

BRIEFING ROOM

Press Gaggle by Deputy Press Secretary Andrew Bates En Route Philadelphia, PA

MARCH 11, 2022 • SPEECHES AND REMARKS

Aboard Air Force One
En Route Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

11:37 A.M. EST

MR. BATES: I have a little bit for you at the top.

So, today, after giving the keynote address at the House Democratic Issues Conference, President Biden will visit a Philadelphia-area, majority-Hispanic elementary school to highlight how the American Rescue Plan is delivering critical resources to keep schools safe and open, combat learning loss, and address student mental health.

When the President entered office, only 46 percent of schools were open; today, over 99 percent are. That was not by accident; it was the product of his historic investments not just to get schools open, but ensure they have the resources to address the long-term impact COVID has had on schools and students.

Today's visit will highlight how American Rescue Plan dollars are enabling this school to help students catch up, including hiring more school staff, providing tutoring, and providing afterschool programs that are supporting student mental health. And that is reflective of what has been achieved across the country on account of the American Rescue Plan, which, again, every single Republican in Congress voted against.

President Biden will also speak with students directly to hear candidly about the issues they are facing today.

And then, Judge Jackson just wrapped her second successful week of meetings with senators in both parties, all of whom have been gracious hosts and who have asked engaging questions.

As you know, the President chose her because she's an extraordinarily qualified jurist with experience at all levels of our justice system; who's devoted to the Constitution and the rule of law; and who assesses cases fairly, neutrally, based solely on the facts; and who has been confirmed three times on a bipartisan basis by the Senate already.

In fact, Senator McConnell said last week that there is, quote, "no question" she's qualified to serve on the Supreme Court.

Yesterday, Senator Cornyn highlighted her practical experience as a judge, a criterion he said is important.

And I want to just take a minute to appreciate the broad set of endorsements that have come in for her, including from law enforcement. Out of the gate, Fraternal Order of Police issued a statement saying, "From our analysis of Judge Jackson's record and some of her cases, we believe she has considered the facts and applied the law consistently and fairly on a range of issues. There is little doubt that she has the temperament, intellect, legal experience, and family background to have earned this appointment."

That was followed shortly after by the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives.

This week, a large group of law enforcement officials from across the country, including a number of police chiefs, wrote to the Senate urging that she have — that she be confirmed in a timely manner. We saw a group of former U.S. attorneys do the same.

Yesterday, a group of 83 former state attorneys general from both parties wrote to the Senate urging her confirmation.

Retired D.C. Circuit Judge Thomas Griffith has urged her confirmation, as has retired Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals Judge J. Michael Luttig, both of whom are highly respected conservatives.

Conservative attorney William Burck, who represented Trump White House Counsel Don McGahn and a number of other senior Trump officials in court, has said that she is as qualified as anyone can be.

And I just wanted to take a minute to take stock of that.

And then a quick preview of next week for you: The President will sign the bipartisan funding bill, which takes some time for Congress to process, get to his desk. In the meantime, he will

sign the short-term continuing resolution to keep the government open until the bipartisan funding bill is signed.

On Monday, the President will address the National League of Cities Congressional City Conference.

On Tuesday, Equal Pay Day, the President, Vice President, First Lady, and Second Gentleman will participate in an event in the East Room to celebrate Women's History Month.

And on Thursday, I think it is a decent bet that we will commemorate St. Patrick's Day.

And with that, I'm happy to take you all's questions.

Q Two questions for you, Andrew. Thanks for doing this. First, President Biden, just a few hours ago, said that Russia would face a severe price should they use chemical weapons against Ukraine. What exactly did he mean, especially when, after these waves of — waves of sanctions already implemented, it does not appear yet that President Putin has buckled under the pressure?

And then second, just yesterday, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., Linda Thomas-Greenfield, she said that what Putin has done to Ukraine constitutes a war crime. But already twice, when asked, Vice President Harris hasn't matched that language. So what does the White House believe? Does it believe that Russia's actions against Ukraine constitute war crimes?

MR. BATES: Well, like you just mentioned, you heard from the President clearly that if Russia uses chemical weapons, there will be severe consequences. I don't have anything to preview on that front, but he's his meaning was unmistakable.

And when it comes to chemical weapons specifically, as you know, one of the false flags or pretexts that Russia has been indicating they might attempt to employ here is chemical weapons. We've warned about that for some time. We decided to participate in the recent Security Council session about this, not just to forcefully debunk Russian gaslighting on this subject, but to further call Putin out, as we have during this entire episode successfully at each juncture, where we have reason to believe they are trying to fabricate another false justification for more violence.

The truth is: Russia is the only country in this equation with a chemical and biological weapons program in violation of international law.

We're not going to be specific about intelligence, which the President also mentioned this morning. But look no further than Russia's track record. They have used chemical weapons — which, again, they are the only country in the mix here who possesses those — in Syria. And time again, we have warned about this particular pretext. And so it is something that we are being attentive to.

When it comes to war crimes, we have all seen the devastating images coming out of Ukraine and are appalled by Russia's brutal tactics. Pregnant women on stretchers, apartment buildings shelled, families killed while seeking safety from this terrible violence.

We are also seeing reports of other types of potential abuses, including sexual and gender-based violence. These are disgusting attacks.

Civilian casualties are increasing. If Russia is intentionally targeting civilians, that would be a war crime. And as we are all seeing on live television, evidence is mounting. And we are documenting it as it takes place.

There are strong indications that this is occurring and that the heinous way Russia is prosecuting this war will result in war crimes.

We are supporting the important work of human rights activists, civil society, and independent media in Ukraine who are documenting, collecting, and exposing evidence of possible war crimes, human rights abuses, and violations of international humanitarian law.

We will share the evidence we gather with allies and partners and with those investigations — investigators to support accountability using every tool available, including criminal prosecutions when appropriate.

Q On the trade announcement today — are you seeking higher tariffs on all Russian imports to the U.S. or only certain ones? And are those tariff levels going to be coordinated with European allies?

MR. BATES: So, what I've got there is, like you mentioned, we're revoking Russia's most-favored-nation status, which is going to mean that Russian imports to the United States face tariffs and other — and other barriers.

And — you know what? Why don't we take a seat and continue?

Q Too late.

MR. BATES: Well, all right. (Laughter.) Never mind, I just didn't want anybody to get — get hurt there. Just one second.

(Gaggle interrupted as Air Force One lands.)

But we are going to include seafood, spirits, vodka, non-industrial diamonds, in terms of the Russian imports that are banned. And we are also going to be restricting U.S. exports to Russia so that they are not receiving luxury items like high-end watches, luxury vehicles, high-end apparel, high-end alcohol, jewelry, other goods frequently purchased by Russian elites.

And I want to underscore that the countries with whom we're working in unison on this represent 50 percent of the global economy. It is going to take a significant toll on Russia, in addition to the steps we have already taken, which have resulted in the ruble being worth less than a penny, has resulted in their stock market being closed for an historic period of time. It has resulted in their credit rating being labeled "junk" by authorities.

(Gaggle interrupted as Air Force One crew deplanes.)

Q Andrew, is the U.S. in touch with India and Pakistan about India having accidentally launched a missile into Pakistan? And are —

MR. BATES: I don't have updates for you on that. I can see if our national security team does a little bit later.

Q And do you have any updates on the status of the Iran talks? Russia is demanding that the agreement inclu- — preclude sanctions on — related to Ukraine, impacting their ability to trade with Iran.

MR. BATES: So, Russia has taken some public positions attempting to tie the JCPOA to unrelated issues like Ukraine, so we're working through that with European allies.

But the bottom line is: It is in our national security interest and the national security interest of everyone involved, including Russia, to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Q What is the endgame of the sanctions exactly, knowing that more have been imposed today? What does the U.S. believe needs to be done in order to resolve this war in Ukraine?

MR. BATES: Well, we have provided Putin with possible off-ramps from the beginning, and we will continue to do so. But he is the only one who can decide whether to take them.

So far, every time he has had an opportunity to take an off-ramp, he's instead gone full speed ahead. And the longer he forces his abused troops to attack Ukraine, the more he broadcasts his own profound weakness as a leader.

Putin's only strategy has been escalation at every turn, but it's becoming increasingly clear that it's escalation without an endgame. And his erratic brutality, which comes at the expense of the Russian people and, again, his own demoralized troops, is proving to be a disaster for his country.

He has a clear plan to be savage toward Ukraine, but to what end? His initial military plan to quickly capture Ukraine and force a capitulation has failed. Now he's turning to a strategy of laying waste to population centers to try and break the will of the Ukrainian people. But that strategy will make effective long-term Russian control of Ukraine impossible.

Meanwhile, the world is rallying around the Ukrainians. And we are exacting an enormous and historic toll on Russians' — Russia's economy because of his war of choice.

Q What future off-ramps do you have in mind?

MR. BATES: I don't have anything more to preview. But as today's actions make clear, the more that this continues, not only is he losing people on the ground to whom he has lied about the cause for going into Ukraine unprovoked, but the Russian economy is in tatters.

They have lost 30 years of economic progress when it comes to integrating their economy with the world in a matter of weeks. That is not going to stop until he stops.

Q And then the last thing is: Yesterday, we heard President Biden accuse Republicans of playing games with oil prices amid a couple other accusations. Does this amount to a preview of the midterm messaging? And how are you guys going to weather both inflation and rising oil prices?

MR. BATES: So I can't speak to midterm messaging directly from here. But, factually, I think it's important to keep in mind, first of all, every action that we have taken to punish Russia for Putin's unprovoked further invasion of Ukraine has had strong bipartisan support and buy-in. And, of course, Russia's destabilizing actions have played an important role in recent increases

in gas prices.

But I'm glad you raised this, because the New York Times had a very conclusive fact check yesterday. The headline was: "Republicans Wrongly Blame Biden for Rising Gas Prices." And so I think it's important to note that independent arbiters in the press have consulted experts and they have deemed that these attacks are disingenuous and that the rising gas prices you've seen all over the world, but beforehand, are due to the pandemic and pressures that has put on international supply.

So, thank you all. Sorry, we didn't have more time.

11:51 A.M. EST