

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

03/06/23

1:53:39 a.m.

2 minutes and 44 seconds

CHRIS MEGERIAN: Two questions on the D.C. crime situation. Does the White House have a response to the city council wanting to pull back that proposal?

KARINE JEAN-PIERRE: So, as you all know, we litigated this about two days last week, right here in this very room. The President expressed concerns on certain provisions of — of the D.C. crime bill and as — as we can see, the D.C. Council's process is still ongoing, so we won't — we won't comment on that any further.

MEGERIAN: So, also, when we were discussing this last week, you cited Mayor Bowser's opposition to the crime proposal. But she also says that the override is an indignity and that Congress has meddled in its affairs. Why didn't the President or the White House give her a heads up that the President wanted to sign this override legislation?

JEAN-PIERRE: She also said that she understands why the President made this decision. But what —

MEGERIAN: So, the question is —

JEAN-PIERRE: No, I — wait. Let me — let me — let me get into it.

MEGERIAN: I — I haven't even asked the question.

JEAN-PIERRE: But you just asked a question. Let me finish your question — the first question what you asked, which is: First of all, she also said that she understood why the President made this decision. Our team, the off- — the intergovernmental affairs team is in constant communication with her team and was last week. Don't have anything to preview or any specific discussion that occurred, but they are in constant communication.

MEGERIAN: Okay. So the question is —

JEAN-PIERRE: Yep.

MEGERIAN: — why didn't the White House or the President give Mayor Bowser a heads up that —

JEAN-PIERRE: I just told you that they're in constant communication with the team, including last week.

MEGERIAN: Okay and they — and the White House told —

JEAN-PIERRE: I'm just not — I'm just not going to get into specifics.

MEGERIAN: Okay. So, not going to address that.

JEAN-PIERRE: But I can tell you that our intergovernmental affairs office was in contact with her office last week.

MEGERIAN: Okay. That doesn't exactly address the question, but I understand.

JEAN-PIERRE: I'm just telling you that we were in contact with them.

MEGERIAN: And secondly, has — why, if the White House cites Mayor Bowser's opposition to the bill, why do they want to do something that she considers an indignity to her city?

JEAN-PIERRE: Say that again.

MEGERIAN: If the White House is going to cite Mayor Bowser's opposition to the crime bill to say why the President should sign the override legislation, why does the White House want to do something that the mayor considers an indignity to the city — that's something that she opposes?

JEAN-PIERRE: But she also didn't — did not approve of the piece of the legislation as well.

MEGERIAN: But the process by override, she says, is an indignity.

JEAN-PIERRE: So, let's step back for a second. We talked about this for two days last week, and still going to tell you exactly what I said last week, which was: The President — the bill was headed to the President's desk, and the President made a decision and we let all of you know what he was going to do and how he was going to move forward. That's it. He was — he wanted to make sure that he delivered for the 700,000 residents of D.C. in a way that was — in a way that was protecting the residents here. This was brought to him. This is not something that we put forward. This is a decision that was brought to him and he wants to be very clear and communicate with the people of D.C. and with all of you on how he was going to move forward.

(...)

2:06:18 p.m.

2 minutes and 41 seconds

STEVEN PORTNOY: Staying on local matters: The D.C. Council chair said today that he thought he had the power to rescind the sending of a bill to the Senate for its review. Was there any communication between the White House and Council Chairman Mendelson's office prior to his press conference today?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, our team was made aware earlier this morning. As you know, when it comes to any — how the Senate — the mecha- — the mechanics of the Senate move forward, that's

something for the Senate. I encourage you to ask them and how that will work and how that will move forward. But, yes, we were given — we were given a heads up this morning.

PORTNOY: The Senate intends to move forward with its vote on the resolution. The President still intends to sign it. Is that right?

JEAN-PIERRE: If — look, again, we've made ourselves very clear. If the — if the bill comes to the President's desk, he will sign it.

PORTNOY: One other question on this. I don't think you've been asked this — this directly before. But, you know, last week, you said that the President viewed what the D.C. Council did as "unacceptable." You specifically talked about how the bill would reduce penalties for carjacking and you even mentioned sexual assault, so the question for you is why the President would still support D.C. statehood. If the Council is going to pass bills that the President finds unacceptable, why would the President empower the Council to have the power of a state legislature that he couldn't check?

JEAN-PIERRE: Because he believes — and he has for some time now — that D.C. should be a 51 state. They should have a statehood. Again, the reason why the President — we've been — we responded to this and answered the question of if he was going to sign it or not is because it was coming to his desk, as we know from last week and so, the President communicated that. We communicated that, but it doesn't change — it doesn't change that he encourages Congress to put — to pass a bill that makes D.C. a state, and he will sign it. He believes that — that cities and — and states should be able to govern for themselves.

PORTNOY: Last point on this. You know, advocates of D.C. statehood say that what has happened here in this episode is the effort has been set back significantly, that essentially what the President has done is he's given juice to opponents of statehood and statehood opponents say that this episode is proving them right, that the D.C. government should not be self-governing without Congress's involvement.

JEAN-PIERRE: Well, we don't dis- — we — we disagree, right? We believe D.C. should be a statehood. I mean, we've been very clear. The President has been very clear. Again, D.C. is not a state. It's not a city. The reason why this bill was coming before the President is because that is the case, right? It's not a state. It's not a city. So, doesn't mean that it stops our support for their statehood. Doesn't mean that the President has changed his mind on that. We still support that and want to see that happen and we're going to — we're going to continue to encourage Congress to move in that way.

(...)

2:10:46 p.m.

2 minutes and 5 seconds

DEEPA SHIVARAM: I wondered, Karine, if you could comment on some efforts in Republican

states, like Florida and Texas, where they're cracking down on undocumented immigrants. In the Florida legislature, there's a proposed bill that looks at requiring private companies to do more to check the immigration status of their employees. In Texas, there are lawmakers considering a bill that would deny undocumented children access to public education. Does the White House have any comment on these efforts?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, I haven't seen these bills. What I can say is — and as you know — on the first day of this President's — the President's presidency and his tenure — first day of his tenure, he said very, very clearly that he took immigration reform very seriously. And he showed that by action, by putting forward a piece of legislation that was comprehensive, that dealt with the immigration issue that we have seen in this country for some time in a real way. And he asked Congress to take action as well. And so, I can speak to that. I can speak to how the President wants to move forward in a way that we're protecting — we're protecting our border in a secure way, which is why he's taken actions — whether it's the parolee program, whether it's putting 24,000 federal agents on the ground — and making sure that we're doing this in a safe and humane way and so that's what I can speak to. That's the way the President wants to move forward. And I'll just leave it there.

SHIVARAM: The Texas bill says that they would deny undocumented children access to public education unless the federal government pays for it. If this moves forward in Texas, is this something that the administration would consider intervening in?

JEAN-PIERRE: Again, I'm just not — I'm not — I'm not going to get a — I haven't — not — I haven't seen that piece of legislation, haven't talked to our team. I'm just not going to get ahead of any state, local legislation. What I can tell you is what the President has put forward and what he has — how he sees this process moving forward on the federal level is be — coming — coming together with Congress, Congress coming together with us, Republicans actually taking real action and not doing political stunts, because that's what we see in these states, is continued political stunts and not really dealing with an issue that they can. If we came in a bipartisan way, we can actually deal with — with the immigration concerns in this country. But they refuse to do that.

(...)

2:17:52 p.m.

1 minute and 26 seconds

EDWARD LAWRENCE: I want to ask you about energy policy, so, if the President had allowed the Keystone Pipeline — the Keystone XL — to go forward, it would have been operating today or very close to being turned on today. Any regrets about canceling that project, and any consideration of reversing any energy policies for a more balanced approach going forward?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, look, the President has been very clear about how he — how he's approaching the energy space. You know, he does it in a way that is responsible. He does it in a way that delivers for the American people. There's nothing new here — the decisions that he's

made. At the same time, you know, having one of the most mo — one of the most important, historical climate — when it comes to climate change — investments and policies, that does — that is not going to change on how the President moves forward here. It is — when — when he walked into the administration, he talked about how climate change was one of the important crises that we needed to address, and that’s what you’ve seen from this President the last two years and that’s not — his decisions are not going to change that.

LAWRENCE: But even with the — there was a leaked memo that showed that energy — if we had charged less for certain drilling oil permits or royalties in a part of Alaska, then there would be more energy security.

JEAN-PIERRE: So, I’m not going to speak to leaked — leaked memos from here. That is not something that I’m going to do. I believe the leaked memo is from the Department of Interior, that you’re speaking to. Just not going to do that. I encourage you to reach out to Department of Interior.

(...)

2:23:19 p.m.

5 minutes and 28 seconds

TYLER PAGER: Just to circle back on something you said earlier about D.C., you said D.C. — “It’s not a state, it’s not a city.” What did you mean by that?

JEAN-PIERRE: Meaning that — what I’m trying to say is we — it’s not a — it’s not a statehood. It doesn’t have statehood, right? And I’ve said this before; I said it last week. Nothing new. I’m not saying anything that’s new here and because it’s not a statehood — right — the President was — had to make a decision. This bill was brought — because this bill was about to be — to be taken to his desk and that’s the only reason this is happening and so, again, the President is going to continue to support D.C. statehood so that we can see it — we can see it govern for itself. That’s what he believes. He believes that cities and states across the country should be able to govern on its own.

PAGER: And can you just give us — I know this was a decision made last week, but, obviously, it affects hundreds of thousands of people here in the district.

JEAN-PIERRE: Seven hundred thousand people. Yeah.

PAGER: What was the President — was there a policy process around this — this decision? When did the President know about it? Did he speak with the mayor himself? Were there any sort of conversations? Or, you know, how did he come to this decision?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, I don’t have a timeline to lay out for you on the process and how it occurred. I don’t have a conversation to preview for you with the — with the mayor. As I mentioned before, our offices here — not just the intergovernmental affairs, but other White House offices

— are regular — in regular touch with the mayor and her office and her staff. But just don't have anything to lay out. But, look, the President knew he had to make a decision. He had conversations with his team, and he made that decision. [TO LESNIEWSKI] Go ahead, in the back.

NIELS LESNIEWSKI: Following up — following up on that, there's another D.C. — D.C. Council disapproval resolution that is pending related to non-citizens voting in local elections. Is there an update on the President's position, something more definitive on whether he would sign that bill?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, I can tell you — and I was asked this last week — the President does not support allowing non-citizens to vote in federal elections. That — he's been — we've been clear about that from here. As it relates to that particular vote or that particular bill, I don't have any updates from here to share — to share with you on that. And we'll update you as soon as — if we have anything — if that changes. [TO DOOCY] Go ahead, Peter.

PETER DOOCY: Thank you. I have a question about the Willow project in Alaska. What's more important to President Biden: improving energy security or reducing fossil fuels?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, first of all, it doesn't have to be one or the other, right? We can try to be — do both.

DOOCY: Well, he said in 2019, "I guarantee you, we're going to end fossil fuel." So, this project will just be dead, right?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, here's what I can say about that. The President did meet with the Alaska delegation last week at the White House. He always appreciates me — speaking and meeting with the full delegation and understand what their concerns are. So, I'll leave it there and when it comes to that specific decision, that's something that the Secretary of Interior is going to make, so I'm not going to get ahead of where she's going to be, but the President has met with the delegation, and I'm just going to leave it there.

DOOCY: Okay. And another subject: How worried should Americans be about China spying on them here at home?

JEAN-PIERRE: And what do you mean specifically, Peter?

DOOCY: Well, there were the Chinese spy balloons, and now there are these Chinese spy cranes — *The Wall Street Journal* is comparing them to Trojan horses — in use at 80 percent of U.S. ports.

JEAN-PIERRE: So, let me first say that what the American people could be assured of is that this President is going to protect them and making sure that we put our national security first when it comes to — when it comes to anything that they feel could be — could threaten that and so — and the President has shown that. He's shown that over and over again. So, on — on the

cranes, don't have to — don't have any comment on that specific reporting. I would refer you to the Department of Transportation and the Department of Defense who have been tasked with Congress to study this particular issue. The National Security Council, in close coordination with the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Defense, Coast Guard, and members of the intelligence committee, have been actively working to address potential cyber vulnerabilities across the marine transportation system. This includes enhanced coordination across the federal government and engagement with key stakeholders in the maritime industry and just last month, the administration issued a worldwide maritime port vulnerabilities advisory underscoring the potential threats posed by foreign manufacturer of port equipment. So, again, this is something that the President takes very seriously. And we'll always take action to make sure we protect our national security.

DOOCY: And if this is a Department of Transportation lead, does Secretary Buttigieg have experience with —

JEAN-PIERRE: It's — it's — it's not just —

DOOCY: — Chinese espionage?

JEAN-PIERRE: It's not just the Department of Transportation. It's also Department of Defense.

DOOCY: Okay.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Thanks, Karine. Has the President had a chance to look at the Parents Bill of Rights bill that's being proposed by some House Republicans?

JEAN-PIERRE: I can't speak to what the President has reviewed or not reviewed at this time. Okay. [TO GRIM] Go ahead.

RYAN GRIM: So, last week, the Department of Justice acknowledged that in 2020 they'd used — the FBI had used 702 authorities to illegally spy on a member of Congress. Can you tell us who that member of Congress was? Has that member of Congress been briefed by the White House?

JEAN-PIERRE: I would refer you to the Department of Justice. Just not going to speak to that from here.

(...)

2:30:46 p.m.

1 minute and 8 seconds

BLAKE BURMAN: A month ago, on February 6th, I had asked you about TikTok, whether it was a national security risk and you had noted that there was an ongoing CFIUS review at the time. Just last week, there was a conversation about this as well and you said that it is a, quote —

or you talked about the, “potential national security risk.” So, is CFIUS — just, if you could clarify: Does the White House believe that TikTok is a potential national security risk, or is that what CFIUS, when that process works itself through, will determine?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, there’s a CFIUS investigation, so we try not to dive in too much because there is a CFIUS process that’s going — going — that’s ongoing, and we want to let that process go forward, but we have been very clear on our concerns like — with apps like TikTok. I’ve said that before. You’ve heard us say that from here. We know certain countries, including China, seek to leverage digital — digital technologies and Americans’ data in ways that can present national security risks and so that has — that has been our statement. That is what we have said for the past several months. But, again, it’s under — it’s under CFIUS’s — the committee is moving forward on looking into this, so we try not to get too far ahead of that.

(...)

2:36:11 p.m.
26 seconds

CHRISTIAN DATOC: There was a report last week about how Ford’s F-150 Lightning — their electric EV truck — is contributing to high pollution and deforestation in the Amazon. Does President Biden regret endorsing that truck back in 2021? And has anyone talked to Ford about how they should source aluminum for the frame from a different mine?

JEAN-PIERRE: No, does — do not regret that and don’t have any conversation to read out at this time.

(...)

2:37:55 p.m.
5 minutes

KIMBERLY HALKETT: I wanted to ask you about the protests over the weekend near Atlanta. Dozens of people were arrested protesting the so-called Cop City. Is the President aware of this? And is the White House worried about this escalating?

JEAN-PIERRE: What — say that again. What was the protest?

HALKETT: The protest was — it’s a facility, a training facility that’s being constructed for police officers. It’s called Cop City. It’s near a Black residential area. The protesters are concerned that this is going to lead to escalation of police militarization. There have been 23 that have been charged with domestic terrorism, but there were 35 people arrested. So the concern is, is the Wh — is the President aware of this? Is the White House concerned about this escalating? And then, I also had a follow-up. The Georgia attorney general has said that some of the people that have been arrested were from outside of the United States — from Canada, from France, from an international group — that were here just to undermine American public safety, so is the

White House tracking this? And how worried is the White House about this?

JEAN-PIERRE: No, we have not been — I've not heard any discussions about this protest over the weekend, so I would have to go back to the team and see where we are, where we're standing, and — and our response on that. Just — this is the first time I'm hearing on — about this protest over the weekend, so I just would have to come back to you on that. [TO NELSON] All right, Steven.

STEVEN NELSON: Okay, thank you, Karine. A Saudi Arabia human rights question for you first, and then I'd like to ask you about Russia sanctions. Regarding Saudi Arabia, there's a 72-year-old U.S. citizen named Saad Almadi who is in prison for a series of tweets he wrote when he was in Florida. He was given a 16-year sentence in October, and you commented on the case then. The Saudi appeal system decided to review the case and last month decided he needed an extra three years in prison, despite the White House condemning the sent- — the original sentence. His son told me it was “a middle finger to President Biden” and that he wants his father to be declared wrongfully detained. There's been some bipartisan reaction to this. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar told me that it's, quote, “atrocious and unbecoming for the Biden administration not to declare him wrongfully detained.” So, does President Biden have a reaction to the new sentence? And is there reaction to (inaudible)?

JEAN-PIERRE: So, we have been in — monitoring the case of Mr. Saad Ibrahim Almadi. As you know — I think I've mentioned this before; not just myself, but my National Security Council colleagues as well — since we learned of his arrest and have been in regular contact with his family, we have brought up and raised our concerns regarding this case at senior levels at the Saudi government. So, that is something that we've been very vocal about and brought up, again, to government officials and exercising our belief, exercising the freedom of expression, including through social media, should never be criminalized. I'm not going to get into the process here in — and how we move forward. That's something that the State Department, as it relates to these types of issues — but we've made ourselves very clear, and we made ourselves clear as well to the Saudi government.

NELSON: So it's — it is fair to say President Biden is upset about the new sentence?

JEAN-PIERRE: What I can say is that we have raised our concerns and I've spoken to — spoken to this particular individual a couple of times from this podium.

NELSON: Thank you. And regarding Russia's sanctions, I'm wondering if you could share the reason why President Biden hasn't sanctioned the Russian billionaires Vladimir Yevtushenkov and Yelena Baturina. How — how is he handling the conflict of interest there, given his son was a business associate of these two people? And can you confirm that, as sitting Vice President, he dined with Baturina in Georgetown?

JEAN-PIERRE: I'm just not speaking to anything that's related to his son from here. If you want to have — if you want to ask a question about Hunter Biden specifically, I would refer you to his family and as it relates to any sanctions, I'm not speaking to individual — individual persons that

are from Russia. Okay. [TO UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER] Go ahead.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER #2: Thank you. I want to ask you about COVID origins. I understand the administration is trying to get to the bottom of this. I just want to ask you if the final conclusion might look like. Is it going to be — look like each institution that is looking into and investigating come up with their own conclusions? Or will the administration will have one final perspective on the origins?

JEAN-PIERRE: As you know, the intelligence community is looking into this. This is something that the President has asked since the — since a few months into his administration and so, they're redoubling down their efforts. They're looking into the origins of COVID. Clearly, it's important. We believe, he believes it's important to get to the bottom of this, especially as we look ahead to the future and trying to prevent any future pandemics. I'm just not going to get ahead of the intelligence community. They're working through this and I'll just leave it there.