

News; Domestic

MEET THE PRESS DAILY for August 23, 2021, MSNBC

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9,336 words

23 August 2021

MSNBC: Meet the Press Daily

MSNMPD

English

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[13:00:37]

GARRETT HAAKE, MSNBC HOST: If it's Monday.

We expect to hear from President Biden this hour following the FDA's decision, making Pfizer's COVID vaccine the first to receive full FDA approval. As COVID cases continue their surge, could it open the floodgates for more vaccine mandates? That's ahead.

And from one crisis to the next, the White House in damage control mode on Afghanistan too, as the Taliban warns the administration, there will be consequences if U.S. troops aren't out by August 31. The scramble to evacuate U.S. citizens' staff and families continue.

And a standoff among Democrats on Capitol Hill as House moderates dig in against Speaker Pelosi with the fate of the President's legislative agenda and the party's future at stake.

Welcome to MEET THE PRESS DAILY, I'm Garrett Haake in for Chuck Todd.

On what the White House hopes could be potentially a game-changing day in the fight to stop the spread of COVID with the FDA granting full approval to Pfizer's COVID vaccine, a move that could compel hesitant Americans to finally get the shot, and compel schools and businesses to require students and employees to get the shot. That's the hope at least.

We expect President Biden to deliver remarks on vaccinations later in this hour, and we'll bring those to you, live when they happen. Those comments come as the President has seen a dramatic decline and how Americans are perceiving his handling of the pandemic. His approval on that issue has slipped 16 points since April, according to the latest NBC News poll numbers, and that comes as he continues to face -- face crises that threaten America's standing in the world and the fate of his domestic agenda here at home.

In Afghanistan, the administration continues to deal with a complex and challenging security situation as it works to evacuate tens of thousands of U.S. citizens and Afghans who've helped allied forces over the last 20 years. The chaos of that situation was on display again today with a deadly shooting at the Kabul airport. According to the German military, one Afghan soldier was killed and three others were injured in the fight between Afghan security forces and unknown attackers.

And after President Biden announced yesterday that the U.S. may extend the August 31 deadline for completing its withdrawal of US troops, Sky News is now reporting that the Taliban warns of consequences if the U.S. withdrawal is delayed.

So, as the President faces scrutiny from Republicans and Democrats about the Afghanistan exit, he's also finding his domestic priorities in limbo because of infighting among Democrats. Nine House Democrats are still threatening to block Speaker Pelosi's plan to advance that multi-trillion-dollar spending package unless there's an immediate vote on the infrastructure bill that's already been passed by the Senate. And all of this comes as the President's political standing overall is taken a hit. His overall approval rating has dropped below 50 percent in our NBC News, News poll for the first time in his presidency.

To help us get started, I'm joined now by our own Kelly O'Donnell at the White House and Courtney Kube at the Pentagon.

And so, Kelly, Afghanistan, COVID, the budget, the next couple of days could be really critical for everything Joe Biden wants to get done over the next couple of years. We'll hear from him this afternoon, how is the White House approaching this crucible of the next couple of days?

KELLY O'DONNELL, MSNBC WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Well, that's a good way to lay it out because this is a time where the President has been surrounded by the swarm of events that have not gone his way.

And when something like the FDA approval of the Pfizer vaccine finally comes through after it has been long predicted, today is that day and a chance for the administration to harness that and use it as a way to convince those who have used a medical reason like that threshold of approval as a reason not to get the vaccine and how it opens the doors for further requirements in the workplace, and in businesses, and in ways people engage with activities they want to participate in those kinds of requirements so expect the President to tout this as an important step. At the same time, we have seen how the Delta variant raging has presented all kinds of additional problems.

[13:05:00]

O'DONNELL: And the President's handling as reflected in the polls you described may not be so much about the decisions he has made on various things related to COVID, but on the environment that people are feeling with a return to mask-wearing, concerns about breakthrough infections, all of those things that we're seeing.

And certainly, on the Afghanistan peace, we've seen how now the national security team meeting with the President is now a standing appointment on his schedule each day this week, a sign of how they're trying to project his engagement on that issue, and the volatility of what's happening on the ground, Garrett.

HAAKE: Kelly, our poll showed the President's overall approval rating getting below 50 percent for the first time, that was before the situation in Afghanistan had really sunk in for most Americans, I think it's still better the number than his predecessor achieved in four years, but have those numbers, have the COVID handling numbers raised any red flags at the White House?

O'DONNELL: They're certainly concerned about the direction here. Those numbers almost have a right-track wrong-track feel to them when you talk about things that are certainly beyond the specific reach of our President. The environment that we're seeing related to the virus is not something he has direct control over the events in Afghanistan, although a decision-maker in this, it's obviously bigger and more complicated.

Things like getting his own legislation passed, there might be a much narrower margin there of his involvement along with Democrats on Capitol Hill to get signature achievements that he would like to see realized, related to all of that spending, those things are perhaps more in their wheelhouse of what they may be able to control. But this is one of the times where being President shows how hard that job is, the worst problems of the world lands on a President's desk.

HAAKE: And Courtney, the Pentagon had a banner day yesterday in terms of evacuations from the airport in Kabul but now, the President's been saying he would potentially be open to keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan past the deadline, the August 31 deadline. Now, this Taliban signaling there's a red line here, where do things stand at this hour with the Pentagon and how they're approaching whatever this warning may be from the Taliban?

COURTNEY KUBE, PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT: There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of confidence that the President would ultimately decide to extend anything beyond August 31, according to defense officials here.

HAAKE: Interesting.

KUBE: So, they are continuing to plan for the reality that everyone has to be out by August 31. And, you know, one of the big questions we've been asking here is, is there some sort of an agreement between the U.S. military and the Taliban about the U.S. leaving them? We know that the U.S. has been talking to the Taliban on the ground there for the lead -- and that is specifically military commander to Taliban commander for the past week or so.

The Taliban, in many cases, have actually been allowing for safe passage for Americans and some Afghans and other third-country nationals to get through some of these checkpoints and that is part of this agreement.

So, the bigger question is, as one of the factors, the elements of this agreement, does it include that the U.S. gave them any assurances that they would leave by August 31? And no one here will talk about that. It seems to be, they want this to be considered as more of an evolving and flowing conversation between the

U.S. and the Taliban. So -- but that was one of the questions that I posed to John Kirby today, specifically, because think about it, Garrett, you know, there are about 5800 US troops there now.

There were somewhere between 600 and a thousand there when Kabul -- when the Taliban first went into Kabul last Sunday. So, it took several days to get those additional roughly 5000 troops in, is it going to take several days to get them back out? And if that's the case, if they're going to be the last ones to leave the airport before August -- the August 31 deadline, does that mean that the U.S. will have to stop taking evacuees in to get them out of there several days before?

Now, we're talking about we're only a couple of days from when this may be. So, this is -- I think that this is something that we're going to have to keep watching. But again, I don't get the sense according to defense officials I'm speaking to, that they think that this deadline is going to get extended.

HAAKE: Do we have any sense of how big the universe of people is in Afghanistan that we're still hopeful to get out either by that deadline or by some other day?

KUBE: No. And candidly, it's just been really, really frustrating and difficult to get any ground truth to where that is, because the numbers are literally in somewhere between 20 and 30,000, up to over 100,000 people. And I think part of that is if you look at American civilians who are there -- citizens who are there, some of them may be registered with the State Department, some may not, some may come and go without telling them. So, they don't -- the State Department may really not have a very strong idea of how many are there.

They know how many people have come to them, asking for help but there may be many more in need of help. They also don't have a good sense who may be outside of Kabul so -- and then beyond that, there's just the Afghans who may be eligible for SIV who've not applied yet, or the P2 process so the numbers are really all over the map on this, Garrett.

HAAKE: And all it would take is one American hostage taken after the fact to make this a true international crisis but Kelly and Courtney, we got to leave it there. Thank you.

[13:10:01]

HAAKE: I want to bring it now Ben Rhodes, who was the Deputy National Security Adviser under President Obama. He's now an NBC News Political Contributor. And Ben, I just want to start by getting your reaction to something that the President's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told Chuck yesterday about the threat that ISIS potentially poses in Afghanistan. Listen to this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JAKE SULLIVAN, NATIONAL DEFENSE SECRETARY: I know that the scenes around the airport are heartbreaking, with large crowds of people wanting to leave. I know that there is complexity, and there is turbulence on the ground and -- in Kabul, and it's very risky and dangerous because there's a genuine threat from ISIS-K. That is the reality of what we are up against and I'm not going to sugarcoat that reality.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

HAAKE: I think most Americans following all the players here know about the Taliban, they know that al Qaeda was the reason we went into Afghanistan in the first place, but how should we be viewing the potential ISIS threat in that country now?

BEN RHODES, MSNBC POLITICAL CONTRIBUTOR: Well, there's been an ISIS threat inside of Afghanistan, in South Asia, since the emergence of ISIS in 2014, 2015. They've never been nearly as powerful, obviously, as the Taliban or even what al Qaeda was in Afghanistan. But you know, they're opportunistic and they would like nothing more, I'm sure than to strike at a moment when the United States is already withdrawing.

The very difficult balance that the National Security Team is facing in the White House is, every day that they are there is a time to save thousands of lives, of Afghan lives who are at risk, and so you want to make maximum use of your capacity to have that airport and get people out. Because the moment we pull up stakes, it gets much, much more difficult for Afghans to get to land borders in Pakistan and Iran.

However, every day that you're there at that airport is also a day in which you could face a potential threat from not just the Taliban, but from somebody like ISIS, who may want to insert themselves into the circumstance. So, I'm sure what they're doing is it's a balance of risk. How many lives can we save versus what are we seeing the threat picture from groups like ISIS?

HAAKE: And there are kind of two phases to this whole process, right? There's the withdrawal phase, where the White House knows they're taking their lumps because of how this all looks on television. And then

there's everything that happens afterward, where I think the White House is hopeful that they'll be vindicated because Americans, by and large, don't want to be in Afghanistan anymore. The risk for that, though, is the terror part of it.

And I wonder, from your former seat as a National Security official here, how concerned you are about the possibility that Afghanistan could once again become a breeding ground for terrorism once this phase is over?

RHODES: I mean, I think there are two risks, right? There's the terrorism risk. And there, you've heard the administration say very forthrightly, look, there are terrorist threats emanating from a lot of countries, the United States doesn't need to have boots on the ground, they have the capacity to take an airstrike at a terrorist's safe haven, or even to gather intelligence about what's happening. I think that thus far, they feel comfortable that they have enough infrastructure in that region, that if they see the emergence of different terrorist threats, that they can take action against them.

At the same time, you have this humanitarian risk of Afghans being subjected to reprisal violence from the Taliban, potentially tens of thousands of lives at risk. And so, the more people that they can get out now, we're likely to be targeted, whether because they've worked with us, or because they stood up for things like human rights and women's rights. The more of those people they can get out now, the more they can mitigate, and hopefully save lives against those Taliban reprisals. So those are the two things that I think they're urgently bouncing right now in the White House.

HAAKE: You tweeted about this recently, but how challenging do you see the political environment being around the idea of resettling Afghan refugees? I mean, we're talking about potentially thousands of people to this country, to European countries that have their own issues with taking in refugees, does Congress need to get involved here? What is that? I guess if to extend my metaphor here if that's the third phase of this, sort of reforming all these people, how do you see that political environment playing out?

RHODES: I think it's going to be a huge issue because essentially what you're talking about here is, they're pulling tens of thousands of people out as they should, who are under grave risk. They're going to be more people flowing to borders in Pakistan and Iran. If you think about it, you know, as we were just discussing, the numbers are hard, but I think most estimates suggest that you're talking about like 100,000 Afghans, if not more, who supported the U.S. or our allies. Those Afghans, by the way, have dependent, they have children. We're talking about hundreds of thousands of people if they can get out.

The United States is not going to take all those people but clearly, if we meet our moral responsibility, our proportional responsibility for our role in the war in Afghanistan, you're talking about a number of refugees that exceeds, I think, what by far, what would normally be the intake of Afghan refugees. And the more the U.S. leads in taking in Afghans, the more we can go around and help work with other countries like Canada and the United Kingdom that have already pledged to take 20,000 each.

So, what you'll see is, I think a lot of these, you know, frankly, Republicans who were talking about, you know, the need to not betray our Afghan allies, they're going to be put to the test and whether that means that they want to open the door to refugees coming in. You already sense kind of the Trump-wing of the Republican Party trying to slam that door. My hope is that all of the concern that you felt for the Afghan people these last few weeks can be sustained because this is going to be a multi-year process of resettlement as people are processed in third countries, and then they need homes because it's not safe for them to go back to Afghanistan.

[13:15:20]

HAAKE: Right. When I'm back on the Hill, I'll be asking every Republican lawmaker who said we had a moral obligation to these Afghans, whether that moral obligation extends to welcome them to this country. Ben Rhodes, thank you very much for your time.

RHODES: Thanks so much.

HAAKE: And coming up. The latest on the FDA's major announcement that Pfizer's COVID vaccine is now fully approved, and it's already prompting new vaccine mandates. We expect to hear President Biden's first public comments about the news later this hour.

And later, we'll go live to Tennessee where at least 22 people are dead and many more are missing after record-breaking rainfall send floodwaters ravaging through the middle part of the state.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HAAKE: Welcome back. As I reported at the top of the hour, the FDA has officially granted full use approval for the Pfizer COVID vaccine for people over the age of 16, making it the first COVID vaccine to have full

regulatory approval. We're expecting to hear from the President shortly on that news and we'll bring his speech to you, live when it happens. It comes as COVID cases continue to climb in the U.S. skyrocketing by an average of nearly 150,000 cases a day.

FDA approval is the final threshold for any vaccine and it may move the proverbial needle to convince some COVID vaccine holdouts to get the actual needle into their arms. But potentially bigger impact here is what this could mean for vaccine mandates. Some private companies were waiting for full approval before implementing mandates for their employees.

Today's announcement triggered the Pentagon's vaccine mandate to go into effect after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced earlier this month that service members would be required to get the vaccine once it was granted full approval.

[13:20:07]

HAAKE: I'm joined now by Dr. Michael Osterholm, Director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. And, Doc, let's just pick up there, the Pfizer vaccine now has full FDA approval, how do you see it changing the conversation about the vaccine? Do you think that approval will actually persuade some holdouts?

DR. MICHAEL OSTERHOLM, DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASE RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA: Well, first of all, let me just clarify in the lead and you talked about over age 16, it does include age 16, also. So, it's 16 and older and I want to make sure that you have -- you have --

HAAKE: 16 and above. OK, my apologies to our 16-year-old viewers and their parents.

OSTERHOLM: -- No, no, that's fine. No, it's just confusing and it says important because right now in our schools, even being able to get 16-year-old's vaccinated would help us a lot, particularly in high schools where we're seeing challenges with this virus already. You know, I think one of the things that aren't really appreciated about these mRNA vaccines like Pfizer's vaccine, 180 million people have been vaccinated with that vaccine, we have not had a single death associated with the vaccine.

You know, aspirin isn't that safe. You know, I tell people to be worried about taking aspirin that I -- this vaccine. So, combined with the fact that these are very safe vaccines, and they are effective. You know, we're learning now about more breakthroughs, we're also learning that we may need one extra dose to basically get us through that situation. We could do so much to end the kind of horrible, horrible situation we've seen in this country if people adjust get vaccinated.

HAAKE: Based on the fact that you corrected me on the 16-year-old part of this, I feel like I know what you're going to say here but according to our poll, 69 percent of respondents said they'd already gotten the vaccine, only 13 percent said they definitely wouldn't get the vaccine. I'm not a big math guy but that leaves about 15 percent who are somewhat open. So, how big of a dent does that FDA approval have to make -- you know, is there potential for impact amid that 15 percent?

OSTERHOLM: I think it's very important. And now people can realize that this vaccine has received the full in-depth review that the FDA would put forward for any other kind of vaccine or drug and had have basically has come out on the other end with the full approval of the FDA and showing that it can save thousands and thousands of lives so I feel very confident that some people will now have that willingness to go forward.

We'll still have vaccine holdouts, and that's where I think vaccine mandates still play a very important role. I'm a very big supporter of vaccine mandates, not because I want to tell somebody what to do with their body, but when their body is infectious to others in the community, then that is a community issue. That's not just about them.

HAAKE: Right. So, does this FDA approval give companies more solid grounds to enact those mandates?

OSTERHOLM: Well, I'm not a lawyer, but I can tell you as a public health professional for the last 46 years, I think it does. I think it's very compelling that it, in fact, says yes, now use the power that you have there to try to bring, you know, a major dent into this really horrible situation.

HAAKE: You're not a lawyer, I'm not a math guy, neither of us are NFL football players but today, you're going to speak to the NFL's Minnesota Vikings as I understand it, to talk about vaccine hesitancy? They've got some notable players, including their quarterback, Kirk Cousins, who has publicly stated that he won't be vaccinated, what do you tell that group to try to convince them to get the shot?

OSTERHOLM: Well, I already have spoken to them today --

HAAKE: Excuse me.

OSTERHOLM: -- And I have been a participant -- that's fine. I have been a participant in the NFL activities for more than a year and a half trying to do whatever we can to most safely conduct the everyday activities of an NFL team and I must say that I've been extremely impressed with the NFL's activities, the science that they brought to the issue. And today my job was just to share an updated level of science with all the players, coaches, and so forth.

I must say that the Minnesota Vikings football team has been exemplary in how it's approached vaccine messaging. They've been doing everything they can to help players understand the importance of these vaccines, the safety of these vaccines, and so I was there to help reiterate what the team has already been saying.

HAAKE: Let me ask you this. I think so many of us have tried to talk to people who might be hesitant or oppose the vaccines in our own life, as a medical professional and as someone who has those conversations professionally, what do you find works to convince people?

OSTERHOLM: You know, unfortunately, the one thing that has had the most impact is watching a loved one die from this virus. I mean, I think most people are aware of the fact that one of the major conservative talk radio hosts in the country Phil Valentine in Nashville just died over the weekend, and his last wish to his family before he died was please get vaccinated, everyone. This is a man who spent months and months and months criticizing very strongly the -- anyone's need to get the vaccine.

And so, you know, I can tell you right now, here I am in Minneapolis, St. Paul and we are not being hit as hard as much of the rest of the country yet. And yet, we don't have a pediatric intensive care bed open today. All of our critical care beds for people who have heart attacks, seriously ill, they're filled.

And COVID has done this in a way that people can only understand, even if you don't get COVID hope you don't have a heart attack, hope you don't have a car accident, hope you don't fall off a roof today because if you did, you would be in deep trouble trying to find the care you need. That's what we have to help people understand.

[13:25:55]

HAAKE: All right, Dr. Osterholm, thank you very much.

OSTERHOLM: Thank you.

HAAKE: And let's turn out to one of those harder-hit places, Alabama, where COVID cases are spiking. Vaccine rates there remain well below 50 percent and hospitals have officially run out of ICU beds.

I'm joined now by the state's top Dr. Scott Harris. He's the Alabama State Health Officer. So, Dr. Harris, the ICUs there are in really bad shape, can you just give us a sense of what's happening in your hospitals right now?

DR. SCOTT HARRIS, HEALTH OFFICER, ALABAMA STATE: We've really been underwater here, Garrett for a couple of weeks now. That the numbers of new cases we're seeing reported to us each day are in the thousands, range three to 4000, we occasionally have been as close to 5000 cases. Our hospitals are not quite at the highest peak they were back in January, but in terms of critically ill patients, we far surpass that.

This is a kind of a regional phenomenon in a way, as you know, the Gulf Coast of the U.S. has been hit really hard and our counties in the southern part of the state have borne the brunt of this. And so, right now we have somewhere around 20 to 30 more ICU patients receiving critical care in a hospital, then we actually have ICU beds officially in the hospital. And that's just a really tough situation to be in.

HAAKE: What's your biggest need? Do you need beds? Do you need equipment? Do you need staff? I mean, we hear from doctors and public health officials all the time talking about how completely burnt out their doctors and nurses are.

HARRIS: Yes. You know, staffing has been the issue all along and continues to be the biggest issue. You know, hospitals are really good at being adaptive and dealing with hardships, and it's not that unusual in a really bad flu season, for example, for hospitals to have a few more patients than they would normally, you know, have room for.

So, you can expand within your own four walls and you can put a gurney in the hallway, and you can keep people in the emergency room for several hours or even days if you have to do that but what you really can easily come up with is a nurse, or a doctor, or a respiratory therapist, or even a pharmacist, or other staff members to take care of those folks.

I mean, they've been working nonstop for a year and a half now. A lot of them have really literally risked their lives, some of them have lost their lives, you know, in this battle. And you know, here in Alabama, that's a big problem for us but it's also a problem everywhere in the country. So, it's really hard just to, you know, wave a wand and suddenly produce, you know, a lot of ICU staff, or nurses, or anyone to work in a hospital right now.

HAAKE: Let's talk about that FDA full approval for the Pfizer vaccine, do you think that will help convince Alabamians who haven't gotten the shot that now's the time?

HARRIS: You know, I hope so. I think it will convince them or at least that's what people tell us. You know, vaccine hesitancy comes in a lot of different flavors, you know, it's not just one group. You know, we certainly talk the most about people that just seem to be making, you know, partisan political decisions about the vaccine the same way that they, you know, make a decision about mask.

But also, there are people that have, you know, other, you know, very good reasons, that they just haven't gotten the shot yet. You know, we're a poor state, we have people with transportation challenges, you know, a lot of people don't have great access to care. And so maybe they've just been waiting for one more thing to push them into making that decision. We certainly hope that that will be the case.

You know, we again -- we tried to communicate to people. We now have a vaccine that has been given, you know, hundreds of millions of doses worldwide before approval was even granted. This is the most safety data that's ever been accumulated on any product before it was approved by the FDA. And so, we hope that that information will convince some people to take a leap. What we have seen an uptick in vaccinations over the past two or three weeks, and that's encouraging but you know, we really have a long way to go here in Alabama.

HAAKE: Yes, we were just showing the numbers on the screen. I want to ask you the same question I asked Dr. Osterholm because I imagine you deal with lots of people who you do occasionally successfully convince to get the shot. But thinking of all of our viewers out there who are trying to convince a family member, or relative, or friend to do so now, what do you find is effective when you're trying to convince people this is the best thing to do for themselves and for their loved ones?

HARRIS: Yes, you know, just like we said, there are a lot of different reasons people are hesitant. There are a lot of different things that you have to try and we push all the buttons that we can in a way. We really encourage people just to have conversations with their own health care providers if they have one.

[13:30:00]

You know, if you talk to your doctor who knows you and your family, and your kids, that's probably the voice that's going to be most trusted. But, you know, on the other hand when we see people for whom there's really not a lack of information, that's the problem.

There are people that just have a lot of mistrust. You know, we've seen for the last couple of years now how much distrust we have across the country. There's a lot -- you know, a lot of people grouped into partisan camps. And they just don't always trust messengers from the other side.

So I think having a one-on-one relationship with someone, you know, which is really labor intensive and really hard to do. That's the best way to get people to know that you care about them, you're trying to help them make the best decision, and you're trying to give them the best information, and ultimately you just have to trust people to make that decision and sometimes they do the right thing and sometimes they don't.

HAAKE: I think that's really good advice.

Dr. Scott Harris, thank you very much.

And as we mentioned, President Biden is scheduled to deliver remarks on COVID vaccinations coming up. We will bring those remarks to you when they begin. And as we wait, we'll head to Capitol Hill where a major standoff between nine moderate Democrats and Speaker Pelosi is now underway.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HAAKE: Welcome back. The House is back from recess but the internal Democratic standoff on reconciliation continues. And it's really not even about the bottom line or the makeup of the sweeping budget package, it's about the timing.

[13:35:05]

Nine House Democrats say they won't vote yes on the budget reconciliation unless they get a vote on the Senate's bipartisan infrastructure package first, a plan that goes in the face of Speaker Pelosi's approach.

The nine wrote in a "Washington Post" op-ed that you don't hold up a major priority for the country and millions of jobs as some form of leverage. The infrastructure bill, they say, is not a political football.

And that group of moderates got some pretty substantial backup this morning with the always important West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin backing their position. The House Democratic Caucus will meet in person tonight ahead of a procedural vote on the budget resolution. The moderates say their ultimate threat is serious, but if the budget reconciliation plan goes down it would take the bulk of President Biden's domestic agenda with it. Potentially for good.

My NBC News colleague Sahil Kapur is on Capitol Hill.

And Sahil, part of what the moderates have been saying here is they think they are doing what Joe Biden wants, but you've got new reporting that suggests that's not the case at all.

SAHIL KAPUR, NBC NEWS NATIONAL POLITICAL REPORTER CORRESPONDENT: That's right, Garrett. There's a strange shadow boxing match going on with the moderates trying to one up the progressives by saying we're on President Biden's side. We are only asking for swift passage of this infrastructure bill because President Biden has called for the House to vote on it swiftly before moving to the budget bill.

Well, I took that to the White House and asked, and their response was categorical no. President Biden has not called on the House to pass that infrastructure bill. He has not taken a position specifically on the sequencing, and White House spokesman Andrew Bates telling me that he supports Speaker Pelosi's approach to the rule that brings both these bills up (INAUDIBLE), looks forward to signing both pieces of the legislation.

And this is significant because the moderates are positioning themselves on the side of President Biden. The White House is saying that's not really the case. Biden is not explicitly weighing in, Garrett, on the sequencing of this because he tried that once before a few months ago, and it didn't really worked out very well for him. He had to backtrack.

But at the end of the day this White House is not about to second guess Speaker Pelosi when it comes to the process of getting these two major pieces of the president's agenda on his desk.

HAAKE: See, and I keep waiting for the president to weigh in again because it feels like Speaker Pelosi has a limited tool kit here. Not a small tool kit, but less expansive than she would like. But one of the tools is a still popular president of the United States who all these moderates need to be popular and to have gotten things done for their own reelections.

So do you have any sense of whether that's been an ask from Speaker Pelosi or whether Biden could ultimately be the one to lean on those moderates here?

KAPUR: I think firstly, Garrett, it is absolutely implied, and it's pretty well understood throughout the House Democratic caucus that if President Biden is weakened, they're weakened. Ironically it's these moderate House Democrats many of whom are from swing districts who have the most to lose if President Biden's agenda goes down in flames.

They want to take this home, specifically the infrastructure bill home, and campaign on this, tell their voters that Democrats did something big and to reelect them to keep them in the House majority for a while. You can't do that if President Biden's agenda goes down and he is weakened. If his poll numbers take a tumble all these Democrats have a tougher time getting reelected.

But at the end of the day, the Democratic leadership including Speaker Pelosi has leaned somewhat to a certain extent on President Biden to help get this over the line. Ultimately Pelosi is about as good a vote counter as this place has seen in a very long time. She rarely miscalculates.

But, Garrett, I don't think she has the votes just yet. She does not have the vote for that budget resolution which she's planning to put out on the floor tomorrow. Locked up at this moment but she sounds confident. She's putting out letter after letter including another one to Democrats just in the last hour sounding very confident of success. Something has got to give here and somebody is really miscalculating.

HAAKE: There are also a bit of a pile on here from progressives. I want to play a little bit of this ad from the Justice Democrats targeting these moderate nine. Listen to this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: These nine conservative Democrats are sabotaging Biden's agenda because it would make billionaires and corporations pay their fair share. Tell Representative Gottheimer stop obstructing President Biden and start working for the American people.

(END OF VIDEO CLIP)

HAAKE: Progressives making Josh Gottheimer famous here is an interesting strategy. Just quickly, could that backfire? These moderates probably like being able to go home and say, I'm standing up to the most progressive elements of the Democratic Party, do they not?

KAPUR: Absolutely, Garrett. It is very comfortable for Josh Gottheimer or even someone like Carolyn Bourdeaux down in Georgia to be at odds with the progressive wing on this. But look, Justice Democrats has issued threats to incumbent lawmakers and they've taken down some high-profile lawmakers. So I wouldn't call them completely paper tigers here. Joe Crowley might be able to speak to that. Eliot Engel, both of whom got primaried by Democrats backed by Justice Democrats and lost their seats as a result of it.

So I think they are trying to deliver a warning shot to Democrats that yes, you might be getting cover from centrist groups, like No Labels but you will be getting pushback from the left. Could they primary them?

[13:40:01]

This group has not been successful at all in primarying Democrats in swing districts. They've been successful in dark blue districts. So it's a whole new dynamic borne out of desperation to get this reconciliation package through and to maximize progressive leverage in doing that, Garrett.

HAAKE: All right, Sahil Kapur, thanks. A lot to watch up there in the next 36 hours or so.

And now a quick update on another political story, this one in New York. In the last hour embattled New York Governor Andrew Cuomo gave his farewell address to New Yorkers on his last full day in office after serving a decade. In his remarks, he called the attorney general's report that led to his resignation a political firecracker and he was defiant until the bitter end claiming that the truth would be revealed.

Cuomo's resignation marks a significant milestone as Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul will now be the first female governor in New York state history. Cuomo is stepping down of course following several sexual harassment allegations and an impeachment inquiry. The political storm happening amid an actual storm in New York as Tropical Storm Henri was dumping massive amounts of rain on New York over these last few days.

And of course we'll have an update next on Henri as it makes its way through the northeast. Plus we'll go to Tennessee where at least 22 people are dead and dozens are still missing after record-breaking floods left part of that state in ruins.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

HAAKE: Welcome back. We're tracking the aftermath of Tropical Storm Henri as it brings a final round of heavy rain to the northeast including parts of New England. Right now cleanup efforts are underway in Rhode Island which saw massive wind gusts up to 78 miles per hour and thousands of residence there still remain without power.

In New York Henri dropped a record-breaking rainfall giving the city its wettest day in seven years and its rainiest hour over 150 years of recorded history.

Turning now to Tennessee where at least 22 people are dead and dozens more are missing after massive flash floods hit part of the state this weekend.

[13:45:06]

As you could see, the floods damaged houses, swept away cars and brought down power lines leaving residents without any cell service to contact emergency services or loved ones. According to the sheriff's office in the area, search and rescue operations are ongoing.

NBC's Sam Brock filed this report for us from Waverly, Tennessee.

SAM BROCK, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Garrett, it's good to be with you and some surprising numbers this morning out of Humphreys County where we are. We're about an hour and a half west of Nashville where they confirmed 40 people are now missing. That number was 25 to start the day.

Surprising, Garrett, because cell service and power has been restored in the last couple of days and yet the number would start to go down has now gone back up. It is extremely disconcerting within the context of what we've seen here. Talking to neighbors about the fact that there have been homes picked up off of their foundations and swept across the street. As you look out of this yard here, that house used to be here is now dangling over the creek bed.

You see H-Vac units in the middle of this lawn, and even farther down if you continue on the same line of sight, cars that are crisscrossing at a 45-degree angle into a home. There's actually three different homes all congested in that one block. And if you keep going down the street you'll find another house that's wedged into a gas station.

I spoke with one woman who lives in this neighborhood, works here as well for 30 years. She told me that in 2010 they saw historic floods, once in 100 years, here we are 11 years later and it's another flood that's even worse. Here's how she described it.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BROCK: What have the last three days been like for you?

JANET RICE, WAVERLY, TENNESSEE RESIDENT: Surreal, horrific. Everyone is lost and hearing stories. The last flood in 2010 was supposed to be the 100-year flood and it wasn't anything compared to this. Nothing. Nothing.

(END OF VIDEO CLIP)

BROCK: Garrett, one other way to look at this, the normally docile creek over my shoulder was so swollen this weekend after 17 inches of rain, that it raged not just over this lot where I'm standing, but across the street up to the porch of the people that live there.

I spoke with one woman who's 69 years old. She said she was looking out of her window and seeing all these massive objects floating through the street, she started she said to be paralyzed with fear as to what was going on. Someone came over and helped pick her up and carry her as the water was rushing. We'll have her story coming up on "NBC NIGHTLY NEWS" this evening.

Now, reporting from Waverly, Sam Brock, NBC News. Let me send it back to you, Garrett.

HAAKE: Pretty surreal pictures down there. Sam Brock, thanks.

Coming up, what's next for Texas Democrats and voters as the state's Republicans say they've reached a quorum allowing them to take up that new restrictive voting legislation.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[13:51:11]

HAAKE: Welcome back. We are still awaiting the president to deliver remarks on COVID vaccinations, but meanwhile after a standoff that lasted more than a month, Texas Republicans say there is a quorum in the Statehouse of Representatives which would allow them to take up a bill similar to the sweeping voting legislation passed by the Texas Senate.

More than 50 of the statehouse's -- excuse me, the statehouse Democrats fled to Washington, D.C. last month as Republicans prepared to bring the voting legislation to the floor. But enough Democrats appear to have returned to Texas to let business proceed. Many House Democrats are still avoiding the capitol and calling on their colleagues to deny a quorum on these votes.

The voting bill that passed the Texas Senate this special session would restrict in mail-in voting, eliminate some early voting options like 24-hour voting in Harris County, and add criminal penalties for voting law violations as well as empower partisan poll watchers.

Joining me now is one of those Texas Democratic representatives who broke quorum and is still breaking quorum, Trey Martinez Fischer. He represents the San Antonio area.

And with apologies if the president shows up and I have to interrupt you. First off, Republicans say they have quorum. Many Democrats say they are not 99 members at the statehouse. So when the House convenes later today, what's going to happen?

STATE REP. TREY MARTINEZ FISCHER (D-TX): Well, first, Garrett, you know, when the Republicans said they made quorum last week, they used a roll call vote that was 12 days old, so I don't believe they have a legitimate quorum. They may have one today. I'm not going to be part of that. I'm not going to make that quorum. I think our Democratic members, even those that want to go back, are beginning to have second thoughts to question legitimacy of the quorum announcement last week.

But, you know, make no mistake, if there is a quorum, you know, I think we're going down the wrong road here. We already see Republicans acting at least with the bills in committee, no negotiations, no discussion,

no public testimony. They're treating the committee process as if it's the floor which means the bills could be heard in 40 minutes. That's not being bipartisan or pragmatic.

HAAKE: You mentioned the Democrats going back who might be, you know, having cold feet now about the fact that they did go back. But a couple of them put out a statement, three of them in fact, that said, "We're proud of the historic work and commitment we and our fellow Democratic caucus members have shown in breaking quorum in May and again over this summer." But they go on to say, "It's time to move past these partisan legislative calls and to come together to help our state mitigate the effects of the current COVID-19 surge."

So essentially saying the pandemic crisis requires their return to work. I wonder what you make of that argument from your fellow Democrats.

MARTINEZ FISCHER: Well, I can tell you there is a court opinion in the city of San Antonio that is much stronger and is going to more for protecting people against COVID than what we can do on the House floor. In fact the legislation on the House floor is to un-do what an appellate court just did here in San Antonio that said local governments run your cities, school districts require masks in schools. The attempt is to un-do it, not to help.

And then number two, listen, you know, people have got to do what they think they have to do but we work on consensus and we work on transparency. And unfortunately, you know, the announcement for them to go back wasn't really made known to the wider caucus, and so, you know, it is what it is. But there is a large number of us that still are committed to this fight. We want to see reforms at the national level. We will continue to hold out unless and until we can get a federal voting rights proposal on the president's desk.

HAAKE: Yes. What does that commitment look like? I mean, you -- how long can you stay away from providing a quorum? A year? Until the next election? And look, I've got to tell you, I mean, I cover Congress, I don't think the cavalry is coming to help you guys in terms of a federal voting rights law any time soon.

MARTINEZ FISCHER: Sure. And I appreciate that perspective. You know, I believe in hope, I believe in moral consciousness.

[13:55:01]

I think voting rights is elevated to the top of the national talking point for a reason because people are fed up. And frankly, when you look at the redistricting process in this country, four states controlled by Republicans can flip the balance of the U.S. House, so if that's not important to people in Washington, D.C., I don't know what is. Having independent redistricting commissions as proposed in S-1 would certainly make redistricting a lot fairer when it comes to drawing congressional districts.

HAAKE: I think I only have about 30 seconds left, but I'm curious, you know, we've seen in Georgia where there was another big fight over a big restrictive voting rights law, huge percentage of the population there, record-breaking numbers getting registered to vote. If you're not successful in forcing the federal government's hand or in blocking that state law, do you feel like you've engaged Texans? I mean, the Texas voter registration numbers, participation numbers have always been dismal?

MARTINEZ FISCHER: In a matter of seconds, I mean, this proposal on the House floor would make it harder to vote by mail, it would make it harder for people to early vote, and so yes, despite that, Texans are still voting. I believe Republicans see this leadership and this majority slipping through their fingers, and if they cannot change the minds of voters through voter persuasion, they will change the rules to hang on to the power, and that's what we see happening here in the state.

HAAKE: All right, Texas State Representative Trey Martinez Fischer, thank you. Always good to have a fellow Texan on.

And thank you all for being with us in this hour. Chuck will be back tomorrow with more MEET THE PRESS DAILY. MSNBC coverage continues with Geoff Bennett right after this break.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

GEOFF BENNETT, MSNBC HOST: And there is President Biden speaking at the White House about the FDA authorization -- the full authorization of the Pfizer vaccine. Let's take you now to the White House.

JOE BIDEN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Our nation's fight against COVID. Food and Drug Administration, the FDA announced it has fully concluded, it is now, it is a thorough independent scientific review. After a strict process, the FDA has reaffirmed its findings that the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective, and the FDA has given its full and final approval.

So let me say this loudly and clearly. If you have -- if you're one of the millions of Americans who said that they will not get the shot until it has full and final approval of the FDA, it has now happened. The moment you've been waiting for is here. It's time for you to go get your vaccination, and get it today. Today.

It's an important moment in our fight against the pandemic. You know, I want to thank the acting commissioner Janet Woodcock and the entire team at the FDA for their hard work. Dr. Woodcock is a true professional. She's a career scientist who served under Republican presidents and Democratic presidents. She's ensured that the team follow the science above all. They've looked at the mountains of clinical trial data and the safety and efficiency data, and concluded without question the vaccine was safe and effective for emergency use in December.

That same thing we've got those shots in arms at the time, 350 million in the United States, and billions across the world. They kept poring over this data. The FDA approval is the gold standard and as I just said, now it has been granted. Those who have been waiting for full approval should go get your shot now. The vaccination is free. It's easy, it's safe and it's effective. And it's convenient.

For 90 percent of Americans, there is a vaccination site less than five miles from your home. And you can get the shot without an appointment, so please, get your shot today. There is no time to waste. The Delta variant is dangerous and spreading, causing a pandemic of the unvaccinated. That's the pandemic of the unvaccinated.

And while we're starting to see initial signs that cases may be declining in a few places, nationwide cases are still rising, especially among the unvaccinated.

END

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