make sure that we continued the President's — the President's

continued push for — for statehood and that's what we did. That's what we did in the SAP. And that was what was the most important thing that we believed. There was no veto threat in the SAP. There really wasn't. We may have — it may have been — I just read it while you were asking me. We didn't oppo- — we opposed it, but there was no veto threat, so I want to be really clear about it. It stated our support for D.C. statehood, but it did not indicate what the President would do should the bill come to his desk. It did not say that. It did not lay that out. Now we're communicating that very clearly. We communicated with the House Democrats days ago, when they were in Baltimore and — and again, I said this — I said this to MJ. I remember many of you asking where we were going to go and I said we don't have any — we don't have a decision yet, we don't have anything to share on this — on where the President is going to be with this particular bill and now we are, because we know that it's going to come to his desk.

JIANG: There must be some state laws that the President also disagrees with that have to do with crime and he obviously doesn't have the power to do anything about that. I'm trying to square his decision to use his power to do something in D.C. while he's also saying, you know, the federal government shouldn't — should allow them to be their own state.

JEAN-PIERRE: Because D.C. is not a state.

JIANG: So —

JEAN-PIERRE: So, this bill —

JIANG: — he can, and therefore he should?

JEAN-PIERRE: D.C. is not a state. So therefore, the bill is coming to his desk, so he has to make a decision. It's as simple as that, Weijia, right? Because D.C. is not a state. Now, he wants D.C. to become a state. We've been very clear about that. He has said that for decades that he believes in D.C. statehood, but it's not a — it's not and so, therefore, because D.C. is not a state, when bills like this come — occur, it goes to the President and he has to make a decision and that's where we are. It's as simple as that. Now, if D.C. becomes a state, yes, the President believes that it should be governing — a city should be governing on its own. That's what he believes.

JIANG: But until then, they shouldn't.

JEAN-PIERRE: But D — Weijia, D.C. is not a state.

JIANG: Right. But, I mean, he has the — he has the — I'm asking because he does have an option to veto. That is one action he could take.

JEAN-PIERRE: Right. But, again, this is a President that believes in keeping communities safe. He believes in keeping the 700,000 residents in D.C. safe and so, he's taking that action because it's coming to him. We didn't put this legislation toge- — forth. This is not our legislation. This is a legislation that is coming before the President of the United States because D.C. is not a state. It's just not, so, he has to make a decision, so he's going to make a decision that will —

that will help the residents of D.C., that will deliver for the residents of D.C. and it's as simple as that.

JIANG: Thank you.

JEAN-PIERRE [TO O'DONNELL]: Go ahead.

KELLY O'DONNELL: I'm seeing two, perhaps, parallels here in the discussion about the SAP, which is the statement of administration policy. Isn't it really boiling down to: There was one train here that was saying that the administration opposed this, and then, really, when the recognition takes place, this would make the President look anti-"tough on crime," that the wheels stopped, and now you have a new position? Isn't that really what happened here?

JEAN-PIERRE: What I can tell you what happened is that there was no change of heart. Yes, in the — in the language — I just read it as — read it again, as Weijia was talking — was asking her question — there was the word "opposed," but we never indicated — which is not unusual; it is not unusual for a SAP — in the SAP for the President to not indicate if he will veto or if he will sign. It is not unusual to do that. Now that we know that it's going to come to his desk, we're communicating that very clearly. The President communicated that with all of you yesterday and so, now we have made a decision on where we're going to go with this particular piece of legislation.

O'DONNELL: In — in a bigger sense, because, you know, those of us who cover this read these things all the time. The general public may not even know what we're talking about here. But it seems like —

JEAN-PIERRE: No, I'm pretty sure they are not.

O'DONNELL: — yes, so, there — but there was a —

JEAN-PIERRE: I'm pretty sure this is —

O'DONNELL: — there was a bureaucratic push in one direction on this and then, when it reached a certain point — and crime is a big issue in America in certain cities. We saw it reflected in the election in Chicago. We know it's a concern. It's been a concern in the city that many of us live in here and then, boom, the President has to make a decision, and he's going a different direction than the administration setup. Isn't it really just that simple?

JEAN-PIERRE: I wouldn't say it's that simple. First of all, let me just step back for a second. This is — when you look at crime and the rise of crime over the last couple of years, this is something that the President inherited and he took action — right? — with the Safer America Plan and making sure that he did everything that he can, using the tools that he has in federal government, to put forth a plan that will keep communities safe. I talked about the 100,000 cops, to put them in communities, working with communities to make sure communities feel safe and that's not just that. There's the COPS program, right? And we're going to see, from the

President's budget, how his commitment to that — his commitment to cops. What we are seeing is we saw D.C. Council put forth a piece of — a piece of legislation. They're not a state. They went through their processes, right? They went through their mechanics. It ends — it ended up in Congress. We put out a SAP saying: Yes, we oppose it, but also we support D.C. statehood. That's what it says in our SAP, but we never indicated from that where the President was going to go, because we were also letting that process play out in Congress. Now that we know that it's coming to the desk of the President, the President — we're communicating where the President stands on this piece of the D.C. crime bill, this piece of legislation.

(...)

1:42:55 p.m.

19 seconds

ANDREW RESTUCCIA: Just on the D.C. issue, just one point of clarity.

JEAN-PIERRE: All right.

RESTUCCIA: Does the President view this as a one-time interference in D.C. affairs? Or does he hold out —

JEAN-PIERRE: That's a hypothetical.

RESTUCCIA: — the possibility that that could happen again?

JEAN-PIERRE: I mean, that's a hypothetical that I can't answer from here. This is — there was a specific issue that came before us —

RESTUCCIA: If another bill comes —

JEAN-PIERRE: — and the Pres — and the Pres — yeah, but it's — you're — you're asking a hypothetical —

RESTUCCIA: Okay.

JEAN-PIERRE: — that I can't answer at this time.

(...)

1:51:43 p.m.

2 minutes and 37 seconds

IKE EJIOCHI: Tennessee's governor signed two anti-LGBTQ bills into law on Thursday: one that bans many drag performances from taking place on public property, another bans most gender-affirming care to transgender youth. What does the White House make of these laws?

And is there anything you can do or planning to do about these laws?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, I'll say this: The American people are focused on so many issues. We just talked about economy. We just talked about inflation. We're talking about safer an — safer communities and schools, and good healthcare. All of the things that you all ask me every day and you all know that's what the American people care about. That's what — even when they went to vote in November, those were the issues that mattered the most to them. But instead of doing anything to address those real issues that are impacting American people, right now you have a governor from Tennessee has decided to go after drag shows. What sense does that make to go after drag shows? How is that going to help people's lives who are thinking about the economy, who are thinking about making sure their kids are going — are going to be safe when they go to school or their communities are safe? But that's what he wants to focus on, so it's part of a larger pattern from elected officials who espouse freedom and liberty but apparently think that freedom of speech only extends to people who agree with them and that's what we're seeing from what's happening in Tennessee and other places, as well. So, you know, don't take my words for it and — of — on this issue. The governor himself hasn't been able to — if you think about this particular issue, he hasn't been able to cite any examples, anything to show that drag shows in public spaces are a problem. He hasn't. He hasn't laid that out at all on why this is an issue for American people, so I've said this before from here. I said this, I believe, last week, and we'll — we'll keep saying it — that these ridiculous policies aren't just unnecessary, they are dangerous. They are — they vilify our fellow Americans and — at a time when LGBTQ Americans are facing higher risk and violence, mental health issues and it is unacceptable. It is completely unacceptable for a governor to be moving in this way to be — with such a bill and is — it is also unfortunate.

EJIOCHI: And what's your message to the LGBTQ youth in the state, as well as drag performers? What's your message to them?

JEAN-PIERRE: So the President always has been very clear when it comes to vulnerable communities, like the LGBTQ community, that he has their backs and he has a record to show that. He has a record that — that shows that he supports this community and will continue to be there for the community as — as long as it takes.