

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, January 10, 2022

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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MS. PSAKI: Hi, everyone. Okay, just one item for all of you at the top. And I just have a hard out at five of, but I think we can get around to everybody in the room.

Today, the President spoke with the New York City mayor, Eric Adams, to express his heartfelt condolences and offer his support following yesterday's devastating fire at a Bronx apartment building, which took the lives of at least 19 people.

In the wake of this terrible tragedy, the President wanted to reach out to offer comfort and also offer support in case there's anything the mayor needs.

Our hearts go out to everyone who was impacted, and we are — we are very appreciative of the heroic work of the first responders who were on the scene so quickly.

I know some of you have asked about assistance. I'm not aware of any requests for federal assistance. But, of course, we will let you know if there's anything to share. And we will remain in close contact with leaders there as well.

With that, Zeke, why don't you kick us off?

Q Thanks, Jen. Starting with the talks in Geneva right now, has the President been briefed on the — on the rounds of negotiations over the past couple of days? And what is the current U.S. government assessment of Russian intentions when it comes to Eastern Ukraine?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the President meets, as you know, regularly with his national security team — members of his national security team, as he did this morning. I don't mean a formal NSC meeting; I mean the regular PDB meeting where he is — receives regular updates.

As you know, those talks just ended late this morning. I think you probably have all seen Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman did a briefing following the conclusion of those as well.

I would just reiterate some of the points that she made, of course: that these talks were frank, that — and forthright, and there was a discussion from the United — from the U.S. side of what our expectations are, and a reiteration of what you've heard the President say and what you've heard many officials from the United States say, which is that there are two paths for Russia to take at this point — for President Putin to take.

He can take the path to diplomacy — there's two more rounds of talks this week; we've seen them as a package of three, which I think they also reiterated from their side — or there's a path of escalation. We are certainly hopeful that the path of diplomacy is the path that they will take.

There are, of course, a range of topics discussed during that meeting, including a reiteration of what is at stake should they decide to move forward and invade Ukraine.

In terms of an assessment of where they stand, I would really leave that to the Russians to articulate. We can't give an assessment of that from here, and Deputy Secretary Sherman did not as well.

Q And what would it look like for the Russians to choose the diplomatic path? Is that just — does that mean they have to withdraw some of their forward deployed forces on the border with Ukraine in order to have that more sustained engagement, or it just not invading further would keep the diplomatic pathway — conversation alive?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Zeke, there are 100,000 troops at the border now. Obviously, returning those troops to the barracks — returning troops to the barracks, conveying to us their intention of doing that is certainly — would be easy ways to show de-escalation.

As I noted a little bit earlier, we see this as a path — as a — as a set of three rounds of conversations that will occur this week.

As you've heard many of our national security officials state, but I will reiterate from here: No talks without — about Europe without Europe, no talks without — about Ukraine without Ukraine. And that is certainly our mentality.

So, we are moving forward with the other two rounds of talks and discussions here. But, absolutely, the aggressive action, the bellicose rhetoric came from the Russians, so they have the ability and the power to de-escalate.

Q And turning to the President's trip tomorrow to Atlanta — Karine got this question on the plane on Friday, but a number of advocates for voting rights and other issues down there have said the President should not come down unless he has a plan to actually pass voting rights legislation. What is the

President's plan to — is it past that, or is he going down there without a plan?

MS. PSAKI: Well, his plan is to sign voting rights legislation into law. That requires a majority of senators to support it, even if there are changes to the — the Senate rules, which is something the President has expressed an openness to.

But let me give you a little bit of a preview of what people can expect to hear from him tomorrow. I would just note that the backdrop of where he's going is vitally important here, as we were planning the trip. In a — it's in a place with profound civil rights history — the Atlanta University Center Consortium on the grounds of Clark Atlanta University and Morehouse College in Atlanta.

The President will forcefully advocate for protecting the most bedrock American right: the right to vote and have your voice counted in a free, fair, and secure election that is not tainted [sic] — tainted [sic] — tainted by partisan manipulation.

He'll make clear, in the former district of the late Congressman John Lewis, that the only way to do that are for the Senate to pass the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

He will follow his remarks from last week, on the anniversary of January 6th — where he did touch on voting rights and that fundamental importance of protecting that right — when an unprecedented insurrection sought to violently overturn the outcome of what the Trump administration's top election security officials confirmed was the most secure election in history, by saying that he will stand in the breach and keep fighting for the soul of America.

And he'll also describe this as one of the rare moments in a country's history when time stops and the essential is immediately ripped away from the trivial, and that we have to ensure January 6th doesn't mark the end of democracy but the beginning of a renaissance for our democracy where we stand up for the right to vote and have that vote counted fairly, not undermined by partisans afraid of who you voted for or try to reverse an outcome.

I would also note one other piece I think you can — you will hear more from him on tomorrow: is he's quite focused on how — ensuring the American people understand what is at stake here.

Sometimes we all are — we all shorthand legislation or shorthand what we're talking about, and protecting the fundamental right to vote means he's going to also talk about what the changes have meant in states like Georgia across the country, what is at stake for voters in Georgia and other states across the country, and why this is so imperative it move forward.

Q And just, lastly, Senator Schumer set a deadline of a week from now for the Senate to pass this legislation or change Senate rules. Is the President optimistic that that can happen on that timeframe? Or does he think that that is maybe too ambitious?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he's going to continue to work in lockstep with Leader Schumer on moving this vote forward. But beyond that, we're taking it day by day to press for the vote to happen and to be successful.

Go ahead.

Q Just following up on some of those questions. So, on Atlanta, will Stacey Abrams be joining the President during any of these remarks?

MS. PSAKI: Andrea, I know we'll have a list — there will be a number of elected officials joining us, traveling and also there. I think we're still finalizing that list. And we will venture to get you that as soon as possible.

Q Okay. And then just — our favorite topic is the Fed nominations that we were expecting in December. Are you — can you give us any kind of guidance on when we could expect those?

MS. PSAKI: We — we hope —

Q A little bit more specific than "soon"?

MS. PSAKI: I wish I had something more specific to deliver to you today. But I can just continue to reiterate we — the President looks forward to announcing those soon.

Q Okay. And then, just on the Fed issue, Elizabeth Warren has spoken out about reports that indicate that Governor Clarida made some purchases and sales, and is calling for greater transparency. Is this an issue that the President is engaged on? And do you think it's time for a — kind of a more serious look at what is — you know, what the rules are that govern the Federal Reserve's actions and — of its top officials?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the — we and the President deeply respect the independence of the Federal Reserve. And we're not going to comment on recent developments.

But I can say, broadly speaking, the President believes that all government agencies and officials — including the Federal Reserve, including independent agencies — should be held to the highest ethical standards,

including the avoidance of any suggestions of conflict — conflicts of indrest [sic] — of interest.

The Fed is obviously an independent agency, as I've stated a few times; it has its own ethics rules and requirements, including new rules issued in October to address conflicts. And so we defer to that agency about any specific follow-ups.

Q And just to follow up on the issue — on that issue with the Fed: So, I understand it's an independent agency, but, you know, if an independent agency is — if officials at an independent agency are not following the rules to the letter or if those rules don't seem like they're covering the whole thing, is it time to take a closer look, even beyond what happened in October?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, Andrea, I think the President respects the independence of the Federal Reserve. I just noted that they have their own ethics rules and requirements. They put new rules in place in October. I'd point you to them.

But the President's expectation that all government agencies and officials, including independent agencies, are held to a high standard, a high ethical — with high ethical standards, avoiding conflict of interest speaks for itself.

Q Okay. And then just one more question on COVID. So, we know that the — we know that the rapid test — you know, contracts have gone out, but they've gone to companies that basically procure materials as opposed to companies that are manufacturing the tests. Are you satisfied that there's adequate testing of — you know, manufacturing capability in place and going to procure the tests?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me give you a little bit of an update on, kind of, a couple

of timelines — or updates on timelines, I should say, on where things stand. We're working closely with manufacturers and distributors to understand what they can ship and by when, as well as actively working through the timelines for distribution.

As you kind of touched on there in your question, there are several components of this. So, we want to ensure that there's not only the physical tests, but the ability to distribute them, which is what we're working through right now.

We expect that the contracts are structured in a way to require that significant amounts are delivered on an aggressive timeline, the first of which should be arriving early next week. We expect to have all contracts awarded over the next two weeks, and then Americans will begin being able to order these tests online later this month.

We also expect to have details on the website as well as a hotline later this week.

So, these are all components that we're working through and working to expedite as quickly as possible.

Q And on the hospitalizations, which are now at a record level, are you — is there anything that the federal government can do to augment the capacity of hospitals, which are now having to cancel selective surgeries, I think, in something like more than half of U.S. states? Is that something where DOD could come in with mobile field hospitals perhaps to just offer additional capacity?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we actually have deployed a number of resources from —

to surge resources over the course of the last several months. We will continue to do that. And we're working with local health authorities, state leaders, local leaders to determine where there are the greatest needs.

But we have deployed a range of resources — many of them through FEMA — to ensure that local communities who have high — higher surges or diff- — needs in different ways, I should say, have resources from the federal government.

Go ahead.

Q On the kind of nascent bipartisan talks related to, kind of, a more scaled-back, targeted approach on the Electoral Count Act, your colleague, Mr. Bates, was quite definitive that that wasn't really an option the White House was pursuing right now. "It certainly is no substitute," I think to use his words. Is part of the reason for being so definitive on that is that you don't want an off-ramp for two Democratic senators, in particular, to point to instead of considering a rules change to the Senate?

MS. PSAKI: I've always known my colleague, Mr. Bates, to be definitive. I don't know if you all experienced that as well.

But I think what — what our position is from here and what the position of many advocates for voting rights and many Democrats on the Hill is, is that it is not a substitute. And we should not treat it like a substitute, because the two bills that the President will talk about tomorrow have essential components of them that will protect people's fundamental rights, expand access, ensure that people know that when they vote, it will count and not be overturned. And we want to be very clear with the public that it is not a replacement or a substitute.

Q Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has declared war on this effort over the course of the last several weeks on the Senate floor. His office put out a lengthy memo last night that said, in part, Democrats will try to use, quote, “fake hysteria to break the Senate and silence millions of Americans’ voices so they can take over elections.” The President has been a little sharper towards Republicans. Do you have a response to that memo and Leader McConnell?

MS. PSAKI: I — it is pretty ironic. If making it more difficult to vote is not silencing the voices of people — words that Senator McConnell used — I don’t know what is.

I also think it’s important to note here: If you look back at Leader McConnell’s record from the past, he has a pretty strong record of supporting voting rights. And what has changed? That’s a question for him, less for us. But I will — I will give you a few examples:

2004, Leader McConnell: “I cannot think of any reason why anyone on either side of the aisle would oppose the protection of the franchise of all Americans.”

2006: “The Voting Rights Act of 1965 represents one of this country’s greatest steps forward. Obviously, I rise today in support of its reauthorization.”

Again, 2006: He wrote in his memoir that he was “overwhelmed to witness such a moment in history” when the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965.

So, I use those examples to remind people that this should not be a partisan

issue — protecting people’s fundamental voting rights; that people should be protecting them and standing up for Americans of all political stripes. That is what we are working to do.

And what we’re talking about here is fighting against the Big Lie that was perpetuated after January 6th in — around January 6th, I should say — by many — far too many Republicans in Congress, and it has resulted in states across the country putting in place more laws that are making it more difficult for people to exercise their rights.

We don’t think that is right. We don’t think that is a political issue; it is a fundamental right in this country, and it should be.

Q One more — just on Build Back Better, because I have to ask about that at the press briefing. Look, I understand you guys can walk and chew gum at the same time. But in talking to Democrats in both chambers — some over here as well — there’s just not a lot of sense that the conversations you guys have said are ongoing right now are going at a pretty significant clip or are substantive at this point. So, where are you guys? And what are the next steps here?

MS. PSAKI: Well, our conversations are continuing behind the scenes at a staff level. And I can assure you that — and assure the American people — that the President is going to continue to press to get Build Back Better done to ensure that we are lowering costs for Americans across the country, most importantly, to ensure we are lowering costs for Americans across the country on childcare, on eldercare, on healthcare; addressing the climate crisis.

We know that we were — we need 50 votes in order to get that legislation

done. And we need to figure out what that looks like to get that legislation done.

But those conversations are happening behind the scenes, and the President remains absolutely committed to getting –lowering costs for the American people.

Go ahead, Kelly.

Q On voting rights: When you do hear the criticism from some advocates about “don’t come without the plan,” or others who say the President has not been personally enough involved — as he heads to this, does he feel he has the political influence to be the tipping point this week?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Kelly, it’s a hard question to answer because, really, what we’re talking about is whether we can get enough votes in Congress to get this done. And that’s why I think it’s important to note that the President will talk about this as a fundamental right for all Americans, something that there has been a history of supporting from both sides of the aisle, something that the public should expect and demand from their elected officials to support.

I think we would dispute the notion that the President hasn’t been active or vocal. He’s given a range of speeches. He’s advocated for voting rights to pass. He said it is a fundamental priority for his presidency. And he has agreed with his Vice President that she would lead this effort.

We understand the frustration by many advocates that this is not passed into law yet. He would love to have signed this into law himself. But tomorrow is an opportunity to speak about what the path forward looks like to advocate for — for this moving forward in the Senate.

Q Can you speak to the role of the Vice President tomorrow and what she will be talking about, and how that relates to the President's message?

MS. PSAKI: Absolutely. The Vice President, of course, has an important role to play here as the person who is leading this effort and will continue to lead this effort from the administration. She has worked to date to help build a groundswell of support — something that many grassroots advocates have been working on for many years now, but she has met with a number of these advocates, she has engaged, and she is going to continue to speak about voting rights across the country.

In terms of the preview of her remarks, we're not quite there yet. Maybe we'll have some more to say about hers and the President's later this evening. We'll see.

Q And as the President has heard feedback from Geneva on the state of the negotiations or conversations there, is he giving any sort of incremental instructions to Wendy Sherman and the team about things he would like introduced into the talks, or is he leaving that to be an on-the-ground, sort of, discussion for those who are in the room and handling it physically there?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he is in regular touch with members of his national security team, and they are in touch with team members on the ground. So, I would say we are looking, again, at this week as a set of conversations. And we will see and be able to assess where things stand better at the end of that.

I will note a couple of things that — as you're looking at this: We are preparing ourselves for the possibility and likelihood — no one should be surprised, I should say, if Russia spreads disinformation about commitments

that have not been made, or if it goes even further and instigates something as a pretext for further destabilizing activity. And so, we would continue to urge everyone not to fall for any attempts to push disinformation out there.

But the — for the President, the most important thing to convey and that he's conveying to his team is that no talks without — no talks about Europe without Europe, no talks about Ukraine without Ukraine.

We had these discussions with the Russians today. They are important conversations that will be happening on the 12th in Brussels and the 13th in Vienna. And this is just one part of a three-set series of discussions happening this week.

Go ahead. Oh, sorry, Peter — I'll come back to you. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Q Thank you very much. Can I ask you for the latest on the Chicago schools closure dispute? The governor announced over the weekend the availability of tests. He'd previously sought the administration's help in procuring tests. Can you say whether the 350,000 they procured involved federal involvement at all and whether those talks are ongoing?

And broadly, do you have any message to both the Chicago Teachers Union and the mayor of Chicago on what you hope to see there in the coming days? This, of course, is the fourth day in a row without any school there.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say first that we are in regular touch with the governor and his team and the mayor as well, so we can continue to convey — have those conversations behind the scenes.

We have been very clear, publicly and privately, that we want to see schools

open; that the President fought for additional assistance in the American Rescue Plan — \$130 billion, including \$5 billion that went to Illinois, \$10 billion that went to testing across the country — to ensure we were prepared and had resources needed to address whatever may come up in the pandemic.

But we are having these conversations. We are in regular touch with them — both the mayor and the governor. And we'll continue to see how we can assist from here.

Q Given the mayor is a prominent member of the President's party, has he spoken to her directly? I mean, does he feel the need to intervene here? It seems like it's sort of an exceptional case in Chicago when so many other cities are reopening that it's bucking a trend in some ways.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'm not going to obviously speak for the mayor, but I think the mayor has also conveyed what her view is here as well.

The President's view is to — that schools should be open across the country, and more than 95 percent are across the country; that the mental health impact on kids of not having schools open is very harsh and hard, and he does not want to see schools closed across the country.

So, that — there's no secret about that. That continues to be what he states. That's why he fought for funding. And we will continue to be in touch with local leaders in Chicago to work to get their schools open.

Q And Jake Sullivan had a statement over the weekend with regards to Iran and sanctions —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q — and he alluded to the threats against American officials. Should we interpret from that that the U.S.'s intelligence — that there have been threats, in particular against Trump officials who were involved in the Soleimani strike?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'm not going to get into intelligence here, from the podium. But we've certainly seen concerning public rhetoric from Iranian officials about individuals from previous administrations, even before sanctions from this weekend, and that's unacceptable.

As the National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, said in his statement over the weekend that you just referenced: As Americans, we have our disagreements on politics...on Iran policy," and other issues, of course. "But we are united in our resolve against threats and provocations. We're united in the defense of our people." And we're going to protect and defend our own people.

But I'm not going to get into more specifics. Obviously, they announced the sanctioning of more than 50 individuals and have made public comments in addition that are certainly available to anyone.

Q If I —

MS. PSAKI: Oh, go ahead.

Q Sorry, sorry. One more.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead. You're fine. You're fine. We're good. Go ahead.

Q Speaker Pelosi opened the door to maybe some sort of virus aid measure coming through. Do you have any new update on whether the White House is involved in any talks towards that — for instance, restaurants, of course, has had some traction in the Senate of a potential top-up of that fund?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we — we certainly agree with Speaker Pelosi on a lot of things, but on the fact that — on what she said this weekend, which is that we're not going to let a lack of resources get in the way of fighting the pandemic.

We have been in constant conversation with leaders and with the Hill and members about what may be needed, whether that's more to address COVID or small businesses and help keep them afloat. I don't have anything specific at this point in time, but we're going to continue to assess what the needs are and stay in close touch with them about that.

Q Thank you.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. I was home all last week isolating.

MS. PSAKI: Welcome back.

Q Thank you. I was isolating with COVID after a positive test, like a lot of people watching. And — a lot of time in front of the TV.

I heard the President say —

MS. PSAKI: Did you watch Fox the whole time, or other things?

Q I have exhausted the full catalogue of Guy Fieri content.

MS. PSAKI: Oo-kay. (Laughs.)

Q And obviously, a lot of Fox.

But I heard the President say, "Google 'COVID test near me.'" So, somebody isolating with COVID, I did that. And the appointments everywhere were completely jammed. So, why is it that you guys were so unprepared for the need for testing after the holidays?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Peter, I'm happy to see you back and well. I would, second, say that there has been a massive surge in cases, as you know and were part of, in D.C. and New York. And there's been an unprecedented — and other parts of the country as well. There's been an unprecedented demand for tests.

So what we have done over the course of the last few weeks, even before that, is the President quadrupled our testing capacity since the summer, we opened 20,000 sites across the country, and we have also opened additional federal sites, including one in D.C. only recently.

He's also provided — we've — also in the process of sending 50 million tests out to community health centers and rural health centers. And now we've just — we're in the process of finalizing contracts for 500 million tests.

Q But —

MS. PSAKI: But what — can I make one more point and then you can go next? I would just note where we have come from. If you look to a year ago, there were no tests — or maybe one, depending on the timeline — that was available on the market. Now we have nine. If you look to about a year ago, there was about 900,000, or maybe slightly higher, tests that were being issued every day. Now we're at about 10 or 11 million. Three hundred million tests are done in this country every month.

So there's enormous progress being made, but we needed to make sure the market was growing — that's what we've been working on — and increase our access to supply, and that's what we've been doing.

Q The test you're talking about, though, require people to go somewhere and either make an appointment or wait in line. The CDC's guidance is: If you think you have COVID, you're supposed to stay home. You guys said you were going to mail free tests to people that need them. The President is there, on television, talking about a "winter of severe illness and death."

While he's saying that publicly, why weren't you guys doing more to prepare for the winter?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Peter, everyone decides where they're going to go get a test. And we make a range of options available. You can also purchase tests online. Later today, we'll have more details on how 150 million Americans who have health insurance can get reimbursed for tests. So, we'll have more details on that later.

The 500 million tests I noted — and I gave you a little bit of an update on the timeline — we'll have more on the website later this week.

So our steps and our process from the beginning has been expanding access to free tests, to make it easy and more accessible for Americans. And we're continuing to build on what we've done to date.

Q But the President talked about a "winter of severe illness and death." At the rate you guys are going, these tests are not going to be available until spring. So will you admit that these free tests you guys promised are not going to be ready until after the Omicron surge?

MS. PSAKI: I think I gave an update earlier that we'll have — start to have tests out the door in the coming weeks — very soon.

Q Okay.

MS. PSAKI: And again, that's not the only place people can get tests. There are a range of ways people can get tests online. Again, you'll know more about how you can be reimbursed for those tests from here. Go to different sites — there are federal sites opening up all around the country.

Q And we understand that you guys plan to rely on the Postal Service to send out these free tests whenever they're ready. But the Postal Service says they're going to have a staffing shortage because of your vaccine mandate. So, would you pull back on the vaccine mandate if it meant getting people these free tests sooner?

MS. PSAKI: The Postal Service also delivered 98 — 99 percent of packages on time in advance of Christmas. And they also — their leaders have also said they're eager to take on this challenge. So, we welcome that, and we're looking forward to working with them to get these tests out to the public.

Q And I understand that the science says that vaccines prevent death. But I'm triple vaxxed, still got COVID. You're triple vaxxed, still got COVID. Why is the President still referring to this as a "pandemic of the unvaccinated"?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think, Peter, there's a significant difference between — and you just — you just experienced this. And not to expose your public health experience —

Q (Inaudible.)

MS. PSAKI: — but I can speak to mo- — mine as well. I had been triple vaxxed. I had minor symptoms. There is a huge difference between that and being unvaccinated. You are 17 times more likely to go to the hospital if you're not vaccinated, 20 times more likely to die. And those are significant, serious statistics. So, yes, the impact for people who are unvaccinated is far more dire than those who are vaccinated.

Q Will the President update his language at some time to be more reflective of the fact that people who are triple vaccinated are catching and spreading COVID?

MS. PSAKI: I think peo- — the President has said — as have we, a number of times that there will be breakthrough cases. There will be people who get COVID here, at different media organizations, at companies around the world, around the country who have been vaccinated. But there is a significant difference between being hospitalized or dying, and being vaccinated with more mild symptoms.

Q Okay. And then, last one: You guys have been very aggressive

countering COVID misinformation. So, what do you guys think about COVID misinformation coming from the Supreme Court and Sonia Sotomayor's false claim that over 100,000 children are in "serious condition and many on ventilators"?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'm not going to speak to Supreme Court arguments or statements made in those arguments. But I will tell you that what is at stake here is our effort to protect health workers and, most importantly, protect patients with the CMS rule and also to make work places safer with the OSHA rule, which we have confidence in our legal argument for. So, I will leave it to them to decide. But that's what's being argued now.

Go ahead.

Q I know getting ahead of the President before a major speech is one of your favorite things to do, and, that being said, I'm going to try this question anyway. You mentioned that, over the past year, President Biden has expressed more openness about taking a look at filibuster rules, especially when it comes to voting rights. Is that a topic you expect him to directly address tomorrow and get into?

MS. PSAKI: Yes.

Q Is there an announcement in terms of whether it will be more forceful or whether he'll have any specific thing to say other than "I'm open to the idea"?

MS. PSAKI: You know, the President has spoken to this issue a number of times, as I've said before, including as recently as December, where he said that if that is how we get this done, "I'm open to that." But again, he's

working on his speech. You'll have to tune in tomorrow and see what he has to say.

Q Has he had any specific conversations with senators about this legislation, about a rules change in the past couple of weeks?

MS. PSAKI: We're in regular touch at a range of levels with senators. I'm not going to detail those further.

Q And then, the last question: Any response to a recent statement from Senator Sinema's office indicating she would not be in favor of changing the rules and dealing with these two pieces of legislation?

MS. PSAKI: Look, I think that everyone is going to have to take a hard look at where they want to be at this moment in history, as we're looking at efforts across the country to prevent people from being able to exercise their fundamental rights.

Go ahead.

Q Jen, in previewing the President's speech earlier today, you said that he will "forcefully advocate" for the voting rights. Last week's speech on January 6th, the President's speech then was — was viewed as pointed and forceful. In terms of the tone of tomorrow's speech, should we expect something along those lines?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would say that the President will certainly be clear about what is at stake here and how important it is to protect people's fundamental rights across the country.

He felt that a speaking to this warranted a moment where he was going to give a full speech on it. That's exactly why he's going to Georgia, a place with enormous history on civil rights issue, unfortunately enormous recent history on efforts to suppress the vote. So, that is why he's going there.

But January 6th — it's all connected in his view — was certainly a day where he needed to speak very clearly about the role of his predecessor.

Q And just one on COVID. Could you expand just a little bit about — on what the President said last Friday when he was asked about controlling COVID? When he mentioned the "new normal," was he moving away from his campaign pledge of shutting down the virus or changing the messaging at all about COVID-19?

MS. PSAKI: What he's referring to is the fact that we have — now, we're in a different place than we were a year ago: More than 200 million Americans are vaccinated, and more than 71 percent are fully vaccinated. More than 80 percent, or a little higher than that, have had a first dose. We have a range of tools at our disposal, including antivirals and other treatments. So, we're going to continue to expand that, but we are in a different place than we were a year ago.

Go ahead.

Q Does the President feel that forceful speech that he gave last week — does that raise the bar for getting something done? I mean, he's been talking about this for months. He had a speech in July in Philadelphia. Nothing's happened. Has he basically raised expectations here?

MS. PSAKI: About giving good speeches or about — (laughter).

Q No, about — about the voting reform.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think he believes the stakes should be raised. He wouldn't be going to Georgia tomorrow — a place where there is enormous history of — from — of civil rights leaders, of his — of his friend John Lewis — advocating for fundamental rights, including voting rights — if he wasn't ready and prepared to elevate this issue and continue to fight for it.

Q The administration has said that schools have the resources to remain open, yet they're — we're seeing closures, including Chicago. There are still a lot of teachers staying away due to illness or fears — other school personnel. So, what is the White House prepared to do in the event of other school closures due to the lack of personnel?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think it's important to note that more than 95 percent of schools across the country are open and, in part, because of the resources that they were able to receive from the American Rescue Plan. It enabled them to hire more bus drivers, maybe hire more teachers, put in place additional mitigation measures. Many — many secured testing contracts to ensure that there could be regular testing at their schools.

There are some parts of the country where all of those resources haven't been deployed yet. Of course, the Department of Education will continue to work with them. And our Department of Education has also taken steps far in advance of the last few weeks to work with states on anticipating and preparing for labor shortages.

So, we are in touch at every level. What our position continues to be is that schools need to be open. We err on the side of schools being open. We

believe that there are the mitigation measures, the steps, and the resources to do exactly that.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. About those mitigation efforts: One way in which to reduce the spread of COVID is through the use of masks. And health officials have said that these cloth masks are virtually useless. You need to use, they say, a KN95, a K95 mask.

And as I travel — I travel around the country — I see very few people, oftentimes, wearing these types of masks — the KN95 mask.

Any my question is: Is there a federal effort to make certain that these types of masks are available in the inner city, in rural America for people just getting on an airplane? Because this is a better type of mask, as Dr. Fauci has said, than a cloth mask.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would just note that the CDC guidance continues to be: A well-fit mask is the best mask to be wearing. They haven't changed that guidance as of now.

In terms of how these resources — if we talk about schools and keeping schools open — can be used, the purchase of masks certainly could be a part of that. It's up to school districts and local school districts to make those decisions.

We also, of course, work with community health centers, rural health centers, local health leaders on what they feel their needs are and how resources from the American Rescue Plan and COVID packages in the past

should be spent. But the guidance has not changed from the CDC. But we do listen to local health leaders on what their needs are and how the resources that have already been approved can be effectively deployed.

Q So, there's no money then that could be taken from the American Rescue Plan devoted towards this federal effort?

MS. PSAKI: I don't think that's what I said. I think —

Q I'm asking you. I'm asking you that question.

MS. PSAKI: Sure. Well, \$130 billion of the Rescue Plan was for schools. That can be used in a range of ways. And so, some of that money has not even been spent yet. It's — it is all in states, but I think there is an allowance for that. But I can certainly check if there is more specific measures. I just think it's important to note that the CDC has not changed their guidance on masks.

Q And then on those talks that took place in Geneva today between the U.S and Russia: The last time that President Putin spoke about this impasse that exists was during his end-of-the-year press conference. And during that end-of-the-year press conference, President Putin said "the ball is in the U.S. court" on this particular issue, which is different than what you said when I asked you that same question in early December. Do you disagree with that contention that "the ball in the U.S. court" here?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think it's not just about me disagreeing. The facts disagree with that. Russia and President Putin has built up a troop presence of 100,000 troops on the border of Ukraine. They have used bellicose rhetoric. It is up to them to determine if they are going to deescalate. There

is a diplomatic path forward. That is a path forward that remains open. But certainly, it's up to President Putin to make this choice.

I just want to get to everyone, so let me try to jump around to everyone before I have to go.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you, Jen. Just two quick questions. I wondered: A group of congressional Democrats wrote to the White House, urging the President to use executive power to, essentially, use the Defense Production Act to manufacture enough rapid tests so that Americans could each take one test per week. I wonder if the White House had any response to that and if they think that is, you know, an achievable goal — something that they would shoot for — in response to that letter.

MS. PSAKI: Well, we've seen that letter. The good news is that we agree and we're already doing most of what's in that letter. So, we use the Defense Production Act to drive production of these tests, and we'll do so again when it can accelerate production delivery of these tests. We used — deployed \$3 billion for procurement of tests. We used \$3 billion to procure tests, which was — which became a major driver in increase and expanding the market for tests.

And the President's plan to procure and distribute 500 million tests to all Americans is, in and of itself, providing a major stimb- — stimulus for global production of these tests. We agree. That's why we've already used the Defense Production Act.

I know they referenced the hotline. There'll be more details on that this

week.

Our objective here is to expand access to free public testing, as is referenced there. We're already in the process of sending 50 million rapid antigen tests directly to Federally Qualified Health Centers — I know they referenced that — and to rural health clinics. And we're publishing guidance. As I noted, we'll have more details later today on that.

So, the good news is that we agree with what — a lot of what they're saying. And we — we have already taken steps to put in place a number of measures.

Q And just one other one: You mentioned — to follow up on the Chicago schools issue — you mentioned that the administration has been in touch with the mayor and the governor. Has anybody from the administration been in touch directly with the teachers union? And if not, why not?

MS. PSAKI: We are in touch regularly with the teachers union and have certainly been, but I don't have any more details.

Go ahead.

Q Thank you. A couple quick questions here. I know you don't want to weigh in on ongoing litigation before the Supreme Court, but not long ago, in this room, the Surgeon General told us that COVID misinformation was a public health threat. I'm wondering if the White House is at all concerned, given Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor's remarks about the Omicron variant, that maybe the danger is being overhyped and your message is not getting out.

MS. PSAKI: I think I just addressed this. Didn't I answer this question?

Q You answered it. But are you worried that there is misinformation that is being spread, so much so that even a sitting Supreme Court justice has an inaccurate picture of things?

MS. PSAKI: Again, I'm just not going to weigh in on a specific legal argument made in the Court.

Q And then, I know you've been asked several times about Chicago. You said it here, you said it before, you know, that the President clearly wants schools to be open. There's been money that's been allocated. Can we expect that the President will be more aggressive and use the bully pulpit to tell teachers unions in Chicago to get back in the classroom? I mean, this is the third — the nation's third-largest school district.

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, I would note the President has been very clear, as we have been clear: We are on the side of schools being open. That is why he advocated for funding in the American Rescue Plan. And we will continue to convey that clearly, because he believes the mental health impact on kids is — could be dire and it is imperative that kids are in the classroom.

More than 95 percent of schools across the country are doing exactly that, and we're hopeful that will continue to increase.

Q And then, one more —

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q — quickly. In December, you and I talked about the Afghan women who

had been honored here at the State Department. Sources are telling us right now, currently, that some of these women are being told that before they can apply for refugee status, they need to leave the country. And if they do that, though, you know, the odds are good that their bank account will be seized and that that process is a two-year-long process.

Are there any additional resources that are going to them currently? I know it's a challenging situation and it's in flux. But is there anything more you can tell us about trying to get those (inaudible)?

MS. PSAKI: Let me check on more specific details. Obviously, the State Department is overseeing all of our programs and we're continuing to work to get more people out, but I will see if there's more details on this and I'll ask them specifically.

Go ahead, in the way back.

Q Thank you. I wanted to ask you about India-U.S. relationship. What is on the President's agenda for this year when it comes to the world's two largest democracies, India and the U.S.?

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, back in September, the President hosted President Modi at the White House, and their meeting was about launching a new chapter in the history of the U.S.-India relationship.

At that time, the two leaders laid out their shared vision for the U.S.-India relationship and we'll continue to work closely this year.

You can expect our governments will move — be moving forward on a wide-ranging set of initiatives, from cooperating to fight the pandemic, scaling up

action to address climate change, working bilaterally and through the Quad, expanding our cooperation and trading investments, cyber and in new and emerging technologies, and continuing to talk about — and, as always, we are focused on strengthening the deep ties between our people and our shared democratic values that underpin the relationship. But, obviously, we're going to continue to build from here.

Q One, quickly, on China's aggressive behavior on its border with India. Does this come into your talks with the Chinese? And is the U.S. sending any message to the Chinese on this?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we continue to closely monitor the situation, and we continue to support dialogue and peaceful resolution of these border disputes. We've been pretty clear how we view Beijing's behavior in the region and around the world. We believe it can be destabilizing. And we're concerned by the PRC's attempt to intimidate its neighbors.

We'll continue to stand with our partners on that.

Last one. Go ahead.

Q Goldman Sachs is saying that there's going to be four rate hikes this year; the Federal Reserve indicated maybe three. If they move a quarter of a point, the Committee for federal — Responsible Federal Budget says that three hikes would add an additional \$175 billion a year to a debt payment alone. So, does this change the thinking of the White House in terms of how much spending the President wants to do, as the rate hikes start to come in?

MS. PSAKI: Well, first, I always like to say monetary policy is the purview of the Federal Reserve, and we respect their independence.

Interest rates have been, kind of, as you touched on there, at historically low levels during the pandemic. We always knew that as the economy recovered and gained strength, interest rates would rise to more historically typical levels.

The President is committed — as you talk about spending — to fiscal responsibility and ensuring that our long-term investments are fully paid for. That's why he has proposed a range of ways to pay for his Build Back Better agenda and he — and why it's fully paid for and would still lower the cost for Americans on prescription drugs, childcare, and many other issues.

But he is somebody who is — is mindful about being fiscally responsible and is focused on that as he looks to his agenda moving forward.

Q And one more on climate change.

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead.

Q On climate change — so the President talks about a transition away from gas cars, recently announcing the mileage standards going up 40 miles per gallon over the next — in the next five years. He's pushed for electric cars. The Beast gets an estimated six miles to the gallon. The President has been in office a year. Is there any plans to make his car electric?

MS. PSAKI: I'm happy to check on that. I mean, part of what we've talked about is making sure that the fleet owned by the United States government, which is very large beyond the Beast — the Beast is just one member — is that we work toward making sure we're leading with our focus on energy independence as well. But I am happy to check on his car, otherwise known

as "the Beast."

Thank you, everyone, very much.

Q Jen? Jen, can I just ask you on the teachers?

MS. PSAKI: Yeah.

Q You've talked about the importance of students being back in the schools and the mental health issues. And — but this administration has made a really strong commitment to labor unions in general. So, how can you disregard the concerns of teacher unions who say that classrooms aren't safe, or who are concerned that teacher — that classrooms aren't safe?

MS. PSAKI: I don't think, Andrea, that's an accurate characterization. We've prioritized teachers getting vaccinated first. We fought for — the President fought for an enormous amount of funding to ensure that schools and classrooms could — could — and teachers could take steps that could put in place mitigation measures to make sure students, school teachers, and members of school communities are safe.

And I think what I'm echoing is what a number of people in the public health community have conveyed: that those measures can make sure that schools are safe, can ensure people attending school are safe. No parents want to send their schools — their kids to school in an unsafe environment either.

But we are in a very different place than we were earlier this year. And it's important for people to be mindful of the mental health impact on kids, something that, of course, many parents across the country feel very

strongly about.

Thank you, everyone, so much.

2:59 P.M. EST