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PRESS BRIEFING  
BY PRESS SECRETARY JOSH EARNEST  
AND DEPUTY NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR BEN RHODES

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

12:54 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see a good crowd here today. I have joining me at the briefing the Deputy National Security Advisor, Ben Rhodes. As many of you know and have covered, Ben was instrumental in implementing the President's vision for advancing our Cuba policy, and we made a pretty historic announcement today that, next month, President Obama and the First Lady will be traveling to Cuba.

And so Ben is here to talk a little about what we hope to accomplish over the course of that trip. And then he'll stay and take as many questions as you all have about that trip.

I should also point out that today is also the day that pitchers and catchers are reporting to spring training in Arizona. (Laughter.) So I know there are a lot of Royals fans that have Opening Day circled on their calendar because they're squaring off against Ben Rhodes's New York Mets in Kansas City. So a nice World Series rematch there.

Ben, go you want to do a little topper, and then we'll take questions?

MR. RHODES: Josh, I'd point out that Yoenis Cespedes will be reporting to the Mets spring training. (Laughter.) Keeping with the Cuban theme here.

MR. EARNEST: Kendrys Morales --

MR. RHODES: So I'll just make a few opening comments. You saw the announcement that the President will be going to Cuba with the First Lady on March 21st and 22nd. This is the first President to visit Cuba since Calvin Coolidge. As we've noted, Calvin Coolidge traveled there on a battleship, so the optic will be quite different from the get-go here.

But I just wanted to step back and put this in a little bit of context. Clearly, this has been a sea change in terms of U.S. policy towards Cuba and U.S.-Cuban relations over the last year and a half since President Obama and President Castro announced on December 17th, 2014 that we would have a process of normalizing relations.

So, to date, since we've made that announcement, there have been a number of steps forward. First of all, we intensively negotiated over several months the formal reestablishment of diplomatic relations, which culminated in Secretary Kerry traveling to Havana and raising the flag over our embassy. This embassy allows us to much more actively engage the Cuban people and the Cuban government to facilitate travel to Cuba from many different delegations from the United States, and to pursue bilateral cooperation on a number of issues. And we've had an ongoing process of bilateral dialogues with the Cubans.

What we've seen is enormous interest from the Cuban people in this opening and from people in the United States. And we've had businesses travel down to Cuba, state and local governments, academic exchanges, and a significant increase in American travel to Cuba. There's been a 54 percent increase in the number of Americans visiting Cuba since that announcement.

I think we've also seen that the opening to Cuba holds out real promise to improve the lives of the Cuban people. And this is really at the core of our policy. Our judgment was that the embargo that was in place was doing nothing to achieve its stated aims of bringing about a political change in Cuba. In fact, the Castro government under Fidel, and then Raul Castro, had been in place for many decades. And it was also hurting the Cuban people because they were cut off from the United States; they were cut off, in many ways, from the world. And they were not benefitting from U.S. policy. And we're seeking to reverse that dynamic.

We have made a number of regulatory changes to increase travel and commerce to Cuba. Those have had some benefits. The significant increases in remittances that go to Cuba, that directly benefits Cuban families. The increased travel benefits the nascent Cuban private sector -- the cuentapropistas, shop owners, restaurant owners. U.S. companies like Airbnb have gotten into Cuba. This is their fastest-growing market. That means travelers staying directly in Cuban homes, benefitting the Cuban people. And, increasingly, as businesses have gone down and had discussions with the Cuban government, we're finding out ways that they can establish a presence. And just earlier this week, Cleber announced it's going to start to operate the first U.S.-owned factory in Cuba that will provide tractors for small farmers.

These are just some indications of the fact that increased trade, commerce and travel is going to benefit U.S. companies that are very interested in operating in Cuba, but ultimately it's going to directly benefit the Cuban people. Now, we have the potential to significantly increase those travel links with the announcement that was made earlier this week that we will be restoring direct flights between the United States and Cuba for the first time in several decades. That will allow up to 110 flights to Cuba every day. That's more people-to-people engagement and more opening between our two countries.

We've raised a number of issues repeatedly with the Cuban government in terms of steps that we think that they could take to improve conditions on the island, both economically and human rights. We have seen some progress with respect to Internet access, in terms of additional wireless Internet hotspots, and efforts to link neighborhoods to broadband connections. But we'd like to see more in that space, and so we continue to indicate to the Cuban government that

Internet connectivity is essential to the ability to the Cuban people to connect with the global economy. It also advances their ability to access information.

We've also been supportive of the reforms that have created more space for a private sector within Cuba, self-employed Cubans -- again, cuentapropistas. And this is an area where we believe we can continue to increase our economic engagement and see reforms within Cuba that can empower the Cuban people.

At the same time, we, of course, have significant differences with Cuba on issues related to human rights, which we continue to raise directly with them. They took some steps in releasing political prisoners and hosting the head of the International Community of the Red Cross last year. But we'd like, of course, to see more respect for the basic fundamental rights of the Cuban people -- freedom of assembly, freedom of speech.

So as we considered whether to go this year to Cuba, the President's judgment was that, number one, going to Cuba was an important step forward in signaling this new beginning between our two countries and peoples, and also, importantly, that going to Cuba could help enlarge this space that benefits the Cuban people and increases ties between our countries; and that, in fact, going earlier this year would allow us to try to get more done, both around his visit and in the days and months that follow.

So what we'll be focusing on with respect to the visit is how can we take the changes we've made in our policies and regulations, and try and connect them to changes and reforms that the Cubans are making so that there's more commercial activity, so that there's more of an opening for U.S. businesses, but importantly, for Cubans to benefit from that activity and to be able to access more resources and achieve a better life.

How can we expand our people-to-people ties so that there's increased travel but also increased cooperation in a number of areas? And we've had good cooperation, for instance, on discussions on issues related to medical cooperation, cancer vaccines. There are other areas where we can expand our people-to-people engagement.

How are we supporting and encouraging efforts around, as I said, increased access to the Internet and telecommunications in Cuba? How is Cuba investing in this nascent private sector there? And, of course, how are we engaging not just the Cuban government, but the Cuban people and Cuban civil society, and speaking out for the human rights that we support around the world? And certainly, on this trip, the President will have the opportunity to engage not just the Cuban government, but Cuban civil society, Cuban entrepreneurs, Cubans from different walks of life.

So it's an opportunity, this trip. It's historic in nature. But also, we see it as a means of pushing forward this normalization process, trying to achieve a greater opening between the United States and Cuba commercially, but also supporting and advancing the values that we

care about, all of which, taken together, we believe will be enormously beneficial to the Cuban people and, frankly, to U.S. interests.

Following the trip to Cuba, I'd just note the President will be traveling to Argentina. The Cuba opening also has to be seen as part of an effort by the United States to significantly increase our engagement in the hemisphere. This is a region that had long rejected our Cuba policy. Our Cuba policy had, in fact, isolated the United States more than it had isolated Cuba in the hemisphere. Argentina is a country that, until recently, had a President who had, I'll say, problematic relations with the United States. The new President there has indicated his interest in beginning and restoring and renewing U.S.-Argentina relations. That will be the business of that trip. So we'll be able to discuss how to increase our diplomatic, economic and other forms of cooperation.

I'll just close by saying that we've been engaging the Cuban government, leading up to today, but we've also been engaging the Cuban American community that follows these issues very closely, and we'll continue to do so. We've been engaging with our business community, with human rights advocates. And we will continue to do so between now and the trip. And we believe that, at the end of the day, part of what makes the Cuba issue so unique is the interest and passion that Cuban Americans feel about it. We want to make sure that we're hearing their voices as we prepare for what will be a truly historic occasion.

So I'll stop there and take questions.

Q Will the President meet with dissidents when he's in Cuba? And would you negotiate that with the Cuban government?

MR. RHODES: Yes, he'll be meeting with dissidents, with members of civil society, including those who certainly oppose the Cuban government's policies. Just as when he went to Panama for the Summit of the Americas and met with Raul Castro, he also met with critics of the Cuban government in his civil society roundtable.

I think the point that we make to the Cuban government is that we engage civil society in countries around the world; that this is part of how the President does business. When he travels in different regions, he meets with a broad range of actors. And Cuba is no different.

So we may have a complex history, but the fact that we meet with and support people who are seeking to have their voices heard is part of what the United States does. And it doesn't mean that we're seeking to overthrow the Cuban government, it means that we're seeking to support basic universal values that we would care about in any country.

Q Do you expect him to see Fidel Castro while he's there? And do you expect this to be tied in any way to the Colombia peace talks?

MR. RHODES: So I wouldn't expect him to meet with Fidel Castro. Raul Castro is the President of Cuba. He'll certainly meet with President Castro.

With respect to the Colombian peace process, we have had good cooperation from Cuba on that issue. The Cubans have hosted the talks between the Colombian government and the FARC. We have had a representative, Bernie Aronson, who's attended a number of those discussions. So we and the Cubans together have worked to support the Colombians as they are pursuing a peace agreement.

So I think it will certainly be a subject that we discuss with the Cuban government that the President discusses with President Castro. At the end of the day, as the President told President Santos when he was here, we want the best deal for Colombia and the Colombian people, and that's what matters here. And we're willing to support that in any way we can.

Michelle.

Q Back when the opening, the start of normalization was announced, you guys mentioned some things that you expected the Cuban government to do, including the release of those prisoners. But ahead of a presidential trip to Cuba, were there any conditions or was there anything specific that you expected them to meet before this happened?

MR. RHODES: Yes, so I think that the basic question that we've explored, including in discussions with the Cubans, is whether we could use the trip to demonstrate that normalization is making progress. And, look, there are very different types of steps that each of us have to take. On the U.S. side, we've been methodically reviewing and, in some cases, changing our regulations to allow for more travel and commerce, and we will continue to do so in the weeks leading up to the trip.

With respect to the Cubans, what we would like to see is that they are taking the types of steps that allow those regulatory changes to take hold, that allow U.S. businesses to start to be able to operate in Cuba in ways that benefit the Cuban people, that allow for greater opportunity and access to information for the Cuban people.

So again, it's not as specific as the process we had with the Vatican in terms of the commitments that were announced on December 17th, but we do want there to be concrete progress that creates momentum for normalization, that demonstrates that normalization benefits the Cuban people and the American people, and that, frankly, can help make the changes that we're pursuing irreversible going forward. So there's a range of steps that the Cuban government could take to advance that process, and we'll be continuing to discuss that with them in the coming weeks.

Now, of course, on human rights, we regularly raise a whole host of issues around certain cases of prisoners, certain patterns of detention, and certain limitations on rights. And that will be, of course, a part of the discussion as well.

Yes, Margaret.

Q Since you announced this sort of normalization process, there's been a dramatic spike in the number of Cubans fleeing for the U.S. Are those numbers sustainable? And is that wet-foot, dry-foot policy of the U.S. something that the President is going to address?

Q So we've seen certainly an uptick in the number of Cubans, particularly Cubans traveling to Central America, as part of an effort to make their way to the United States. I think that's tied to perhaps expectations around our policy changes, but also greater freedom of movement for Cubans to travel from Cuba, and in some cases increased resources from some changes in our policies in other countries.

We are not planning to institute change with respect to wet-foot, dry-foot, but we do regularly look at our broader migration policies. We have a dialogue with the Cubans about those issues. We've worked very closely with our Central American partners as they've dealt with this influx of Cubans who are making their way to the United States. So we will be addressing the migration issue. But, again, our focus is on how can conditions improve in Cuba so that over time there's more economic opportunity and less of a need, frankly, for Cubans to have to pursue opportunity elsewhere.

Q And will you be bringing a delegation of congressional members with you, particularly since you need congressional help with the embargo and the big things that are still in the way?

MR. RHODES: We'll certainly want to incorporate members of Congress into the President's trip. There are a number of members who've been -- in both parties, I should add. This is an issue that does engender bipartisan support. We'll want to make sure that they're incorporated into what we're doing.

Q Are you satisfied with what the Cuban government has done on human rights? You sound disappointed.

MR. RHODES: Look, I don't think we will be satisfied -- I don't think we've been satisfied to date, and frankly, I think we're always going to have differences with this government because they have a different political system. At the same time, even with those kind of fundamental differences about how they organize their political system, we do think that there are steps that they can take that can improve conditions for the Cuban people and be a part of the evolution that is taking place on the island.

Thus far, we've seen these incremental steps with respect to Internet access and connectivity. We've seen some incremental increase in their engagement with the international community on these issues. I mentioned the head of the ICRC. But we'd like to see more.

Q Then why go now?

MR. RHODES: Because we believe that not going and isolating Cuba doesn't serve to advance those issues; that we will be in a better position to support human rights and to support a better life for the Cuban people by engaging them and raising these issues directly. And whether that's individual human rights cases that we're concerned about, whether that's the types of reforms that could broaden opportunity for the Cuban people, or whether that's just how do we directly engage Cuban civil society so that we are speaking out for the values that we support, again, in our judgment, engagement is a far more effective means of addressing those issues than isolation.

Q How concerned are you that all this is still very reversible, is it not?

MR. RHODES: So we want to make this policy change irreversible. And that means that we want the links between Cubans and Americans and the links between our businesses and the engagement between our countries to gain such momentum that there's an inevitability to the opening that's taking place and to the increase and activity between our countries.

To be very specific, we have an embassy opened in Cuba. That embassy allows us to travel more widely across the country, to engage the Cuban people. It wouldn't make a lot of sense to shut down an embassy that we have opened. You have significant increases in Americans traveling to Cuba. That will only get higher as we institute direct flights and other measures. It wouldn't make a lot of sense to tell a lot of Americans that their government says that they can't be allowed to travel to Cuba. We have a lot of interest from the business community and the Chamber of Commerce in supporting this opening. It wouldn't make a lot of sense to tell American businesses that they have to shutter projects that they've initiated in Cuba.

So our objective here is to do as much as we can with the time we have remaining to make this an irreversible policy. And frankly, I think the indications to date are that the American people support that.

Q Thanks, Ben. On Guantanamo Bay, how do you anticipate the conversation going about the property there? And secondarily, will there be a conversation about reparations? There are a number of Cuban Americans, in particular in south Florida, who lost potentially millions, if not billions, in personal property and assets. Will that be a part of the discussion as well?

MR. RHODES: So, on Guantanamo Bay, I'm sure that will be part of the discussion. I know that because I've had that discussion many times with my Cuban counterparts. They are insisting, obviously, that our presence there is not legitimate and that the facility be returned to them. But again, that is not on the table as a part of our discussions. We're focused on the range of issues that I discussed. But I'm sure that they will raise it. It continues to be an issue of concern to them.

With respect to the claims issue, that will certainly be on the agenda, as well. We have initiated under the State Department's leadership a dialogue with the Cubans on the issue of

claims. There are many claimants in the United States. We've been engaging many of them to try to determine the best way forward to see that, again, their concerns are satisfied.

So the Cubans also, frankly, have a substantial number of claims against us, as well. So there is a formal dialogue on claims, and I think it will be part of the agenda, as well.

Q Just so I can circle back quickly on the prison -- that is not going to be part of this? There is no way the government is going to give that back? There's not going to be a provision to give that back? That is not a part of this trip?

MR. RHODES: That's not a part of this trip, no.

Q Who determines which dissidents the President will meet with? Is that something that's negotiated? Do you already have -- is that something that's already been discussed?

MR. RHODES: We determine who we meet with in different countries, and we've certainly indicated to the Cubans that this is something the President will be doing on this trip, as he does on other trips.

Q I was hoping you could flesh out why now. You've talked previously about using the prospect of the President's trip as something of a carrot to get some of the concrete progress that you are hoping to see. Previously, you've said that you would go when there was enough progress. This morning you wrote on Medium that there has been -- you're going because there's insufficient progress. What's changed then?

MR. RHODES: Well, the fact is there is a little bit of both in the sense that -- what we want is to take all this opening and all this activity, and again, what we've seen over the last year, all this interest from businesses and state and local governments and the Cubans, and start to make it concrete, start to show outcomes and results.

You're beginning to see that take hold. Again, the direct flights agreement that was reached. You have some businesses beginning to be able to operate in Cuba. But we've also been having discussions with the Cubans about all these issues -- what more can we do so that that becomes the beginning of something and is not a trickle, but leads to a much more significant flow of activity.

And so we are confident that at this point it is both the case that we have made progress in normalization. We've dealt with a number of the important issues that had to be addressed at the beginning of that process. But now we want to see more of that connectivity come online in terms of commercial activity, in terms of many of the issues that we've been discussing with the Cuban government.

And frankly, given the choice between going in December when, frankly, it would just kind of be a vacation down to Cuba, or going now and trying to get some business done, we believe that



the time is right to go and lean in and try to get as much done on this trip as we can, and try to create as much momentum as we can to carry that forward throughout the year.

Q You don't think you've lost leverage?

MR. RHODES: No, I don't think so -- because again, first of all, this has been an ongoing process of discussions with the Cubans. And look, the President is also going to Cuba, and what he says and how that trip goes, as you all know from covering many trips, will depend on whether we are demonstrating progress.

So I think that the interest that both countries have in showing the progress on normalization and having this be a productive and successful visit I think continues to create the conditions where there's an incentive to get things done.

Yes, Mark.

Q Ben, will President Obama get a chance to address the Cuban people?

MR. RHODES: We have not developed a schedule, Mark. But I certainly think that he would want to look for some opportunity where he'll be able to speak to the Cuban people. So I don't want to suggest that we have a particular venue in mind. But again, I think he sees this as an opportunity where he's meeting the Cuban government, but he's also going to want to be engaging broadly with the Cuban people.

Q So you're looking to arrange something like that?

MR. RHODES: Something, yes. But again, it's still preliminary. We haven't really begun to flesh out the elements of a schedule yet.

Q And would you expect a reciprocal invitation to be extended to President Castro?

MR. RHODES: Well, we'll take this one visit at a time. We were able to meet President Castro in New York. That was at UNGA, though. But our focus now is on this visit.

Carol.

Q What specific policies are you hoping that the Cubans will announce either during or after this visit? And do you expect that you guys will do an executive order to lift the travel ban to the extent that you can? And can I ask you one on Turkey? The Turks are accusing U.S.-backed Syrian Kurds of the attack yesterday and calling on you guys to sever ties with the YPG. One, what is your response to that? And two, have you seen any evidence that their claims are true?

MR. RHODES: So, we have not determined responsibility. We obviously condemn in the strongest possible terms the attacks that took place in Turkey. We as a government have not settled upon an assignment of responsibility. But we'll be engaging with the Turks on this.

We've made clear to the Turks, in all of our engagements with the YPG and other Kurdish elements, that we make very clear to them the importance of our alliance with Turkey, and the importance of them not engaging in efforts that would undermine what should be our focus, which is the shared threat of ISIL.

So this is something, though, that we'll be talking directly to Turkey about. And we'll, of course, want to make sure that their security concerns as an ally are taken very seriously. And we'll want to make sure that the different actors that we're working with in Syria are focusing their attention where it should be, which on the counter-ISIL effort.

On your first Cuba questions, we have been steadily making regulatory changes since December 17th. We, at the end of January, announced our last tranche. But I would expect that that process will continue. So as we have additional regulatory changes to make, we will announce them. I don't want to preview what they are because that's an ongoing process that involves our efforts to ensure that not only are we acting consistent with the laws that are on the books, even if we would lift the embargo if we could, but that we're also focused on the right issues and areas.

Generally, what we've aimed to do is promote additional travel, commerce and economic activity in Cuba that, again, we believe benefits the Cuban people.

In terms of the steps the Cuban government can take, again, I don't want to be overly prescriptive from here. I would say that we talk to our business community. There are a number of things that Cuba could do that could make it easier for businesses to operate in Cuba and to operate in ways that benefit the Cuban people, to have a presence and to be able to engage Cuban workers. So again, there's actually a delegation here this week from Cuba, including the minister of trade, and we're discussing what are the practical steps that could be taken that, again, connect our regulatory changes with changes with their economic reform efforts.

There are also issues that we just regularly and consistently have raised. As I mentioned, Internet access has been one of those. Our support for their nascent private sector as a part of that economic reform agenda has been one. And then on human rights, I'm sure we'll have a number of specific issues that we'll be continuing to raise between now and the trip. We'll want to make clear that, in any case, we'll be focused on those issues because the American people care about them, the President cares about them.

So, again, I think between now and the trip and on the trip itself, we'll want to have steps taken by both the United States and Cuba that show how this is moving forward. And then there will be areas of bilateral cooperation that we're pursuing with Cuba where we'll be exploring what can get done around the trip.

Q Can I ask you one more? Have you guys talked to folks on the Hill, particularly your critics of this policy in advance of this trip?

MR. RHODES: We've been doing outreach to the Hill. I, myself, spoke to a number of members. I don't like to read those out. I definitely spoke to people of different viewpoints - people who are critical of what we're doing and people who are very supportive.

I will say that our judgment of what's taking place is you see increases in support for this policy on Capitol Hill; that if this is moving in a direction, it's moving in the direction of opening. And you see that with a number of people who are supporting lifting the travel ban in Congress. You see that in some initial efforts to lift the embargo. And you see it as something that crosses party lines. So you have Senator Leahy, on the one hand, but also Senator Flake who's very supportive of what we're doing. And so part of what I think the opportunity is here is you have bipartisan support for this policy that has been growing, and we want to push that forward.

Q I was wondering if you could talk a little bit -- I think critics have pointed to the spike in arrests of dissidents in Cuba as evidence that -- maybe they have Wi-Fi hotspots now, but kind of there's actually been a regression on human rights issues. So I'm wondering, do you guys see this as having been a net positive, or has this issue kind of overshadowed some of the gains that have been made, especially economically? And I wanted to ask really quickly if there had been progress made on returning some American fugitives that are now in Cuba.

And then on Argentina, if the United States sees, now that there is a new President or a new First Family for the first time in a long time, whether they can be an ally. And what kind of reception do you expect the President to get, especially considering the one that President Bush received when he went down there?

MR. RHODES: So human rights, first of all, we see everything that we're doing as being in the net positive for the lives and human rights of the Cuban people. I'd say a number of things. First of all, the economic issues ultimately are connected with the human rights issues because it gets at are the Cuban people going to benefit from having a better wellbeing; are they going to be empowered by greater access to information in the outside world.

But what we're also seeing is, the expectations of the Cuban people have gone up for the future. And that's a good thing. We want the Cuban people to be hopeful for the future. We want them to see that there are possibilities for them to be continuing to pursue a better life.

What we do see with the government is they have continued, in particular, a practice of the short-term detentions that are deeply concerning. The number of kind of long-term political prisoners along the lines of a number of the people who were released around December 17th, those types of detentions have gone down over the years and months. But what we see is this practice

of short-term detentions, harassment of people seeking to express basic rights. And that's an issue that we'll be raising directly with the Cuban government.

And the fact of the matter is, the Cuban people see this as a hopeful time, as a moment of opportunity, and it's important that the Cuban government recognize that those aspirations of their people are going to ultimately redound to the benefit of Cuba, and is not something to be put down.

So it will be on the agenda. But as we look at this, it's important to remember we tried it one way for 50 years -- we had an embargo, we had democracy funding, and you did not have the promotion of human rights on the island. We believe that this is a much better way to ultimately support the Cuban people and help them achieve a better life.

I'll give you just one example. The U.S. government had an embargo that limited the Cuban people's ability to access all kinds of goods at the same time that we were seeking to provide phones to some individual Cubans. Well, why not just try to allow all Cubans to have access to telecommunications? That, in our judgment, is a better way of advancing the things that we care about.

With respect to Argentina, we definitely anticipate that they'll be a closer partner on a range of issues. And, in fact, President Macri has been a strong voice for democracy and human rights in Latin America. He's signaled that he'd like to have closer economic and diplomatic cooperation with the United States. So we believe this is really a new beginning and a new era in our relationship with Argentina, and it mirrors the sentiment we see across the region, particularly since our Cuba opening, where there's much more receptivity to working with the United States.

So I'd imagine the reception will be very positive and it speaks to the goodwill throughout the hemisphere for President Obama.

Q You talked about the embargo and trying to get it lifted. The trade minister, earlier this week, prescribed things that he thinks the White House can do without the lifting of the embargo -- allowing the dollar to be used in a third country, and permitting U.S. import of rum and cigars. Of course, that might be something other people want --

MR. RHODES: I don't know if that's of interest to anybody here. (Laughter.)

Q Have those things been considered? Is it too soon? When will it be appropriate to consider those, especially if you continue to have the intransigence that you see in Congress to lift the embargo?

MR. RHODES: We've been considering those issues. And essentially what -- look, our judgment is that the embargo should be lifted. Short of that, we want to look at what are the areas where we can open up space that can promote the greatest travel and commercial activity

that ultimately benefits the Cuban people. So we are looking at those issues. And as I said to Carol, I'd expect that just as we've, kind of on a regular basis, been rolling out these different regulatory changes, that we'll be able to continue to do that in the coming weeks.

We think that's in our own interest. We think that helps advance the interest of Americans who want to travel to Cuba to engage the Cuban people, or American businesses that want to engage in Cuba, but also, frankly, in helping ordinary Cubans. So we'll be looking at that.

Q What would be the technical process of doing that?

MR. RHODES: So it's a very technical process, and essentially what it involves is different agencies of the U.S. government -- in particular as it relates to our sanctions policy, Treasury, where we very much would urge the confirmation of Adam Szubin, because he oversees this office and it's very important work -- Treasury reviewing our regulations and deciding what type of licenses to issue, what type of policy changes that can be made. And of course, everything that we do has to be reviewed by the Office of Legal Counsel to ensure that it's consistent with existing law.

Juliet.

Q One specific question and one broader one. Specifically, the First Lady doesn't go on that many foreign trips. Could you talk about what her participation means and whether the Obamas' daughters are going? Because it does say the First Family will meet President Macri. And more broadly, could you talk about how the administration's work with Burma on similar issues regarding democratization has helped inform what's happening with Cuba, where you see parallels and where you see differences?

MR. RHODES: The First Lady will be coming. I don't think we have an answer with respect to the children at this point. But the First Lady will definitely be accompanying the President.

I think she's taken a greater interest in issues related to girls' education internationally, as we've moved into the second term. And that's beyond the United States. So that's been the substantive focus that she's had. But I also think that she looks for the appropriate opportunities that have in part to do with their schedules aligning and also in part having to do with focusing on regions where I think she can help us advance our efforts.

And if you look at this type of trip, what the First Lady is, frankly, singularly good at is she's an enormously popular figure in different countries around the world, generates a lot of goodwill, and is a very able messenger for America and its values. And so going to a place like Cuba for the first time in this presidency, and the first time in many years, and having this kind of historic opening to the Cuban people, I think it's very important that she's there and that her voice is a part of the conversation, and that this region more generally of the Americas is one that she's interested in engaging. So we very much welcome her participation.

With respect to Burma, I do think there are some parallels and obviously a lot of differences. The core parallel is that we believe that the policy of not engaging Burma and Cuba was not working in either case. When we came into office, in Burma you'd had a military junta that had ruled with an iron fist for many years. You had Aung San Suu Kyi and many other people in prison. You had an economy that was closed off from the rest of the world. And we felt that simply using isolation and sanctions wasn't working to resolve that situation.

And so the President engaged, and we engaged broadly in Burma. So we engaged the government, but we also engaged civil society. We also engaged entrepreneurs. We also sought to promote economic ties to show the benefit that could come from more engagement with the international community. And we've seen that have an enormous effect in just a small number of years in Burma in opening up space there, in restoring their connections to the international community, and ultimately in a very successful election that took place late last year.

And I'd note, the President traveled to Burma twice, even when those questions were still very much in play. Our judgment is you don't wait until the story is over to show up and find out what happened; that that just puts us on the sidelines. And that by going to a place like Burma, he was able to advance the things that we care about. He was able to raise the hopes of the people there, and he was able to restore a relationship with a country that had been deeply estranged from the United States.

Cuba is very different in terms of size, in terms of the issues in play, in terms of politics. But I think the common thread is that we believe we can accomplish more through engagement. We believe that that engagement should be with the government, but also with the people of the country. And we believe that greater connectivity to the United States and the international community -- diplomatically, economically -- ultimately is going to be to the benefit of the Cuban people.

Q Just one follow-up. Would you say that it's harder, however, to do this in Cuba because you don't have this kind of mobilized opposition the way you had in Burma? Is that one of the things that makes, potentially, democratization a little more challenging in this instance?

MR. RHODES: Well, you had Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, and so there was an opposition figure of enormous renown, whereas in terms of the politics in Cuba, you have a one-party system, and then you have elements of opposition but it's not analogous to the longstanding prominence of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, including their running and winning an election in the late '80s. So the political circumstances are certainly different.

Julie.

Q Thanks. As you've outlined, the United States government has done a lot to sort of relax our restrictions and facilitate some more travel and commerce with Cuba. They haven't done nearly as much on their end, and, in fact, if I'm not mistaken, imports were down from the U.S.

last year, substantially. And as you mention, they haven't done anywhere near what we'd like to see them do on human rights. So can you just sort of address this criticism that you're getting from some of the opponents of this policy that this trip really rewards a regime that in many ways is still very much against American values and has not done what we wanted -- or what the President wanted to see happen when he first announced this a year and a half ago?

MR. RHODES: Look, first of all, we do have enormous restrictions still in place. We have an embargo in place. The Cubans themselves I think certainly continue to point at all of those restrictions as a constraint.

The fact of the matter is, we do believe that they could do some things, practical things, that could make it easier for business to operate in Cuba, to establish a presence in Cuba, to engage Cuban workers directly, to interact with their private sector.

So there's a range of issues that we've been discussing with them, and we've been able to find, in some cases, direct solutions. Airbnb can get in because they're directly engaging the Cuban people in that private sector. Cleber was able to find a means of establishing a factory that will benefit small farmers through the production of tractors. But we want to do much more of that. We want to see the Cubans take steps that allow for an opening for U.S. businesses, because ultimately we believe if our businesses are operating there and there's travel there, that that's going to be to the benefit of the people.

So again, a degree of progress. Some steps by the Cuban government on whether it's Internet access or specific arrangements with U.S. companies -- but not enough. And that leads to the core point, which is we believe the best way to try to push this forward is for the President to go; that essentially there's been a whole range of activity. Part of what business has been able to do and we've been able to do is kind of look under the hood of the Cuban regulations and the Cuban legal framework over the course of the last year. This is not a country that was in many ways designed or prepared to immediately engage the U.S. private sector. But I think we now have that understanding.

So I think that there is an opening for us to try to push a much greater degree of activity through. And again, the basic point we would make to critics is, the way to carry this policy forward is to keep leaning forward and to keep engaging more, and to keep pressing for greater activity, and to keep pressing for the Cubans to take steps in line with our steps that open up this space between our countries. And pulling back would only make it harder to achieve those things, but a presidential visit is a forcing mechanism, and I think it has the potential benefit of making our government and the Cuban government do as much as we can to make normalization move forward.

Q Will you make it clear to them that you want to see more changes on their end in exchange for this trip, in the run-up to or during the visit between the two Presidents?

MR. RHODES: Again, it's not a quid pro quo, but I think we would like the trip to show the concrete progress in normalization. And so it's an opportunity to demonstrate results. And frankly, insofar as the Cuban government wants to meet the expectations of their own people, which have been raised by this opening with the United States, and help improve the livelihoods of the Cuban people, that that engagement will serve those objectives. So we feel very strongly that engagement is a far preferable way of pursuing the things that America cares about than isolation.

MR. EARNEST: Olivier, you want to go ahead?

Q Sure. I got a couple for you, Ben. One, building on Carol's question -- and I think you alluded to this too -- any sign that Cuba is going to let American businesses directly hire from the Cuban labor pool?

MR. RHODES: So that's an issue -- that's an example of an issue that we have continually raised with them, and we would like there to be increasing opportunities for American businesses to hire Cubans, and foreign businesses to hire Cubans. And again, sometimes that's very easy. If it's Airbnb contracting with a Cuban home, that's one thing. But if it's a U.S. company hiring workers, those are the types of issues that we're discussing with them.

Q Any progress towards nominating an ambassador to Cuba?

MR. RHODES: That's something that we're still working through. Again, as some of you have heard me say, one of the reasons why we've been comfortable where we are is because we have an excellent Chief of Mission down there in Jeff DeLaurentis, who's of ambassador rank, worked closely with Susan Rice when she was at the U.N., and very well thought of in Cuba and in the United States. So we're comfortable with Jeff, but we're going to certainly be addressing the question of ambassador in the coming months.

Q And finally, when U.S.-Vietnam relations were normalized not quite 20 years ago, we heard a lot about how the previous approach had failed and how this was going to lead to greater openness. If you read the State Department report on human rights now for Vietnam, and it's just ghastly. It's egregious political abuses. What do you say to critics who say that by broadening the American engagement with Cuba, you are in effect putting American businesses in the service of an authoritarian regime that's going to use them for patronage for jobs, and it's going to prop itself up that way?

MR. RHODES: So, a few things. One, Vietnam, is not 90 miles from Florida. Two, I think that what American businesses can bring is greater opportunity for Cubans, greater connectivity to the United States and to the Cuban American community. Yes, if the Cuban economy improves, there will be more resources for the government, but there will be far more resources for the Cuban people. And if you look at the direction of the Cuban economy, a lot of the activity and a lot of the growth is in the cuentapropista sector and is in sectors that are engaging the rest of the world.



So we believe that American business is a net positive for the Cuban people, and that over time is going to bring about real benefits and improvements in their lives. And then there are certain sectors, obviously, where we can make a critical difference if you look at something like telecommunications.

The last thing I'd say is, part of what's different is we have a Cuban American community that is deeply invested in the future of Cuba, that cares deeply about the wellbeing and rights of the Cuban people. And I think what we've heard from many of them is, they see that Cuba is changing. There is an evolution taking place in Cuba. And we can either be a part of that or not. And if we keep ourselves out of it, and the Europeans and others are there helping to shape these changes taking place, that doesn't make a lot of sense. And that's why I think you have people like Carlos Gutierrez and other Cuban Americans who have come to this recognition that this is the moment for us to engage.

Because again, this is a government that was very comfortable for over five decades with the embargo in place and with the United States as essentially the source of legitimacy that they drew upon because of what we were trying to do to Cuba. We have seen Raul Castro begin to initiate a set of reforms in Cuba. They obviously aren't at the pace and scale that the United States would suggest with their economy, and that obviously doesn't get at the core political issues, but there is an evolution taking place. And we want to be a part of that evolution; we don't want to remove ourselves from it.

MR. EARNEST: Yes, ma'am, I'll give you the last one, in the back.

Q Thank you so much. So the embargo is a big obstacle. The Cubans want it lifted because it's a big hurdle to normalizing relations. Can you talk about how it's playing on the campaign trail? Senator Marco Rubio already said that these are unjustifiable concessions. So can you talk about whether or not the President is concerned, as others have said here today, that should a Republican win the White House, all of this is going to be reverted? And for Argentina, can you elaborate more on the timing of the trip? It's been two decades, since you've said before. What specific message is the President bringing to President Macri?

MR. RHODES: Well, I think the timing is, we wanted to go early in this administration, given that President Macri expressed his interest in renewing our relationship. So we want to sit down with him early in his term to chart the way forward, but also demonstrate that a cornerstone of the President's legacy is his approach to Latin America. And that involves the Cuba opening, that involves the Colombia peace process, but it also involves making sure that we're leaving strong relations with important countries like Argentina. And I think it's fitting to go on the back end of the Cuba trip for that reason as well.

With respect to your first question, first of all, again, the longstanding approach that those senators have supported has failed to produce any results. The Cuban government is still in place. It's not as if one more year of the embargo is going to bring transformational

change. This was a policy that we pursued for decades. We have an evidentiary basis to make an assessment that it's not working. But even beyond that, it wasn't helping the Cuban people. The Cuban people were suffering because of the embargo and because of these restrictive policies.

And the fact of the matter is, the thing that we should all agree on, and I think we do all agree on is we want a better life for the Cuban people. The Cuban people support these changes. Every indication is that they overwhelmingly support engagement with the United States. So why would we, in service of our objective of helping the Cuban people, ignore their voices and tell them that they're going to have to continue to live under the embargo, and tell them that they're going to have to live cut off from the rest of the world?

Let's listen to the Cuban people. They are invested in this. They see this as potentially leading to a better future. And moreover, I don't think that it's the right way to think about the changes we've made as not in our own interest. It's not a concession to have an embassy. That makes no sense. And an embassy allows us to better represent our interests, to better engage civil society, to better facilitate American commerce, to better speak up for the things we care about.

It's not a concession to allow Americans to travel to Cuba. Americans would very much like to travel to Cuba. So explaining to them that it's some concession to allow them to do something they want doesn't make a lot of sense either. And it's not a concession to allow American businesses to pursue opportunities that they're seeking in Cuba. That's in our own interest. That's the opposite of what a concession is.

So I think, again, to just conclude, on your question, the reason we think that this will be irreversible is because the logic of it is so clear. What we were doing was not working. This has a better chance of having a successful outcome for our interests. If people are traveling there, they're not going to want to be told that they can't travel there anymore. If businesses are starting to operate there, they're not going to want to be told to shut down. If we have an embassy there, it doesn't make much sense to shut it down. If we have new opportunities in the Americas because we've gotten rid of this anchor on our standing in the region, it doesn't make much sense to immediately anger and alienate the Western Hemisphere by reversing this policy.

And that's why we believe you see bipartisan members of Congress, but also a diverse group of stakeholders from the Chamber of Commerce to many, many, many people in the Cuban American community to faith communities, like the Catholic Church, all supporting this change in policy.

Q So is the President confident that either Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton will continue his legacy in this foreign policy arena?

MR. RHODES: Without commenting on certain candidates, I think that positions that they've taken clearly indicate support for our policy. And certainly, we believe that they understand that the old approach didn't work and that this is a better way of pursuing things.

MR. EARNEST: Thank you, Ben. I think, as you can tell, there's obviously a lot of passion here in the White House and in the administration for this change in policy, and so we're certainly looking forward to the trip next month. And hopefully, many of you will be able to join us for that trip.

So we've already been out here for an hour or so, so I'm happy to take a few more questions from you today to the extent that you have them on other topics.

Kevin, you want to go first?

Q One of your favorite topics.

MR. EARNEST: I have a lot of favorite topics.

Q So, asked about Donald Trump, Pope Francis says anyone who wants to build a border wall isn't Christian. So what does the White House make of the Pope's comments? And couldn't his comment be extended to millions of Americans as well?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the Pope has a spokesperson, and so you can certainly speak to that individual for a great understanding of what the Pope was saying. I think I can just say, as a general matter, that President Obama had the opportunity a couple of weeks ago to address the National Prayer Breakfast, where he talked about his own personal faith, his own personal Christian faith, informed his view of the values and priorities that he has chosen to champion in the White House.

And we've noted, I think on a number of occasions, we've had the opportunity to note that many of those values and priorities are not shared by Mr. Trump. So I will, however, though, extend to Mr. Trump the courtesy that he has not extended to the President, and not use this opportunity to call into question the kind of private personal conversations that he's having with his God.

Michelle.

Q So Ben talked about wanting to see concrete progress from Cuba leading up to this trip. And when I asked if there were any conditions or specific things that you wanted to see met before that, he was a little bit vague about it, saying that there was a range of issues that would continue to be discussed. So can you clarify, when he says "concrete steps," do you want to see certain things before the President sets foot there?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think what Ben was referring to is the fact that over the course of the last 14 or 15 months since the President announced his policy change, we've seen a number of concrete steps taken by the Cuban government to begin to normalize relations between our two countries. And as Ben said at the closing, the President announced this change in policy because

he believed that that change would be good for the Cuban people, but most importantly, it would be good for the U.S. and the American people and the American economy.

And that has manifested itself in a variety of ways -- whether it's the opening of an embassy, or the reestablishing of commercial flights, or even greater opportunities for American businesses inside of Cuba. And you can certainly anticipate that in the lead-up to this trip, during the trip, and certainly after, that we're going to continue to seek additional concrete steps that we believe advance the interests of the United States.

Q So there are some specific things that you want to see before he lands?

MR. EARNEST: Well, we would like to see continued progress in the direction of more normal relations between our two countries. And we believe that kind of progress would serve the interests not just of the Cuban people, but of the citizens of the United States.

Q And why doesn't he want to meet with Fidel Castro?

MR. EARNEST: President Obama is planning, I think as Ben noted, to meet with President Raul Castro -- he's the leader of the country. The President will have essentially a two-day visit to Cuba, and we're going to have some limited time.

So Ben noted that the details are still being worked out, but at this point I would not anticipate a meeting with the former President.

Q And why doesn't the President want to attend Scalia's funeral?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Michelle, as we discussed yesterday, the President and First Lady tomorrow will be traveling to the Supreme Court building to pay their respect to Justice Scalia, whose body will be lying in repose at the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court has organized this opportunity for the American public to travel to the Supreme Court on Friday and pay tribute to Justice Scalia. That's exactly what the President and First Lady will be doing tomorrow.

Like thousands of Americans -- not all of whom agree with Justice Scalia's view of the law -- they do agree that his service to the country and his service to an institution that is critical to our democracy warrants special attention. And the President will pay his respect to Justice Scalia and his service to the country by traveling to the Supreme Court tomorrow.

Q But why wouldn't he just go to the funeral to do that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, as I also noted yesterday, Vice President Biden, who is somebody that had his own personal relationship with Justice Scalia and his family, will be representing the administration at the funeral. Obviously, when the Vice President travels someplace, his security footprint is at least a little bit lighter. But given his personal relationship with the family, and given the President's desire to find a respectful way to pay tribute to Justice

Scalia's service to the country, we believe we have settled on an appropriate and respectful arrangement.

I think all of this should be viewed in the context of the comments that the President offered in person on Saturday evening. Just a few hours after receiving the news of Justice Scalia's death, the President addressed the news media and spent the bulk of his remarks paying tribute to Justice Scalia and his life. When asked about Justice Scalia at a news conference on Tuesday, the President once again took the opportunity to speak at length about his respect for Justice Scalia's intellect and commitment to the rule of law and his service to the country.

And so I think all of that taken together reflects the kind of approach that I think that most Americans are looking for from their leaders in Washington, D.C. There's so much rancor and politics and partisanship that we allow ourselves to get drawn into different corners to the extent that some people actually want to use the funeral of a Supreme Court justice as some sort of political cudgel. The President doesn't think that that's appropriate. And in fact, what the President thinks is appropriate is respectfully paying tribute to high-profile, patriotic American citizens even when you don't agree on all the issues. And that's what he's going to do.

Tara.

Q We talked earlier in the briefing about the progress with human rights, and I'm wondering about the -- there was a time when the State Department had submitted names of political prisoners. About 50 of them were released, and then some of them were rearrested. So I'm wondering how Ben Rhodes and the other officials are trying to make sure that people don't get rearrested, and what some of the unintended consequences might be of the President's visit.

MR. EARNEST: I would refer you to the State Department for an updated assessment about the condition of those conversations, because the truth is these are the kinds of conversations that are going on between U.S. diplomats and Cuban diplomats on essentially a daily basis at this point.

A regular part of our engagement with the Cuban people -- or with the Cuban government has been focused on ensuring that the Cuban people are empowered and have their human rights protected. And we believe that there's a lot more that the Cuban government needs to do to do that. And that is a consistent part of our engagement with them. I don't have an update on that at this point, but there's no misunderstanding about that.

And that is precisely why the President has sought to deepen the engagement between our two countries so that we can be more effective in advocating for the human rights of the Cuban people.