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Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney and Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, 2/25/2013

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:21 P.M. EST

MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thanks for being here. As you can see, I have a guest with me today for the daily briefing. Secretary Janet Napolitano is here to speak with you about the effects of sequester -- sequestration -- if it is allowed to take place, what those effects would be on her department.

As you heard from Secretary LaHood last week from this podium and Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, over the weekend, the impacts of sequester will be felt in a variety of ways -- in education and defense spending and transportation, air traffic control and the like, and certainly with regards to our homeland security.

So as we did with Secretary LaHood, I'd ask that you allow Secretary Napolitano to give a topper, some remarks at the top, then she'll take questions from you specific to her. If you could hold questions that you expect I'll be more appropriate to answer until we can allow the Secretary to leave and then I'll take those questions.

And with that, I turn it over to Secretary Napolitano.

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Thank you, Jay. And I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the impacts of sequestration on the operations of the Department of Homeland Security. As a primer, DHS has a very broad mission and we touch almost every aspect of the economy. We secure the aviation sector. We screen two million domestic air travelers a day. We protect our borders, our ports of entry. We facilitate legitimate travel and trade. Last year, our CBP officers processed more than 350 million people and processed over \$2.3 trillion in trade. We enforce the immigration laws. We partner with the private sector to protect critical infrastructure. We work with states and local communities to prepare for and respond to disasters of all types, like Hurricane Sandy, while supporting recovery and rebuilding.

Put simply, the automatic budget reduction mandated by sequestration would be disruptive and destructive to our nation's security and economy. It would negatively affect the mission readiness and capabilities of the men and women on our frontlines. It would undermine the significant progress we've made over the past 10 years to build the nation's preparedness and resiliency.

Perhaps most critically, it would have serious consequences to the flow of trade and travel at our nation's ports of entry. We will have to begin to furlough customs and border protection officers who staff those ports. At the major international airports, we will be limited in accepting new international flights, and average wait times to clear customs will increase by as much as 50 percent. And at our busiest airports like Newark and JFK, LAX and O'Hare, peak wait times, which can reach over two hours, could easily grow to four hours or more. Such delays will cause thousands of missed-passenger connections daily, with economic consequences at both the local and the national levels.

Reductions in overtime and hiring freezes at our Transportation Security officers will increase domestic passenger wait times at our busiest airports.

On the Southwest border, our biggest land ports could face waits of up to five hours, functionally closing these ports during core hours.

At our seaports, delays in container examinations would increase to up to five days, resulting in increased cost to



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the trade community and reduced availability of consumer goods and raw materials. Mid-sized and smaller ports would experience constrained hours of operation, affecting local cross-border communities.

At our cruise terminals, processing times could increase up to six hours causing passengers there, as well, to miss connecting flights, delayed trips, and increase their costs.

Sequestration will have serious consequences for our other missions, as well. As I said, CBP will have to furlough all of its employees, reduce overtime, and eliminate hiring to backfill positions, decreasing the number of hours our Border Patrol has to operate between the ports of entry by up to 5,000 Border Patrol agents.

The Coast Guard will reduce its presence in the Arctic by a third. We will curtail our air and surface operations by more than 25 percent, affecting management of the nation's waterways, as well as fisheries enforcement, drug interdiction and migrant interdiction.

Under sequestration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, also part of DHS, will be forced to reduce detention and removal and would not be able to maintain the 34,000 detention beds as required by Congress. It would also reduce our investigative activities in areas like human smuggling and commercial trade fraud.

In terms of our nation's disaster preparedness response and recovery efforts, it would reduce the Disaster Relief Fund by nearly \$1 billion, potentially affecting survivors recovering from Hurricane Sandy, the tornadoes in places like Tuscaloosa and Joplin, and other major disasters across the country.

And Homeland Security grant funding would be reduced to its lowest level in seven years, leading to potential layoffs of state and local emergency personnel across the country.

Let me close by saying this. Threats from terrorism and the need to respond and recover from natural disasters do not diminish because of budget cuts. Even in the current fiscal climate, we do not have the luxury of making significant reductions to our capabilities without significant impacts. We will work to continue to preserve our frontline priorities as best we can, but no amount of planning can mitigate the negative effects of sequestration.

So as we approach the 1st of March, I join with all of my other colleagues and with the governors, who we just heard outside, to ask the Congress to prevent sequestration in order to maintain the safety, security, and resiliency of the country.

Thank you.

MR. CARNEY: We'll take some questions for the Secretary.

Q Thank you. Secretary, you were talking about reduced hours of Border Patrol and reduced personnel at the nation's ports. Are you saying that the nation will be less secure at the border and at its ports as a result of the cuts?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: No. What we're going to have to do in terms of -- at the actual ports of entry, we're going to have to continue to check for contraband, for potential terrorists and the like, passengers as well as containers and other cargo. So the procedures will be the same, but we'll have fewer people able to do them, so the lines are going to get longer.

And between the ports, we are going to see a reduction in Border Patrol resources between the ports of entry. So it's really a very -- as I said last week at a hearing, it's almost an out-of-body experience. Last week I was testifying in the Congress before the Judiciary Committee on the need for immigration reform, and I was being asked, what are we doing to strengthen security at the border. And the very next day -- and we have put record amounts of resources into the border and our border security. The very next day, I was in the Appropriations Committee saying, but you're taking -- rolling it all back through sequestration. So it's really a --

Q But doesn't that mean the border is less secure if you're taking away hours of --

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Between the ports of entry, if you reduce the number of Border Patrol agents, I think you can say, yes, it does affect our ability to keep out illegal migrants and others trying to enter the country.

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Matt.

Q So you painted a dire picture and you mentioned that, as you were closing, the threat of terrorism doesn't wait for these kind of legislative roadblocks. So with all the diminished capability that you've described, how could the country not face a greater threat of suffering a terrorist attack under these circumstances in the months to come?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: We're going to do -- in this fiscal environment where we go to sequestration and possible shutdown and all the rest, always lacking a budget in regular order so that we can't effectively manage and plan, we will always put a priority on maintaining the safety of the American people. But what that is going to



require, and the impacts people are going to see -- and they will build over the next several weeks; you won't see them immediately like a shutdown, but it will accrue over the next few weeks -- is that lines, procedures, wait times are all going to get longer.

So, for example, if you're traveling by air, you're going to have to start getting to the airport earlier. And if you're trying to make a connecting flight, you're going to have to make your arrangements to give you greater time with which to do that. And if you're trying to bring cargo over a land port of entry, you're going to have to prepare for some very long lines.

Q But will there or will there not be a greater threat of a terrorist attack?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Well, there's always a threat. We're going to do everything we can to minimize that risk. But the sequester makes it awfully, awfully tough.

MR. CARNEY: Major.

Q How soon? You said we wouldn't see these effects right away. Is this a month, two months, three months? As you look at your budgets and how to put this through in the furlough process, need 30 days notification, and begin to cycle through, when do the American public actually feel what you're describing today?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: I think -- because it's not all about furloughs, it's also not being able to backfill over time and the like, and that starts immediately. But I think the public will really begin to feel it in the next few weeks. So it will be accruing over the next few weeks. And if you heard Secretary LaHood on Friday talking about the effect on the FAA, between the effect on the FAA and the effect on the TSA and the CBP, you really have a perfect storm in terms of the ability to move around the country.

Q And once it starts, do you think the effects will become exponential? I mean, they'll get worse and worse and worse?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Yes. It will be like a rolling ball. It will keep growing.

MR. CARNEY: Ed.

Q I've heard kind of different answers. So is the country going to be less safe after sequester, in your opinion, as somebody who's all over this issue for the last four years?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Look, I don't think we can maintain the same level of security at all places around the country with sequester as without sequester. We're going to do and are doing everything we can within the limits sequester gives us. But, as I was mentioning earlier, if you have 5,000 fewer Border Patrol hours -- or agents, you have 5,000 fewer Border Patrol agents. That has a real impact.

Q So you think there will be more illegal immigrants coming in, and there's a greater threat that terrorists could actually launch an attack?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: We've spent the last four years with the Congress putting record amounts of personnel down at the Southwest border. And I know that border really well. I mean, I was the U.S. Attorney in Arizona, the Attorney General, the Governor. I'm from New Mexico, originally. I've lived at the border and worked at the border my whole life. And that border now is as secure as it's been in the last two decades. It doesn't mean we don't have more to do. There's always more to do. But it's really been an unprecedented historic effort.

And now, because of a budget impasse, to have to begin to look at rolling back those agents and slowing hiring, and getting rid of overtime -- which we use a lot between the ports of entry -- that will have a real impact.

Q Secretary Napolitano, just a few moments ago, Governor Jindal from Louisiana was outside and he accused the President of trying to scare people. Can you just say right here for the record that you are not here just trying to scare people? That what you're saying has to happen is a necessity as a result of these cuts?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Yes, I'm not here to scare people. I'm here to inform, and also to let people begin to plan -- because they're going to see these impacts in their daily lives, and they're going to have to adjust and make their arrangements accordingly. And it won't be like a shutdown, where it's like turning off the light switch. But all I can say for folks is these are the effects that will accrue. Please don't yell at the customs officer or the TSO officer because the lines are long. The lines over the next few weeks are going to start to lengthen in some dramatic ways in parts of the country.

Q Because the Governor raised the question -- why can't you just cut 3 percent out of your budget without having these devastating impacts, whether it be on aviation over at the FAA or on security at Homeland Security. Why not?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Well, that's not the way sequester works. Sequester works account by account by

account, and you don't just take \$85 billion out of the economy over six months and not expect to see real impacts -- because there's only certain amounts of things we can cut. And we are personnel-heavy. We secure air, land, and sea borders. We're out in the maritime environment. We're making sure that disaster relief is flowing when we need it. So these effects are the kinds of things people are going to see and they need to be able to plan for. So my purpose here today is just to make very clear what these impacts are likely going to be unless and until Congress resolves the sequester.

MR. CARNEY: Peter, then Ari.

Q Secretary Napolitano, just to confirm -- the total number of dollars that will be taken from your department as a result of sequester is what?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: We'll give you the total number. It keeps changing.

Q Roughly?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: What would you say -- for all of DHS --

Q On sequester.

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: About 5 percent.

Q Okay.

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: The reason I'm fluctuating is because it was 6 percent last week and because of adjustments.

Q And then in real dollars that is roughly?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Billions.

Q Billions. Are there are other places -- aside from the way that sequester works, are there other places where you could cut back in the billions of dollars to find the cuts necessary to accomplish spending cuts that America, Republicans insist need?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Look, we began in 2009 going through our department, finding places where we could cut and avoid costs to streamline our efforts as much as we can. We actually had employees involved in this because they're the ones that oftentimes see best places where we can save and conserve. We've already identified over \$4 billion in those kinds of cuts. We are constantly working, looking to see how we can effectively, efficiently carry out all the different missions that are located under one umbrella, which is DHS. So yes, we have cut billions already.

Q And there are \$4 billion more, are you suggesting? Or there's --

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: We have already cut four [billion] but we're always looking for cuts and places where, for example, we can use technology as a force multiplier; places where we can perhaps use some of the leftover DOD equipment and put it into use for some of our missions.

But we continue to have -- as I said before, there are evolving terrorist threats. They don't go away. We're now dealing with the emerging cybersecurity threat. And when I say emerging, it really is here. But we have huge responsibilities under that now, which are somewhat new. And Mother Nature doesn't go away because of a budget cycle. So we have to deal with all of that simultaneously.

Q So, basically, we can see if there were more flexibility in a situation other than the sequester, there would be other places for you to cut, but just not under the present formula?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Under the present formula, it is just a big, broad brush that treats everything as if it's equivalent. There's no prioritization. There's no planning. There's no management associated with it. And as I said before, look, people don't want to be less safe. They don't want to be less secure. They want to think that we are securing the borders. They want to believe we're enforcing the immigration laws. They want to make sure that if there's a disaster, there could be a prompt and effective response. These are things people expect out of the government and for us to be able to provide.

So with those expectations and meeting them, where the sequester really hits then is, okay, how do we do that when you have a cut that says, well, you got to reduce your CBP hours; and you got to reduce overtime here; and you can't pay for this over there. That's what we're dealing with.

MR. CARNEY: Ari.

Q You talked about undoing some of the progress that's been made over the last decade. If sequester lasts a few weeks or a few months, are there long-term consequences that will remain? Or is all of the damage you're describing damage that can be very quickly undone if funding returns to where it's supposed to be?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: That's hard to say. It's hard to say because you have to actually see what is going to happen. All I can say is, look, we're doing our very best to minimize the impacts of sequester. But there's only so much I can do. I'm supposed to have 34,000 detention beds for immigration. How do I pay for those? We want to maintain 22,000-some odd Border Patrol agents. I got to be able to pay their salaries. We need to have overtime for our port officers because we already have a shortage of port officers.

I mean, I was Miami last week at the airport, and I heard a lot from the Mayor and others in that part of Florida about long wait times and from the cruise industry about their long wait times. And it's very hard to work on that and try to fix that when we are probably and likely to see in the Miami area an extension of wait times. So we'll do everything we can to minimize the impact, but there is only so much I can do.

We have to protect the safety of the American people the best we can. We're committed to doing that, but that means a lot of inconvenience at a minimum, plus some, I think, true economic loss, plus rolling back some of our progress at the Southwest border. These are all things we're going to see.

MR. CARNEY: Alexis.

Q Governor, I wanted to ask you, you were just mentioning that certain statute, certain law requires you to maintain certain levels -- detention beds being an example. If this particular -- the sequestration part of the law is encouraging or compels the Department to violate another law, is there anything that you can do through the courts or legally to supersede one statute for another?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Look, as the Secretary, I'm working with all of these components to do the best we can to secure the public, right? And now I'm put between the rock and the hard place, and I shouldn't have to go to court for Congress to figure out a budget for the Department of Homeland Security and for the federal government at large. We can do this in a balanced way. We can do this in a balanced way that allows us to rein in spending, make logical cuts and cost avoidances where possible, and close tax loopholes so that we get some revenue into the system. There is a balanced approach that's available.

But in the absence of the ability to come together and resolve that, what this means is it's going to fall very heavily -- and people will see it -- this is not -- sequester is a concept that's been floating around in the air, but it will unfortunately have real consequences people will see over time.

Q So there's no question you have to honor this? You have no legal leeway?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Not that I'm informed of.

MR. CARNEY: April, then Zach, then Jon.

Q Secretary Napolitano, without sequester we are an open society. But with the sequester, if it happens March 1st, how vulnerable would this nation be to possibilities of terrorism?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Well, I think if you look at the combination of the effect on DHS, on the Department of Justice and on the Department of Defense, we are having real impacts on the robustness of our defensive posture. And there are things that we will not be able to do as well, like secure between the ports of entry on the land borders, as we would do without sequester.

In terms of maritime activities, protecting the coasts, as we do with the Coast Guard, we're looking at a 25-percent reduction because we have to accomplish the cut between now and the end of the fiscal year, so we have seven months to accomplish the cut.

Q So there is a vulnerability?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Yes.

MR. CARNEY: Zach, then Jon.

Q Secretary Napolitano, you mentioned that Americans would face longer lines, longer waits. Couldn't you say that's just part of life in an America that needs to pull in its budget, needs to be more disciplined? Isn't that a way that Americans just have to contribute towards deficit reduction, wait a little bit longer? Is that so bad?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: I think you're minimizing what people are likely to see, and I think that question minimizes the impact on the economy, for example. When you slow down the inspection of containers by up to five days -- we work on a real-time inventory type of economy -- you slow down that global economy, the trade that comes into the country and leaves the country, that translates into lots and lots of jobs -- good-paying jobs. And those are going to be impacted.

When people can't travel and get to where they need to go for business or personal reasons, that has a real impact. Americans are all contributing. We understand that. But this is not the way to do it, and the sequester is about as illogical a process as you could possibly conceive.

Q So containers aren't hours, they're days?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Days. In some ports, it will be days.

Q Five days.

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Up to five.

MR. CARNEY: Jon.

Q Just two very quick follow-ups. We heard from Bobby Jindal just a few minutes ago. Governor Jindal says that the administration is scaring people. He says the President is scaring people. Is that just wrong?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: I think it's wrong. I mean if people are scared, it's because the full impact of this is finally being made evident, and so people now are saying, oh, my gosh, what do I need to do? Well, people need to be able to plan. They need to know what to expect. It won't happen, as I said, like the flick of a light switch but it will accrue over the next weeks, and that is why it's so important Congress come to the table, reach a balanced approach, so we can get this budget impasse behind us and get on with the work of the country.

Q Just to follow up on Peter's question -- I know you want a balanced approach and some tax revenues, I understand that fully -- but if you had flexibility to make these cuts, the billions of dollars you mentioned, any way you wanted in your budget, could you lessen the impact?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: We could a little bit on the margins. But the plain fact of the matter is they fall at such a heavy level, because we're so personnel-rich as a Department, that people would still experience the kinds of things that I've just described.

MR. CARNEY: Donovan, and then Chris.

Q Thanks. I just wanted to clear something up. Earlier you said -- someone asked if our country would be less secure and you said no, the procedures will be the same but you have fewer people to do them so the lines will be longer.

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Right.

Q But then April just asked you if our vulnerability to a terror attack will increase and you said yes. Can we just clear up --

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Yes. At the ports, where people -- where we're governing cargo and passengers, we will do the same checks. They're very important. It will take longer.

What I was particularly referencing, however, was the rollback in Border Patrol agent time. And it's just common sense, if you roll that back, you make between the ports of entry less secure than the record security that has been there for the last years. And quite frankly, as we move into the discussion of immigration reform -- and that system needs comprehensive change and reform -- we all want to begin with saying, look, the border must be secure and it must be sustained in its security.

MR. CARNEY: Chris, and then we'll take one more and let the Secretary go.

Q I have a question on a different topic. As you know, the Defense of Marriage Act is under review right now before the Supreme Court. And in anticipation of that ruling, LGBT advocates have been calling on you to place in advance marriage-based green card applications for married same-sex couples. I was wondering if this policy is under consideration right now.

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: The legal advice we have received is that we can't put it in advance because DOMA remains the law. We'd like to see that law overturned. In practical terms, however, most of those cases fall within very, very low priority in terms of what we've done over the last years, which is to build priorities into immigration

enforcement so we're not seeing impracticality those deportations occur.

Q But back in in 2009, you directed USCIS to suspend adjudication of visa petitions and adjustment applications for immigrant widows of U.S. citizens. If you can do this policy for widows, why can't you do it for foreign nationals in same-sex marriages?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Because of DOMA.

MR. CARNEY: Yes, sir, last question for the Secretary.

Q Secretary Napolitano, I just want to -- on the economy loss again, considering the \$1.5 billion daily trade relationship with Canada, for instance, how will this impact the relationship -- the sequestration? And also, when you say, I want people to begin to plan, have you been in contact with your Canadian counterpart, security-wise, to discuss how they could take some part of the work?

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: I haven't been in touch with my counterpart. I don't know whether the acting commissioner of customs has been. But as I said in my opening remarks, we do \$2.3 trillion worth of trade a year through customs and border protection. And Canada is our largest trading partner. Mexico is probably our third-largest trading partner. That translates into hundreds of thousands of jobs in the United States. One of the chief complaints I receive whenever I travel to either border is it takes too long to move the trucks across; it takes too long for people in passenger vehicles to get through. And all I can tell you is that with sequestration, that situation is not going to improve, it's going to go backwards.

MR. CARNEY: Thank you very much, Madam Secretary. Appreciate it.

SECRETARY NAPOLITANO: Thanks, Jay. Yes, you bet.

MR. CARNEY: And if you have any more questions, I'm here to take them.

Yes, sir.

Q If there's a move in the Senate to pass legislation that would give the administration flexibility to deal with these cuts in a way that is not so destructive to national security issues, to air travelers being inconvenienced and so forth, would the President be receptive to that kind of legislation?

MR. CARNEY: Well, first of all, I think the move in the Senate that we're likely to see is a vote on a bill that would delay the deadline for sequestration through a buy-down that includes both spending cuts and revenues -- the kind of balance that the American people overwhelmingly support and the kind of balance that the President hopes Congress will adopt when it tackles the further deficit reduction that is necessary for us to achieve that \$4 trillion-plus goal.

I think Secretary Napolitano said it very well, which is you can imagine ways that flexibility might help you on the margins, but the size of the cuts and the fact that they all have to be done in such a short period of time, the fact that they're limited where they are in portions of defense and nondefense discretionary, means that the impacts cannot be avoided.

These are real effects on real people's lives, on the border, on FAA. I mean, when you asked your question -- if the Senate could pass a bill that would basically prevent all the bad things from happening but somehow allow cuts to come in places that nobody will notice, you're imagining something that isn't possible.

So there is no question that we need to reduce our deficit further. The President has put forward plans again and again that achieve that goal. And his plans have routinely always consistently included balance. So far, he has signed into law \$2.5 trillion in deficit reduction. More than two-thirds of that deficit reduction has come through spending cuts.

He has put forward a plan, which we talked about last week, an offer to the Speaker that includes more deficit reduction beyond the \$4 trillion goal, that includes spending cuts and savings from entitlement reforms. But it also includes closing tax code loopholes, capping deductions, eliminating special interest tax breaks for corporations and wealthy individuals that would, together with those cuts, help achieve the deficit reduction we need in a balanced way.

It was only two months ago that we all were in this room and talked about the proposal that the Speaker of the House said was absolutely the right way to go, which is to increase revenue -- up to \$800 billion of revenue -- through closing loopholes and eliminating tax breaks and capping deductions for wealthy individuals and corporations. He said that was the right policy then.

Today, he says it's not. Today, he says, unfortunately, that we should reduce hours for border security agents. We should close air control towers. We should cut back on the number of teachers in state after state after estate --

state, rather than -- do that rather than ask for these loopholes to be closed or these deductions to be capped. That's just bad policy and it's wholly inconsistent with what the American people want to happen in this case.

Q And just a follow-up. Is the White House anticipating that the Senate will move on some sort of legislation that would delay this deadline and buy it down, as you said just a few moments ago? And are administration officials working with staff on the Hill to put that sort of thing together? And how would all of that impact the CR that is coming up at the end of the month? Because it seems as if the cans that are being kicked down the road are starting to run into each other.

MR. CARNEY: Well, you make a good point. On the first question about activity in the Senate, I certainly would refer you to the Senate Majority Leader's office. But, as you know, Senate Democrats have put forward a bill that would buy down the sequester until the end of the year through a balanced package of spending cuts and revenue increases. And the President supports that. The House Democrats have done the same, and we hope that the Senate votes on that.

And what I am confident of, and what the President is confident of is that there is majority support in the Senate for that. The question that Republicans will have to ask themselves is if they will block that -- because of the filibuster rule, where a minority can block what is so clearly supported by the majority -- and therefore prevent it from passing the Senate and potentially being taken up in the House; where, given what we have seen from some Republicans and the indication from some rank-and-file Republicans in the House, the concern that they have about the impact of sequestration and their interest in avoiding sequester through balance, including revenues, we think it's possible that that bill, if it were to be allowed to pass the Senate, could also pass the House if the Speaker would let it come up.

After all, we know from a poll just last week in USA Today that when it comes to further reducing our deficit, this isn't even a close call in terms of where the American public stands. Seventy-six percent of the American people said in that poll that they prefer a balanced approach that includes revenues as well as spending cuts. Only 19 percent -- less than 1 in 5 Americans -- say that they support the Republican approach. So this isn't even --

Q So the delay in buy-down would have to include revenues of some sort?

MR. CARNEY: Certainly, yes, as the President has said, that we have to do this in a balanced way. That's been the approach that he's always taken.

Julie.

Q Jay, are there still no active negotiations underway between the White House and Congress?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as you know, the President spoke with congressional leaders last week and we will continue to engage with Congress this week. But I think it's fair to say --

Q Are you meeting with them? Are you having -- any active negotiations?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have any readings or calls to read out or preview -- meetings or calls to read out or preview -- but I can tell you that we will continue to engage with Congress.

The simple fact is that what Republican leaders are saying in public reflects the position, as we understand it, that they have -- which is an absolute refusal to allow for a single loophole to be closed, special interest loophole to be closed, in order to avoid implementation of the sequester.

So that means all of the impacts you heard Secretary Napolitano talk about, all of the effects you heard Secretary LaHood speak about, everything that Secretary Duncan spoke about over the weekend will take place if Republicans choose that path. And they are saying now that they prefer that than asking any special interest -- asking that any special interest tax break be eliminated, or any advantage that just a handful of Americans get when dealing with their taxes that regular folks don't get, that that be ended or capped. They would rather have these job losses take effect and the effect on the economy take place than make those calls.

Q If I could just ask one thing on a non-sequester topic. Syria's foreign minister said today that the Assad government is ready to hold talks with the rebels. Does the U.S. view that as a credible offer from Assad?

MR. CARNEY: Well, we are working with the Syrian opposition and with our allies toward a future for Syria that allows the Syrian people to decide what their government looks like and provides a brighter and more democratic future for the people of Syria. That future cannot include Bashar al-Assad, who has long since forsaken any opportunity he might have had to participate in Syria's future. He has so much blood on his hands. He has been engaging in a prolonged assault on his own people that has cost tens of thousands of lives, of innocent civilian lives.

I would leave it at this point for the State Department to assess those statements. But we have been clear, I think

the Syrian opposition has been clear: The future for Syria cannot include Assad. We are working with the Syrian opposition. There will be a meeting later this week of the Syrian opposition with the international community; that will be very important. And we continue to provide and lead the way in providing humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people in this effort to help bring about a better future for Syria -- one that does not include President Assad.

Q Jay?

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Michael.

Q So back to the flexibility question. So you guys have bragged a lot -- I think you did it a few minutes ago -- about all of these -- more than a trillion dollars' worth of cuts that you've already done. We haven't heard any -- you either haven't been -- there haven't been Cabinet Secretaries standing up warning about the damage to the economy or to the nation's security or whatever from those cuts. What is so different between those cuts that were already made and the cuts that could be made if you were given flexibility?

MR. CARNEY: First of all, the cuts that have already been signed into law include the \$1.1 trillion that was originally passed as part of the Budget Control Act. By doing that and including them with the cuts the President had already signed into law, we have brought nondefense discretionary spending down to a level as a share of our economy that we have not seen since Dwight Eisenhower occupied the Oval Office. That is a fact.

And it is a fact that, in looking forward towards additional deficit reduction, we need to make sure that we don't ask the most vulnerable Americans, don't ask ordinary, middle-class Americans, don't ask seniors to bear the burden solely because we have been so assiduous in making sure that we reduce spending where possible in our nondefense discretionary budget.

We need to do this in a balanced way. And, I mean, your question answers itself in a way. We have, up to now, the President signed into law \$2.5 trillion in deficit reduction. More than two-thirds of that has come in spending cuts. And that reflects the fact that he has approached this with the spirit of compromise; that as a Democrat who leads a party that is not enthusiastic necessarily about cutting domestic spending programs or cutting into the entitlements that provide support to our seniors and others -- he has lead his fellow Democrats toward compromise. So he has not just pushed revenues, he has pushed spending cuts and entitlement reforms. And there are entitlement reforms that produce savings in the offer that remains on the table for Speaker Boehner.

On the other hand, Republicans have yet -- at least from the leadership -- in any concrete way put forward any kind of proposal for further deficit reduction that reflects that same spirit of compromise where, if you concede here, as I think everyone would that Republicans are more averse to raising revenues and would rather cut spending and reduce entitlements and benefits -- the tough decision for them is revenues.

We haven't seen that from Republican leaders and it is about time that we see that because that's what the American people are asking for. Because it is not fair to say seniors should bear all the burden or middle-class families, or parents who have kids with mental health challenges or disabilities of other kinds. Why would we ask them to foot the bill alone but not -- when we're talking about broader deficit reduction -- say to the hedge fund manager in New York, who pulled down a cool \$2 billion last year and paid 14 percent or 15 percent because he benefitted from or she benefitted from the carried interest rule, why not say that's not fair? Why not say that we should ask them to pay a little bit more, and those who benefit from the corporate jet loophole, and the oil and gas companies that benefit from a taxpayer subsidy that has been in place for a century? Anybody fill up their gas tank this weekend? Think the oil and gas companies can maybe afford to give up their taxpayer -- special interest break? I think most Americans would say yet.

Q But you're not arguing -- the administration, as I understand it, isn't arguing that there are no more cuts to be made, right? Just that you want to do it in a balanced way and you want to do it with some planning and some flexibility and some ability to say this gets cut, that doesn't get cut. So if the Congress says, at least on the flexibility part, you can have not only as much flexibility as you've had in the past, but the ultimate flexibility -- the administration can just literally say we can -- we'll cut where we want to cut to achieve that amount -- I mean, doesn't that give you part of -- I mean, you acknowledge there are going to be some cuts, right?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I do. And if you look at the President's proposal to the Speaker, because of the cuts in nondefense discretionary spending that we have made and the President has signed into law and that have brought that portion of our budget to historic lows, the additional job of deficit reduction will come principally from tax reform that produces revenues and entitlement reform that produces savings. And if you look at the proposal the President made to the Speaker, you will see that laid out in hard numbers.

And that's why the President felt that it was possible, and he was hopeful at the time that the Speaker would take up this offer because it so clearly represents balance, so clearly represents compromise, so clearly addresses some of the issues that Republicans have said Democrats will not address, which is making some sensible changes in our entitlement programs that aren't easy for Democrats necessarily to do. But the President is willing to do them as part of a broader effort, including tax reform that produces revenues, to get our deficit further reduced and our fiscal house in order.

Unfortunately, from Republicans, they say, well, forget about the hedge fund managers, forget about the oil and gas companies, forget about the corporate jet owners, let's just ask the middle class and seniors to pay the price. And if we don't get that -- if we don't get our way with that approach, then we'll have those effects on the border that Secretary Napolitano talked about. We'll have those effects with our air traffic that Secretary LaHood spoke about, and all the effects that Secretary Duncan spoke about.

That's just nonsensical when it comes about going about the business of governing in a responsible way.

Alexis, and then Zach.

Q Jay, the President is going to travel tomorrow to Newport News. Can you tell us how the event away from Washington is going to help resolve the impasse and what the President is going to maybe encourage Americans to do in response to this, this week?

MR. CARNEY: Certainly. That region, as everyone knows, will be particularly hard hit if the sequestration is allowed to take effect. And the President, as he has in the past, hopes with this event to highlight the impact of sequester; and by doing so, hopes that attention will be brought to bear on that problem and the need for Congress to act responsibly to avoid it.

We've spoken a lot in recent weeks and months about the approach the President takes with these issues, and he believes it's important and continues to do it to work with and sit down with and talk with members of Congress in the hope of reaching a compromise on issues like this. But he also believes that it is essential, and it is part of his responsibility, as President elected by the whole nation, to take these issues out into the country, to present his agenda and his priorities to regular folks out there in states across the country -- tomorrow in Virginia. He's been a number of places in recent weeks, and he'll continue to do that.

You shouldn't -- it's not a binary choice here. It's not one or the other, you do both. And it's certainly the responsible thing to do for members of Congress, both House members and senators, to go to their districts and states -- and they were, some of them anyway, back home this past week, others were traveling abroad. But to have this discussion with their constituents and to be straightforward with them about what the effect of sequester would be if it's allowed to take effect.

Jon.

Q Jay, I just have two follow-ups from last week. You were going to check on what was being done to the White House staff in reductions? And then there was that hundred-city tour.

MR. CARNEY: Well, first of all, on the second one, I think that has been very clearly explained to you that this is not a tour. This is local officials -- federal officials in those states and cities working with governors and local officials to highlight important actions that the administration and the government is taking. Occasionally, White House officials will participate. But this is not a tour as described for public relations reasons by critics.

Secondly, I think as OMB has made clear, they are working through agency by agency, with those agencies, what the effects of sequester will be. The Executive Office of the President, the EOP, is affected, and there will be impacts. And as I understand it, OMB is working on those. I know that there will be reductions in pay and there will be furloughs. But I don't have a breakdown of those numbers for you. OMB is working on those now.

Yes, Matt. I'm sorry, Zach. I owe Zach and then Matt and then Major.

Q Jay, you mentioned that the President isn't very interested in tinkering at the margins with the sequester. But if Congress passes, let's call it a "less bad" bill that preserves the magnitude of cuts but gives the President the flexibility to manage them, would he refuse to sign that bill?

MR. CARNEY: That's like a compound or triple piece of speculation there. What the Senate will address, we hope, is a bill that would buy down sequester in a balanced way, in accordance with the President's principles, in accordance with the buy-down that Congress passed with bipartisan majorities or a bipartisan vote two months ago, and in accordance with the general spirit that the public hopes its leaders in Washington will approach deficit reduction moving forward.

Again, you can't -- as Secretary Napolitano said, you can't change the fact that the impacts will be negative. In an agency like hers that is so personnel-heavy, those impacts will result in reduced man-hours, will result in layoffs or furloughs, will result in the kinds of effects that she talked about. There's no way around it.

I mean, when the question came previously, it was as if -- if you could imagine a bill that introduced enough flexibility to do away with all the bad things, would you agree to it? Well, that bill doesn't exist. It can't be written -- not with the size of these cuts, and the fact that they needed to be implemented in such a short period of time in this fiscal year.

Q But you're not writing off any other proposals aside from the Senate --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm not going to speculate about what the Congress may or may not do. What it should do is take up deficit reduction in a balanced way, both in postponing the sequester deadline; and then having done that, in the pursuit through regular order and the budget process of further balanced deficit reduction.

Major.

Q Jay, you mentioned carried interest, corporate tax benefits for jets and oil and gas subsidies. To my knowledge, not one of those items is in the Senate Democratic alternative to deal with this matter. What accounts for that disconnect?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'm talking about the big job, and that would include a 28-percent cap for wealthy individuals on their deductions, which would raise a significant amount of --

Q So when you speak of those, you're not talking about those in the context of resolving this particular sequester crisis?

MR. CARNEY: Well, if the Congress were to take up the big task of further reducing our deficit by at least \$1.5 trillion, absolutely those should be part of it because you need a certain portion of revenue to --

Q But they don't need to be in the alternative before the Senate currently?

MR. CARNEY: There are a number of things you could choose from. The principle that the President has put forward when you're talking about a smaller, short-term buy-down of the sequester, and you're talking about, generally, you're trying to put together a package that is easier on each side for both sides to swallow -- then not necessarily.

I mean, the Senate has put forward a package -- Senate Democrats have put forward a proposal that does not ask much in terms of hard choices of Senate Republicans, but it does represent balance. And it would only buy down the sequester for a number of months until the end of the year.

But, obviously, for the bigger task of completing the \$4 trillion-plus target of deficit reduction over 10 years, yes, we would include all of those, including the 28-percent cap that I spoke about.

Q Now, I understand the administration prefers a buy-down, but would you be open to just buying some time, maybe flexibility for two or three weeks, if you believe that would give you an opening to negotiate something to prevent sequester from happening, have the flexibility that with over the course of two or three weeks --

MR. CARNEY: I'm not sure what that means, "the course of two or" --

Q Flexibility to carry out for an agreed upon period of time, maybe two or three weeks, whatever the sequester calls for, but give you all the wide flexibility --

MR. CARNEY: Well, unless you're working with congressional offices to write legislation, I haven't --

Q I'm just saying, would you be able to do that?

MR. CARNEY: I wouldn't speculate about what Congress may or may not do. What is absolutely the case is that there's no -- to go back to my answer before, there is no amount of flexibility you could introduce here, given the size of the cut --

Q Even for two or three weeks to buy you time for more negotiations?

MR. CARNEY: Well, the thing to do for two to three weeks, or two to three months, or until the end of the fiscal year is to postpone the sequester to realistically give Congress the time it needs to do what both sides in both Houses have said they want to do, which is return to regular order, engage in a budget process that results in, hopefully, a budget that keeps with the principles the American public so overwhelmingly supports, which is a balanced deficit reduction budget that includes both cuts and revenues and investments in key areas of our economy so that we can continue to grow and continue to strengthen and expand the middle class.

Q The Governor said this is not happening in a vacuum; that with gas prices going up and the payroll tax going back up to where it was before, their consumers are being squeezed, and instability caused by a threat of sequester creates a greater economic dynamic. And some came right to the edge of saying sequester is sort of the dividing line between recession and non-recession. Are you that --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would leave it to economists to make those judgments and predictions. What we know is that

the CBO, outside economic analysts like Moody's and Macroeconomics Advisers have analyzed what would be the effects of sequester and have reached a rough consensus that it would shrink growth by .5 or .6 percent in 2013, and that it would cost up to 750,000 jobs. Now, what that means in terms of the broad picture, I'll let economists predict. But it certainly means a sharp hit to our economy and a sharp hit to job creation. And there are no higher priorities for this President, and I believe that there are no higher priorities for most members of Congress.

Q Jay, to follow on Major's question about carried interest and the tax changes -- you obviously had a chance over the weekend in social media to respond about Woodward. But his op-ed or column over the weekend was suggesting that that's what you're doing, that you're sort of moving the goal post on sequester to bringing in tax changes, even though when it was negotiated with the Republicans, this was all about spending cuts.

MR. CARNEY: Well, that's -- let's just be clear about --

Q Well, that's what he's saying, so I want your reaction.

MR. CARNEY: Well, look, we're focused on the real choices that Congress needs to make and the American people expects Congress needs to make. It is simply, as journalist after journalist has pointed out, as people -- the clips going back to the period of these negotiations show clearly, that first of all, the White House and the Democrats were insisting on revenues as part of the trigger mechanism. Republicans refused. Therefore, sequester was the avenue that was chosen.

But everyone from the President -- on the day it passed -- to Republicans, who talked about introducing proposals to eliminate sequester that included revenues, said at the time and has said ever since, no one believes that the fact that the sequester included spending cuts only and meant that the replacement for the sequester would include spending cuts only. That's nonsensical. If that were the case, there would be no need for the sequester because there would be no disagreement.

The fact of the matter is Republicans as well as Democrats have talked about from the beginning the need to replace the sequester with a package of deficit reduction measures that include increasing revenues. So it's just not the case that it was anything different at the time.

Q One on a quick subject that has not come up yet. The New York Times reported on Saturday that there's -- it's already been reported Organizing for Action is this outside group connected with some of the President's former campaign aides. They want to push gun control and other issues on his agenda. The report over the weekend that was new was suggesting that donors are going to be able to, if they put up \$500,000 -- which is obviously a lot of money -- they're going to get special access to the President. They're going to have quarterly meetings here at the White House. Is that -- that suggests that access to the President is being sold?

MR. CARNEY: No. OFA, which you are asking about, is an independent organization that, as reported in the press, will engage in advocacy and grassroots mobilization activities around public policy issues. It will not be engaged in political campaign-related activities. It has been organized to rally support for the President's policy agenda, but is a separate organization. Administration officials routinely interact with outside advocacy organizations -- and this has been true in prior administrations and it is true in this one.

Q Right, but to promise access to the President of the United States, that's different.

MR. CARNEY: On the broader issue of money and politics generally, the President has been very clear that we should be doing more to reduce the role of money in politics -- the President and Democrats on Capitol Hill -- and back to the DISCLOSE Act, that would close loopholes and bring more transparency to the political system. But it was blocked by Republicans.

President Obama has also outlined additional concrete steps Congress should take to eliminate the corrosive influence of money in Washington like holding Congress to the same conflict of interest standards as the executive branch, and prohibiting lobbyists from bundling and bundlers from lobbying.

The fact is there are a variety of rules governing interaction between administration officials and outside groups, and administration officials follow those rules. White House and administration officials will not be raising money for Organizing for Action. And while they may appear at appropriate OFA events in their official capacities, they will not be raising money.

Q But you're not denying the point that was reported by the New York Times that even though he is for all those reforms, that if you give \$500,000 or more to this group you get access to the President -- you get meetings? Is that true or false?

MR. CARNEY: The President is engaged in an effort to pass items on his agenda. And outside organizations that support that agenda, like organizations that are environmental in nature and support aspects of the President's environmental agenda, or organizations that support his manufacturing agenda -- administration officials can meet with them, including the President. But the fact of the matter is this is an independent organization that is supporting

an agenda.

Q Is that the price tag to see the President?

MR. CARNEY: No.

Q It's not?

MR. CARNEY: Of course not.

Q So \$500,000 -- does that guarantee you access to the President?

MR. CARNEY: This is an independent organization. I would point you to that organization for how it raises its money. It has said quite clearly, distinguishing it from other organizations, that it will disclose its donors. But I would direct your questions to them about how they --

Q Donating that amount does not guarantee you meeting with the President?

MR. CARNEY: Correct. And I would point you to that organization.

Q So is the New York Times going to correct that part?

Q When the President ran in 2007, he used this exact language. He said, "The cynics, [and] the lobbyists and the special interests who have turned government into a game only they can play, they write the checks and you get stuck with the bills. They get the access while you get to write a letter." Doesn't this in many ways, though, create a situation that does blur that line of exactly what he was campaigning against in 2007, that he couldn't communicate with those people, even though independent, to say to them, this isn't the way my administration wants to work?

MR. CARNEY: The President has been very clear what his agenda is. This is an independent organization that supports the policy initiatives that the President puts forward, not unlike a variety of so-called 501(c)(4) organizations. The fact of the matter is the President has continually pressed for greater transparency in our political system. He very famously made clear his feelings about a Supreme Court decision that introduced and injected huge sums of money into our political campaigns. And he calls on Republicans to support the DISCLOSE Act, which he and Democrats support, which would at the very least allow for the public to know who is funding these organizations.

Again, this is not an organization -- and I would refer you to them -- but this is not an organization, based on what they've said, that is involved in political campaigns, that is involved in issue advocacy. Thanks, all.

Q You said no quarterly meetings, but some meetings with the President? Would you get a meeting with the President if you donated \$500,000?

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to the organization.

END
2:18 P.M. EST

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