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PRESS BRIEFING
BY PRESS SECRETARY SARAH SANDERS
James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

2:40 P.M. EDT

MS. SANDERS: Hey, guys. Happy Friday.

Q Happy Friday.

MS. SANDERS: Good afternoon. It's great to see so many friendly faces in here. Not that that's different than normal. I'm obviously referring to the children around the room.

We're really excited and very glad to welcome the kids of the press corps to the White House today. They're going to love trick-or-treating in the Executive Office Building, and I look forward to taking some questions, maybe even from some of the kids, today.

Couple of quick things to note before we get into that. As you all saw, yesterday was an important moment for our nation's fight against the drug addiction and opioid epidemic that has hurt so many wonderful families.

By directing the declaration of a nationwide public health emergency to address the opioids crisis, the President is mobilizing his entire administration to confront this issue. The President's stirring remarks yesterday, which included a powerful story of how addiction impacted his family, set the stage for the country to unite behind this fight to save lives.

In the wake of the announcement, several Cabinet members and agency heads are traveling around the country to events related to the opioid crisis. Among those participating in events are Attorney General Sessions, Secretaries Shulkin and Carson, Acting Secretary Hargan, Surgeon General Adams, and Acting ICE Director Homan. These events illustrate that the President truly has made this issue an administration-wide priority.

On the economic front, the U.S. economy grew at 3 percent for the second quarter in a row, despite the damage from this year's hurricane season. Unemployment is at a 16-year low, the stock market continues to climb to record levels, and economic confidence is soaring.

The engine of the American economy is revving up, and the President is ready to pour in the rocket fuel through massive tax cuts and reforms.

It's fitting that we have some kids with us here today because, ultimately, this tax plan is about empowering hardworking American families to build a better life for themselves and a brighter future for

their children.

And with that, I will take your questions. Jon.

Q Sarah, I want to ask you about the \$300 million contract that Whitefish Energy got to do the electrical -- rebuild the electrical grid in Puerto Rico. Does the White House have any concerns about the way this contract came down and the fact that this company has apparently no experience of doing anything on this magnitude?

MS. SANDERS: This is a contract that was determined by the local authorities in Puerto Rico, not something that the federal government played a role in. But as we understand, there's an ongoing audit, and we'll look forward to seeing the results of that later.

Q Are there red flags raised by this? And can you say definitively that the fact that the primary -- one of the primary investors in this company was a major donor to the Trump campaign had nothing to do with the fact this contract was awarded?

MS. SANDERS: Right. The federal government, as I said, has nothing to do with this contract or the process. This was something solely determined by the Puerto Rican government. And, as I said, we'll look forward to the audit to see if there are any other issues beyond that.

Matthew.

Q Thanks, Sarah. Question on those Russia sanctions that the President signed in August. So the recipients of those sanctions were supposed to be named on October 1st, and that just came out today. I'm wondering if you can explain the delay and how soon the administration will actually act to implement those sanctions.

MS. SANDERS: Right. There was an interagency review that's now been completed. That was the cause for the delay. The guidance was issued by the State Department, and that's now being carried out.

And for any further details, I'd refer you to the State Department.

John.

Q May I kindly request two? The President tweeted out this morning regarding the Russia investigation, "After months of costly looking." Is the President suggesting that more special investigation is a waste of money?

MS. SANDERS: I think that the President has been pretty clear what his position throughout this process. That's not the only investigation that's taking place. Congress has spent a great deal of time on this -- a better part of a year. All of your news organizations have actually spent probably a lot of money on this as well, which we would consider probably a pretty big waste.

I think that our position hasn't changed since day one, and I think we are seeing now that if there was any collusion with Russia, it was between the DNC and the Clintons, and certainly not our campaign.

Q Question number two --

MS. SANDERS: Sorry, I'm going to move around. We're going to go to tight time today.

Q But this is an important one on 401(k)s. I think you may want to answer.

MS. SANDERS: Well, then maybe one of your colleagues will ask it.

Zeke, go ahead.

Q Banking for two here also. First, did you have any comment on the secession of Catalonia, and Spain, more broadly? The State Department put out a very sharp statement saying the United States wants a unified Spain. Would you echo that from the podium? Has the President made any phone calls on that?

MS. SANDERS: I'm not aware of any phone calls today, but we certainly echo the State Department and again reiterate our support for a unified Spain.

Q And, Sarah, there was one more.

MS. SANDERS: Sorry, guys, I'm going to jump around to try to cover --

Q Thanks, Sarah. On Whitefish Energy, the President met this morning with Interior Secretary Zinke. He is from the town where that company is based. Did the President ask him directly whether he had any knowledge of this deal?

MS. SANDERS: The primary purpose for this meeting that has been on the schedule for several weeks was to discuss the Secretary's Monuments Report that will be coming out shortly. And that was the reason for the meeting. But he did ask Secretary Zinke just for clarification purposes and he reiterated, once again, that we have no role -- the federal government, and specifically he, had no role in that contract.

John.

Q Thanks a lot, Sarah. On Whitefish Energy -- another question on this company. Prior to Hurricane Maria, they just had two employees. And then after Hurricane Maria, it's awarded a \$300 million-plus contract. I realize that you said this was a contract that was awarded by officials in Puerto Rico, but would you acknowledge that it doesn't look right, just on the surface of things?

MS. SANDERS: Look, I'm not going to comment before the audit is conducted, but we certainly look forward to seeing the results of that. And once again, this was a state and local decision made by the Puerto Rican authorities and not the federal government. But we will look into the audit once it's published.

Q The President has said there's a lot of corruption in Puerto Rico. Would you think that this falls under that umbrella of corruption?

MS. SANDERS: Once again, I'm not going to get ahead of the audit, but once we have that, we'll make a determination.

Q You mentioned the opioid crisis at the beginning of your remarks and how the President yesterday declared it a national public health emergency. That declaration did not come with a request for money from Congress. How much does the President want Congress to put towards this crisis? And when will he put in a formal request for that money?

MS. SANDERS: Well, there was \$45 billion that was originally in the healthcare plan that the President supported that no Democrat in the country supported. So, ideally, that would have been done through that. But since it wasn't, we're hoping that Congress will come together and there will be a lot of bipartisan support to put behind the opioid crisis and join in the President in dealing with this effort.

Major.

Q Sarah, can we say then, therefore, based on your answer just

now, that \$45 billion is what you would like to see as an initial approach to the opioid crisis, and done during the budget deal that you hope to negotiate in December?

MS. SANDERS: I'm not going to negotiate with you from the podium, but that was the number that we outlined in that initial healthcare bill. There's a billion dollars that's been spent to date since the President came into office. We do feel like that \$45 billion would have been a good number. That was in the healthcare bill; that was what we supported. We're going to continue looking at that and determine future numbers as we work on negotiating the next package.

Roberta.

Q In the meeting that the President had with Secretary Zinke, did he agree with the recommendation to shrink the size of Bear's Ears National Monument in Utah?

MS. SANDERS: I'm not going to get ahead of the President's announcement on the specifics of that, but I can tell you that he will be going to Utah in the first part of early December, and we'll release more details at that point, if not some before. He also spoke with both Senators Hatch and Lee during the course of that meeting.

Q Thanks, Sarah. Obviously, sexual harassment has been in the news. At least 16 women accused the President of sexually harassing them throughout the course of the campaign. Last week, during a press conference in the Rose Garden, the President called these accusations "fake news." Is the official White House position that all of these women are lying?

MS. SANDERS: Yeah, we've been clear on that from the beginning, and the President has spoken on it.

John.

Q Thank you, Sarah. Last weekend, former President Jimmy Carter offered his availability as a go-between to the North Korean regime in the hopes of resolving the differences between this country and Pyongyang. He has a history with the family of the current leader in North Korea, meeting with his grandfather in 1994. Is the administration in contact with President Carter? And does it have any plans to use him as a go-between or an envoy to Pyongyang?

MS. SANDERS: I don't think that's part of our process at this time. If that changes, we'll certainly let you know. But that's not part of our current plan or thinking for how to deal with North Korea.

Blake.

Q Sarah, thanks. I'll ask the 401(k) question.

MS. SANDERS: See? You got friends helping you out. (Laughter.)

Q Helping my colleague out.

MS. SANDERS: And you didn't think anybody here liked you, John.

Q I've got John's back.

Is the President considering dropping the amount of pre-taxed contributions that Americans can put into their 401(k)? Currently, that's at about \$18,000. It seems as if this whole issue is up for negotiation. Does the President support taking that \$18,000-or-so level and potentially lowering that?

MS. SANDERS: As I said earlier this week, the President wants to continue to fight and push for protection of Americans' retirement. And

that hasn't changed, but I'm not going to negotiate any deals beyond that. But that's the President's position and that's the same today as it was earlier this week.

Q Thanks, Sarah. There's been a number of politicians over the past week, including Chris Christie here at the White House yesterday, who have said that Rob Mueller should step aside from certain investigations within the special counsel. Does the President share those views?

MS. SANDERS: The President wants to see this completed. We think that we are continuing to see day in, day out, as this investigation moves to completion, that, as the same as it started, there's still no evidence of collusion between the President and anyone.

If any collusion took place, it would be between the DNC and the Clintons. And I think we're starting to now see that all of the things that the Democrats had accused this President of doing, they were actually guilty of themselves. And I think that's a really big problem that should be certainly looked at.

Q Sarah, the lawmakers in Egypt are preparing a measure that would criminalize homosexuality, with up to five years in prison. Will you condemn the measure?

MS. SANDERS: I'm not aware of the specifics of that, so I'd have to look into that before I could make a response. But we'll certainly be happy to check into it.

Q Thank you, Sarah. At the risk of wasting my question, I'm going to ask you about the Fed. Since the last time you were up here, there have been a couple of reports. One, that the President is going to make an announcement next week. Can you confirm that he's going to make an announcement and, if so, give us a little timing?

And then, secondly, there have been reports that Chairman Yellen is out of the running and that Jerome Powell is at the top of the list. Can you confirm any of that?

MS. SANDERS: I can confirm that the President plans to make an announcement on that next week, but beyond that I don't have any other details to add.

Q I want to ask you about a comment that Sebastian Gorka made on Fox News. I know that he doesn't work for the White House anymore, but he claims to be very -- still involved in knowing what's going on here.

He was talking about the Uranium One deal and Hillary Clinton, and said, "If this had happened in the 1950s, there would be people up on treason charges right now...This is the equivalent to what the Rosenbergs did, and those people got the chair. Think about it." Does the President agree with that statement?

MS. SANDERS: I hadn't even seen those comments. I'm not going to comment on Sebastian Gorka or validate that. I can tell you that we do think that there is a lot cause for concern regarding that deal, and we certainly think it should be looked into. But I can't comment beyond that on somebody outside the administration's comments.

Jessica.

Q Question on the President's upcoming Asia trip. Can you talk a little bit more about the criteria that you used to decide which of the many multilateral meetings that he attended? And can you confirm that he's not going to be at the East Asia Summit, and why?

MS. SANDERS: He is participating in, I know at least, the opening ceremony and some of the other parts of that event. In terms of the

specifics, we're going to do a full and more detailed briefing on that next week. And so I'll wait until we get to next week, because the final details of some of those things are still being worked out.

Olivier.

Q Thanks, Sarah. The President said on Twitter that he congratulated Chinese President Xi on his extraordinary elevation. Does the President have any misgivings, either the way that elevation occurred or its potential impact on American interests in Asia?

MS. SANDERS: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q I was wondering, why did the President involve himself in the Uranium One investigation? Are you trying to gin up your own Russia investigation to rival the one up on Capitol Hill? And where is the President's evidence that Hillary Clinton colluded with the Russians, as he tweeted this morning?

MS. SANDERS: In terms of the President being involved, I'm not aware of any specific involvement. The President has pushed for transparency -- if that's what you're referring to -- when dealing with Congress. I know that's probably something new, for a President to actually push for transparency, but that's what he's done. And that was the purpose of what he was trying to do in that process.

Q How about evidence of collusion and Hillary --

MS. SANDERS: Mike.

Q Sarah, no, the President made a charge that Hillary Clinton colluded with the Russians

MS. SANDERS: I think I've addressed that pretty thoroughly.

Mike, go ahead.

Q So you're saying that, Hillary Clinton --

MS. SANDERS: I'm saying that I'm calling on your colleague.

Q Okay, well, you didn't really address that question.

Q One of the PACs affiliated with Majority Leader -- the Senate Majority Leader is attacking Steve Bannon. I wondered if the White House has an opinion on that. Is Mr. Bannon fair game? Is he still viewed as helpful to the President's cause? And has the President had any success in talking Steve out of some of the -- backing him off some of the incumbents, as he suggested from the Rose Garden?

MS. SANDERS: In terms of how a PAC spends their money, I would direct you to them. I'm not going to answer for them any more than I can even answer for the President's PAC, as we don't comment on political situations or contributions from the podium.

Q Hi. Sunday, it's going to be the one-month anniversary of the Las Vegas shooting -- four weeks. The shooter enhanced the speed of his fire by using bump stocks. At first, you didn't want to comment on that, but I'm curious to know, does the President think the ATF should prohibit their sale? Is he going to ask them to? Does he think only Congress can do it? Or does he think that bump stocks are not the problem and that there is no need to --

MS. SANDERS: He has asked that that process be reviewed and we're waiting on some of the details of that to take place. But a decision hasn't been finalized on that. But we are looking at that and certainly under review.

I'm going to cut us a little bit short today. And I have one last announcement that I wanted to make:

The President asked me to let all of you know -- those of you that have your kids here for trick-or-treating -- before they go over to the Executive Office Building for trick-or-treating, he has invited them to come into the Oval. So if you would like to have your kids participate, please meet us here and we'll walk them over shortly, and then give them back to you so that you can sugar them up and take them home to your house to run wild.

Thanks so much, and have a good Friday.

END

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EDT

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