

White House press briefing [via Newsmax]

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1:51:54 p.m.

10 minutes and 11 seconds

CAROLINE DOWNEY: On the criticism that immigration enforcement has become arbitrary or not particularly prioritizing, Democrats have been circulating this statistic that only 14 percent of illegal aliens arrested under this administration are violent criminals. But we know that in deep blue cities with progressive district attorneys, it's common to plead down serious violent crimes into less serious offenses, which could be distorting those numbers. So, given that backdrop, does the administration still stand by the messaging that you're targeting the worst of the worst? And does this prevailing narrative tell the whole story?

KAROLINE LEAVITT: Well, thank you for bringing this up, Caroline. I've seen this CBS report floating around. There's a lot of liberal talking heads and pundits and Democrat elected politicians who think that this single story and these statistics and the way they are painted is somehow a shot at this administration. It is not. And let me correct the record. Number one, the Trump administration has been clear from day one that any illegal alien present in this country is subject to deportation. However, the priority, of course, is going after the convicted criminals. The worst of the worst, the murderers, the pedophiles, the rapists in this country. Interestingly, in the CBS story, what the Democrat talking heads on television are not saying is this line nearly 60 percent of ICE arrestees over the past year had criminal charges or convictions. And among that population, the majority of the criminal charges or convictions are for nonviolent crimes. Oh, well, what are non-violent crimes, you ask? This has coincided with what DHS has been saying all along, that approximately 70 percent of illegal aliens arrested under President Trump have pending criminal charges and or prior convictions, and these so-called non-violent crimes, drug trafficking, distribution of child porn, burglary, burglary, fraud, DUI, embezzlement, solicitation of a minor in human smuggling, just to name a few. So, just because a crime is not violent in nature doesn't mean that crime is victimless. And I can guarantee every single person who is out there on television right now pointing to these statistics that were taken out of context by CBS News, would not want an illegal alien convicted of the distribution of child porn or fraud or DUI living in your community. So, the Trump administration will continue our focus on deporting all illegal aliens present in our country, with a focus on the worst of the worst criminals. Thank you for being here. [TO GUTIERREZ] Gabe.

GABE GUTIERREZ: Thank you. And thank you for the update on our colleague Savannah Guthrie's mother. Is there anything more you can share? You said the President was reviewing that surveillance footage. What was his initial reaction when seeing those disturbing images? And does he believe that that suspect acted alone?

LEAVITT: I haven't talked to him specifically about the second point on whether he, the suspect, acted alone or not. So I don't want to weigh in on the President's thinking on that. His initial reaction, of course, as all Americans is, is just pure disgust. And again, it's heartbreaking to see now this footage really bring to life a story we've all been reading about. And again, we're just praying for the safety of — of Nancy Guthrie and that she will return home soon. And the

President directed me to — to please encourage all Americans with any information to call the FBI. And we hope that this case will come to a positive resolution as soon as possible.

GUTIERREZ: We, of course, have a lot to talk about. On a completely separate topic, I was hoping you could clarify something that's come up over the last several days — again, regarding a separate topic — in the Epstein files. According to newly released files, President had a conversation with the Palm Beach police chief in early 2000, according to the police chief in 2019. The President has gone on record before. He's told reporters that he said that Jeffrey Epstein — that he had no idea about Jeffrey Epstein's crimes. During this conversation with the police chief, however, he did say, according to this recounting of it, that thank goodness you're stopping him. He also called Ghislaine Maxwell evil. That's my two questions — are — did that conversation with the Palm Beach police chief happen? And can you explain the discrepancy?

LEAVITT: What I will say is that the President has always remained consistent and that he kicked Jeffrey Epstein out of his club at Mar-a-Lago because, frankly, Jeffrey Epstein was a creep. And unlike many other people who are named in these files, President Trump cut off his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein and was honest and transparent about that for years and years. And so, I think what the President has said all along has always remained true. And the release of more than three million documents related to Jeffrey Epstein and his heinous, disgusting crimes just shows the level of transparency that this president and administration has committed to and bringing these files to light. [TO REESE] Reagan.

GUTIERREZ: But did he call the chief in 2006?

LEAVITT: Thanks, Karoline.

GUTIERREZ: Did he call the chief?

LEAVITT: Look, it was a phone call that may or may not have happened in 2006. I don't know the answer to that question. What I'm telling you is that what President Trump has always said is that he kicked Jeffrey Epstein out of his Mar-a-Lago club because Jeffrey Epstein was a creep, and that remains true. And this call, if it did happen, corroborates exactly what President Trump has said from the beginning. And I'm sure many of you, when you read that — that alleged FBI report probably thought to yourself, wow, this really cracks our narrative that we've been trying to push about this President for many years. So, we're moving on from that. [TO REESE] Reagan.

REESE: Thanks, Karoline. I want to ask you about the SAVE Act. NBC reported that there's some hesitation among House Republicans on adding absentee ballot restrictions into the SAVE Act. Can you explain what the hesitation is among House Republicans, and also just provide a status of negotiations with Congress on the legislation?

LEAVITT: Sure. I can't speak for House Republicans, Reagan. I can obviously speak for the President, who is possibly, quite possibly the strongest supporter of the SAVE America Act,

which, as you know, would require proof of citizenship to register to vote. It would require proof of identification, a photo identification before casting a ballot, and it would also ensure that there are exceptions made. I think that's what you're alluding to with these conversations with House Republicans for reasonable requests, of course, for our military, for individuals who are disabled and cannot make it to the polls. Those are reasonable, common sense things that I believe House Republicans are discussing amongst themselves. But as for the President, he's been very clear he wants House Republicans and Democrats, if they were politically wise to pass this legislation for the Senate to pass it, to send it to the President's desk so it can be signed into law.

REESE: Follow up. I'm wondering when the last time the President spoke to Leader Thune was and if he discussed using the standing filibuster to pass the legislation?

LEAVITT: The President has given his position on the standing filibuster. As for his most recent conversation with — with Leader Thune, frankly, I'm not sure. I do know. They speak very frequently. The President's in constant communication with both Leader Thune and the House Speaker. Mike Johnson. [TO NELSON] Stephen, I see we switched up our seating chart. Your direct line of sight now. Congratulations.

STEVEN NELSON: Thank you to the White House Correspondents Association, for recognizing the *New York Post*'s reach. I've got two questions for you. One about the Guthrie case and then another about infrastructure. On the Guthrie case, does President Trump have a warning to the culprits here about what would happen to them, what consequences they would face if they do not release Nancy Guthrie unharmed?

LEAVITT: I think anyone who was involved in this depraved crime, this abduction, of course, we want to be seen held to the fullest extent of the law possible.

NELSON: And on infrastructure, can you explain why President Trump asked Chuck Schumer to help him rename Penn Station and Dulles Airport after himself? Why is he interested in having his name on those two buildings? And why are the Gateway Tunnel funds the proper point of pressure to get that to happen?

LEAVITT: To your first question about the renaming, why not? It was something the President floated in his conversation with — with Chuck Schumer. As for the funding, the President has addressed that separately himself. [TO KEMP] Danny.

DANNY KEMP: Thanks, Karoline. Today, the — the Vice President's account posted and then deleted a tweet about the Armenian genocide. And then last week, President Trump's Truth social account posted and then deleted a racist video about the Obamas and the white House again blamed that on staffer. I wanted to ask you, does the White House have a social media problem at the moment? Do you have an auto posting problem that's leading to these mistakes?

LEAVITT: No. As for the Armenian tweet that you're referring to, I would just refer you back to the White House's message that was issued on Armenian Remembrance Day. And there's been no change of policy at this time. [TO OLOHAN] Mary.

MARY MARGARET OLOHAN: Thanks, Karoline. When the President goes to Beijing in the spring, does he have plans to try and advocate on behalf of Jimmy Lai, who's just sentenced to 20 years yesterday?

LEAVITT: This is something I've heard the President advocate for, both publicly and privately. I had the honor of being in that meeting with President Trump and President Xi in South Korea that took place, and this was brought up by the President himself. It is important to him, and he looks forward to visiting China in April. [TO MITCHELL] Go ahead.

ELIZABETH MITCHELL: Thanks, Karoline. So, some Republican lawmakers from Nebraska have said they're worried that the Argentinian beef executive order will sideline some American ranchers. How will Trump administration make sure prices go down for consumers without harming those ranchers?

LEAVITT: Of course. Well, both things can happen at the same time. That's the President's belief. He wants to see prices come down. In fact, I just overheard him on the phone with Secretary Rollins. They were talking about something different, but he's always saying, we got to make sure that prices continue to come down. As you know, Secretary Rollins successfully did that with respect to egg prices. Cattle beef prices are coming down slightly, and the President wants to see that continue. He believes that a — a — a minor import to the country with cattle might be a short term solution with respect to bringing down prices. But of course, protecting our American cattle and rancher industry is a priority for the President, and he's in touch with those stakeholders. We've had them here at the White House a few times in recent months to discuss this issue directly.

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2:03:26 p.m.
1 minute and 19 seconds

PHILIP WEGMANN: DHS Secretary Kristi Noem just posted a photo of herself signing the last contract of steel to build the border wall between Laredo, Del Rio and Big Bend, Texas among [sic] reports that construction had stalled. Is the President satisfied with the pace of construction?

LEAVITT: The President wants to make sure that the full border wall is built as quickly as possible. Of course, I know this is a priority for him dating back to 2016. And so absolutely, he wants to ensure that the border wall is built. Under — under budget and ahead of schedule is how President Trump likes to view building projects and that includes the border wall.

WEGMANN: Is he satisfied with the pace of construction thus far?

LEAVITT: I think the President is never satisfied. He always wants to ensure that things are moving along as quickly as possible, but I know Secretary Noem is on it and she's doing a great job. [TO SPIERING] Yeah, sure. Go ahead, Charlie.

CHARLIE SPIERING: Thank you. On the Savannah — on the Nancy Guthrie case, is the President satisfied with the federal and local investigation so far? And has there been any more contact from the white House or the President with the family?

LEAVITT: I don't think anybody will be satisfied until this case is brought to a close and until Nancy Guthrie is returned home safely with her loved ones.

SPIERING: What about the White House contacts? Has the President contacted the family since?

LEAVITT: Not since that initial phone call.

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2:06:39 p.m.

1 minute and 30 seconds

LEAVITT: I will just point out that there are a lot of wins in the news this week that people in this room have not asked about, because you continue to ask questions about the same subject. So, let me point them out for you again. On Friday, the Dow shattered 50,000 for the first time ever. This week, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons came out in opposition to gender mutilation surgeries for children. They are the first major medical group to do so. A federal appeals court today — nobody asked about that — just upheld the Trump administration's policy of detaining illegal aliens, validating the strong measures that have driven illegal crossings to historic lows, and sent a crystal clear message that under President Trump, if you enter the country illegally, you will be detained and removed the murder rate — again, not a single question about this — has plunged to a 125-year low as crime falls across the board thanks to President Trump's crime crackdown. We also saw this week national median rents have fallen to a four year low following six consecutive monthly declines, and mortgage affordability has surged to a four-year high. Home ownership is the core foundation principle of the American dream, and I will repeat that mortgage affordability this week surged to a four year high. But not a single mention of that in this Briefing Room today. And again, this came out last Friday, but for an unprecedented ninth straight month, there were zero illegal border crossings at the southern border. So we're going to get back to business. The president is very busy today, and you will see him all tomorrow at the event in the East Room touting his administration's energy policy. Thank you.