

'Hardball with Chris Matthews for Monday, May 13th, 2013

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HARDBALL

May 13, 2013

Guests: Rep. Michael Turner, John Brabender, Willie Brown, Joe Klein, Jenny Beth Martin

CHRIS MATTHEWS, MSNBC HOST: Outrageous.

Let`s play HARDBALL.

Good evening. I`m Chris Matthews in Washington.

Two big stories tonight, the IRS and Benghazi. The president called one outrageous, the other a sideshow. Let`s start with the outrageous.

Taxes, if you`re honest and pay them, the best feeling you get after April 15th is, Well, that`s over with. You`ve done what you have to do. So you try to believe that the system is basically fair, that those progressive rates really mean something, that those IRS people who go over your returns really are looking to keep people honest, and they`re fair about it. How else can you deal with this? This (ph) is if you don`t have some basic faith in the system, you can`t even do your return.

So this, my progressive, independent and reasonably conservative friends, is how we live in this country, how we try to be good citizens. And we are the ones -- we are the ones most furious about this IRS story that`s just come out.

Do those people know what they`ve done to undermine that basic civic faith that we`ve all got about not being chumps for being honest at tax time? To they know what they`ve done to the faith about this republic and what it can do to keep us who we are?

Then there are the right-wing people out there. They love this story, this baby. They`re always -- they always expect the worst. They get up in the morning figuring, well, they`re about to be picked up by the FEMA workers and taken to concentration camps, or the black helicopters of the new world order, they`re coming to take their guns.

Yes, this "expect the worst" crowd just got an earful of what it goes to bed at night agitated about. I can only guess what they`re saying about the news that some in the IRS have decided to target right-wing groups. Knew it all the time, they`re muttering. This is the government. They`re telling everyone they can listen (ph) to. And they ought to abolish those (ph) darned IRS to start with.

Anyway, Mr. President, I`ve got some advice for you. This thing`s going to demoralize the good people. It`s going to give firepower to the far out. So don`t just talk about being outraged. I can say that. Do something.

Remember what Reagan did back when the air traffic controllers broke faith with their oaths and went on strike? He fired the bunch of them. And guess what? You may not like the rough treatment, but that's when we realized he was president. That's when the bad guys in the soon (ph) to be Soviet Union knew this country had a leader.

So do something. I can call something outrageous sitting in this chair. You can act. Find a way to get rid of whoever did this, or your enemies will ride this baby right through 2014. Find a way to get rid of those people, or Mitch McConnell himself will ride this right through reelection. And talk about preparing for the worst.

Howard Fineman is the editorial director for the HuffingtonPost and an MSNBC political analyst and Joe Klein's a political columnist for "Time" magazine.

Joe, you've been writing over the weekend about this, and you've been tough. I want you to say what you think, given what the president said today. Just start off with that.

JOE KLEIN, "TIME" MAGAZINE: Well, I thought that what the president said today was appropriate. But you're right, people have to get fired over this. The problem is this. We have civil service laws in this country that are 150 years or 130 years out of date at this point, and it's really hard to fire people down in the bureaucracy who make mistakes. I mean, that's why the Veterans Administration is such a mess.

MATTHEWS: Well, why do you call them mistakes?

KLEIN: What do I call a mistake?

MATTHEWS: Why do you think this was a mistake by somebody --

(CROSSTALK)

KLEIN: Because -- because --

MATTHEWS: -- something wrong. It looks to me like partisan prejudice. And you don't have to be elected to be a partisan person of prejudice. Somebody went out against the right wing, singled them out by name.

KLEIN: I think what they're trying to do is this. There are very complicated tax laws that -- you know, that pertain to partisan policy advocacy groups. And in this case, they were trying to figure out -- you know, sometimes policy drifts into politics, and it's illegal to use those groups for political purposes. So they had to check it out.

It's a new rule -- it's a new law. This was 2010. The most activist partisan groups were from the right. They took a shortcut. It was -- it was really mega-stupid wrong.

And you know, this is a problem that's coming from the bottom up, not the top down. In other administrations, like Franklin Roosevelt and Richard Nixon, it came from the top down, the president wanting to investigate his opponents. In this case, it's going to turn out --

MATTHEWS: I don't think you're right yet, Joe. I don't think we know it comes from the bottom up. What I'm hearing is that these orders came -- they have a special situation, where Cincinnati, the office out there, the

big IRS operation that was tasked with this job -- it's the main facility of the United States for doing this. It was its job to look around for these non-profits that were abusing the law, especially on the right, and they did it. They did it their way, which got them into trouble. But they were tasked with doing it, right?

KLEIN: That's absolutely right. And what's going to happen now, Chris, is going to be, you know, the same sort of thing we're seeing with the Benghazi case. We're going to look at all the e-mails and we're going to see how far up the food chain this went --

MATTHEWS: Yes.

KLEIN: -- and whether -- and the big issue, I predict, is going to be whether the White House had any hand in keeping this silent in 2011, when it became known to the leadership of the IRS.

MATTHEWS: Well, President Obama spoke for the first time, as I said, today, about this story. And most important, perhaps, was when he said he first learned of it. This is he personally speaking, not his White House staff, hard statement by the president today, which made me very happy. Here he is.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARACK OBAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: I first learned about it from the same news reports that I think most people learned about this. I think it was on Friday. And you know, this is pretty straightforward. If, in fact, IRS personnel engaged in the kind of practices that have been reported on, and were intentionally targeting conservative groups, then that's outrageous and there's no place for it.

We'll wait and see what exactly all the details and the facts are. But I've got no patience with it. I will not tolerate it. And we'll make sure that we find out exactly what happened on this.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MATTHEWS: Now, there's two issues here, whether he was involved in it personally, Howard -- apparently, not so because he didn't know about it. But the larger issue -- he's head of the United States executive branch. He is responsible.

And he's also leader of the Democratic Party. And this is firewater for his enemies. This is dynamite. They can use this against him through the next five or six elections. This is going to be a part of our history. Well, you know, the IRS is out screwing the right wing all the time. They're out looking for us all the time.

HOWARD FINEMAN, HUFFINGTON POST MEDIA GROUP, MSNBC POLITICAL ANALYST: Well, the fires on the right are going to be there, regardless --

MATTHEWS: No, but they've got an issue --

FINEMAN: -- but there's no reason to pour gasoline on them by what I thought was a touch too lawyerly approach here today.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

FINEMAN: I wrote that. The White House people were mad at me for saying

so. But -- and I understand what Joe is saying about civil service, and so on. The president learned about it Friday. He doesn't necessarily have to wait for a report to find out who did what down in Cincinnati.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

FINEMAN: And I think a little more urgency would have been politically warranted today.

MATTHEWS: Why doesn't he say --

FINEMAN: That's why --

MATTHEWS: -- Whoever did this is going to get canned?

FINEMAN: Yes. I think he should.

(CROSSTALK)

FINEMAN: By the way, remember George Bush, even in the midst of the whole Scooter Libby thing --

MATTHEWS: OK, let's talk about --

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: Suppose he doesn't fire anybody. Five months from now, six months from now, he will be the head of the IRS, which includes all those people, Joe. They will still be there, part of Obama's IRS. You heard of "Obama care," this will be Obama IRS. It'll be his then.

(CROSSTALK)

KLEIN: -- the supervisor who knew about this in 2011, she should be writing her resignation letter right now. If not, they should can her. The inspector general's report on this is coming in a matter of days, so I think we should wait for that. But he has to take aggressive action here. You know, it really is an egregious --

MATTHEWS: Exactly.

KLEIN: -- act.

MATTHEWS: You know, if he would say something that everybody who's progressive would understand -- You know, if I heard a right-wing administration had done this to my progressive supporters, that our groups, the Americans for Democratic Action, any one of these new groups was being targeted for audits or harassment, I'd be furious. So as president, not just as Democratic or progressive leader, he should speak the same way.

FINEMAN: Well, I think the real audience for him, Chris, is people -- fair-minded people in the middle.

MATTHEWS: That's what I'm talking about.

FINEMAN: Yes. Exactly. That's what I'm responding to. And he did say, You know, at some point, there's going to be another Republican administration. But he put it in a conditional term. He wasn't saying it in a personal way. He didn't sound that personally outraged, at least by my ears --

MATTHEWS: Who are these headless nails --

FINEMAN: Yes.

MATTHEWS: -- that he can't get out of the government when they commit this kind of malfeasance?

FINEMAN: Yes.

MATTHEWS: I don't buy this idea that civil service protects people who do this kind of stuff.

FINEMAN: Well, but he said -- and again, one of his top aides e-mailed me right after I wrote my piece on HuffPost and said, Look, we've got to wait for -- in fairness to the president, this guy said, we have to wait for --

MATTHEWS: Well, I agree with the --

FINEMAN: -- the inspector general's report and --

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: It's a matter of a week or so, fine. I'm always ahead of him in terms of getting agitated, Joe. I agree I'm always more agitated than the president. That's why he's president.

(LAUGHTER)

MATTHEWS: But the simple fact is, if he doesn't get rid of these people, they're going to be thinking about getting rid of him.

Anyway, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who's on fire with pleasure over this -- he's up for reelection next year, and this is probably his ticket to ride. He tipped his hand today regarding just how he and the Republicans plan to use this baby to club Democrats.

He told Breitbart news, appropriately, the recent IRS revelations were, quote, "just the beginning of the story. This is no little thing. This is a big thing. And the good news about it is they finally got caught." They -- I love those words. "They finally messed with an agency everybody fully understands. When they try to quiet the critics through (ph) other agencies, it doesn't get attention. This does. Everybody understands the IRS and how powerful they are. This is just one example of an administration with wide efforts to silence critics."

So Joe, here he is saying that this is an example of the United States government at its worst, but it's also a typical example.

KLEIN: Well, yes. I mean, it's no secret that this hasn't been the best managed administration that we've seen come down the pike in a while, although the president really is proud of his record of non-corruption, which this, you know, kind of destroys.

MATTHEWS: Wow.

KLEIN: But I do believe that --

MATTHEWS: He's not connected to it personally, at least.

KLEIN: I do believe that in the end, the big issue here isn't going to be the mistake and the stupidity of the mid-level employees who launched this, but it's going to be how much did the White House know and when did it know it. Was this scandal, you know, submerged for electoral purposes in 2011, 2012?

FINEMAN: Right. And that's what Joe said. I think Joe may have used the word over the weekend "Nixonian."

MATTHEWS: Yes.

FINEMAN: And rightly so. But what -- Joe's right. The test of whether it truly is Nixonian is yet to be seen --

MATTHEWS: OK, is it time --

FINEMAN: -- what we know about the White House there -- let me tell you one other thing, Chris. I was just down in Kentucky again over the weekend, where Mitch McConnell is running for reelection.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

FINEMAN: No Democrat really wants to challenge him. They can't get anybody in the ring against Mitch McConnell. If I'm a Democrat, I'm looking at this IRS story, which plays right into Kentuckians resentment of government.

MATTHEWS: Right.

FINEMAN: You know, the big G government, they're taking up the guns, it's the evil IRS. It's the revenueurs and all that stuff. You hand that to Mitch McConnell, it's an extra 50,000 votes in rural Kentucky. It just is.

MATTHEWS: So the president -- what can the president do, Joe, right now, to meet this concern? And I think it's a big one. I think this has got some legs. What does he do about the fact he's got perhaps bureaucrats, perhaps somebody at the high level of bureaucracy in the IRS knew about this two years ago and then they had to flack it? Remember, they were denying it a year later, after they knew about it in '12, they knew about it in '11, they were denying it in '12.

He must figure at some point, the PR person there may have talked to the PR person in the White House because they're always circling the wagons, Joe. You know how it works. We got a stinker coming here, you better be ready for it.

KLEIN: You know, in the military, you're responsible for everything that goes on during your watch. And that means that the director of the IRS, at the very least, is responsible for this.

And I think that the president really has to make a show of force at this point and just, you know, lop off the head of that agency --

MATTHEWS: Yes.

KLEIN: -- and move on it because, I'm telling you, this is going to be big, even if it doesn't turn out to be significant. But if it turns out that there was any degree of White House knowledge of this, that is going to be a conflagration at a time when we have some serious business to deal

with in this country --

FINEMAN: Right. Exactly.

(CROSSTALK)

KLEIN: -- like the budget.

FINEMAN: We do have more serious things, but on the other hand, if -- go back to the campaign. In that year, or the year before, when the head of the IRS is up on the Hill saying, There`s nothing going on here -- all the Tea Party groups are complaining. They`re all complaining. Conservative groups are complaining. The guy comes onto the Hill and says, you know, There`s nothing to this whatsoever. There`s absolutely nothing to this whatsoever.

It`s hard to imagine that that testimony did not pass the radar screens of the White House and certainly of the Obama campaign. I mean, it`s just hard --

MATTHEWS: They knew it might be -- your tradecraft is showing. This is what you know as a journalist.

FINEMAN: You know, those guys are watching that, they`re saying, Oh, my God.

MATTHEWS: Yes. I didn`t think the president was as angry about this as he should have been, not just his wording but his body language, whereas when it came up to Benghazi, (INAUDIBLE) right now, he was furious. The difference between his eye (ph) set (ph) and the way he looked at that AP reporter today when the issue was this, was totally different than it was when the issue of Benghazi came up.

So we`re now (INAUDIBLE) now flacking for this show. We`re about to go to the hottest show you`re going to see tonight, which is what we`re going to talk about for the next 10 minutes. This president is furious at what he calls the sideshow of Benghazi. Up in a minute with that.

Thank you, Howard.

FINEMAN: Thank you.

KLEIN: And thank you, Joe Klein. Great reporting and great reporting over the weekend.

KLEIN: Thank you.

MATTHEWS: Coming up, we`re going to talk to someone who says her conservative group was personally targeted by the IRS.

And then later, the other big story, Benghazi, and what it could mean, what it could threaten more of, President Obama, Secretary Clinton, or the Republicans who spend so much time focusing on it? We`ll see who gets hurt.

And this is **HARDBALL**, the place for politics.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MATTHEWS: A jury in Philadelphia has found a doctor who practiced late-term abortions guilty of the first degree murder of three babies who were

delivered alive. Dr. Kermit Gosnell was also found guilty of the involuntary manslaughter of a woman patient.

The jury will return one week from tomorrow to decide whether Gosnell gets the death penalty.

We`ll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MATTHEWS: Welcome back to HARDBALL. More now on the IRS scandal that has outraged so many across the country. To recap what we now know, the agency has admitted to unfairly targeting conservative groups seeking tax exemptions as non-profits.

Congress, the Treasury Department`s inspector general and the IRS itself are among those investigating the matter, and those who were unfairly targeted are weighing legal action.

At issue here is how the IRS looked for groups it thought might be violating the rules. It did so with an apparent political motive, essentially hand-picking groups that had terms like "Tea Party" or "patriot" in their applications.

Of the 300 groups the IRS singled out for heightened review, about 25 percent of them featured those words in their paperwork, according to agency officials. In the end, none of them were found to have violated any rules. In fact, not a single one of them have had their applications turned down to this point, although some reviews are still ongoing.

If the words "Tea Party" and "patriot" are what you`re screening for, it`s hardly a surprise our next guest was one of those targeted. Joining me now Jenny Beth Martin, the co-founder of the non-profit Tea Party Patriots. Also with us is Joy Reid, MSNBC political analyst with TheGrio.com.

Thank you very much, Jenny Beth for joining us. According to -- well, let me just get your personal -- how did you know you were targeted for review by the IRS as a patriot group, as a Tea Party group?

JENNY BETH MARTIN, TEA PARTY PATRIOTS: Thanks for having me on again, Chris. And we saw in -- well, we saw that it was taking months and months and months to get answers from the IRS, and they`ve been stringing us along for years. In 2012, the beginning of 2012, we got, like, an eight-page letter from the IRS -- several other groups did around the country -- asking for things like our Facebook posts and comments on our Facebook page, all the e-mails we`ve ever sent, the names of congressmen and senators that any of our supporters from around the country have talked to.

A lot of the information that they were asking for was completely -- completely -- really, none of their business and completely intrusive.

MATTHEWS: Well, tell me about it from your point of view. Are you a political organization?

MARTIN: We are a non-profit organization designed to do grass roots lobbying. That means we do legislative action. And that`s what a 501(c)4 is for. And then we also have applied for 501(c)3 status so that we can educate on things like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights --

MATTHEWS: Right.

MARTIN: -- which this IRS report --

MATTHEWS: Well, do you -- let me --

MARTIN: They're saying --

MATTHEWS: I'm sorry --

MARTIN: -- they didn't even want us to do that.

MATTHEWS: Do you take sides in elections?

MARTIN: We have only stood up for our issues. We've never endorsed any candidates. In the primary, in fact, the vast majority of the work that we do, the vast majority is related to the issues, like "Obama care," the debt, the overspending.

MATTHEWS: Well, wait a minute. Obamacare --

MARTIN: I've been on your show talking about it.

MATTHEWS: In opposing Obamacare do you think that was a political move?

MARTIN: It was about the legislation. It wasn't about a political move. It was about what we thought was happening with the bill and the law moving through Congress.

MATTHEWS: I understand that. Once the bill was passed, did you stop attacking Obamacare since it was a policy question, it wasn't political? If you kept attacking Obamacare after it was the law of the land, then I would question whether you were doing it as a campaign issue.

MARTIN: No, it wasn't a campaign issue.

And we were out there in front of the Supreme Court when it was being heard out in front of the Supreme Court. Again, that's what we're allowed to do as a 501(c)(4). And it wasn't for campaign purposes. It's because that is what -- how you appeal laws if you want to in this country.

MATTHEWS: Yes. But once the law was approved by -- went through and it was approved by review by the Supreme Court, did you continue to attack Obamacare on through the November election?

MARTIN: We have focused on Obamacare. And, of course, going into the elections last year, it was not as large of an issue as we would have liked it to be.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: But why did you -- if you're not political, why did you keep hitting the issue going into an election, if it had already been approved by the Supreme Court?

MARTIN: Because we're legislatively focused, Chris. It's legislation. And we're legislatively focused. And that's what we do.

We weren't talking about candidates. And, in fact, when we talked about the law going into the election, we didn't even call it Obamacare. We said the president's health care law, because our attorneys said that if we used Obama, and the name Obama, that would cause problems for our pending -- our

pending status.

MATTHEWS: I got you.

Joy Reid, thank you for joining us tonight.

My concern, I have voiced it loudly, this is catnip for the hard right. It says the government's the enemy. The government's out to get you. The helicopters are next. We're going to come get your guns, confiscate what you have and perhaps take you away to a concentration camp. And it's not just paranoia if you have this kind of evidence. I think it is paranoia most of the time.

But if this thing gets out to be fact, if it's clear they were going through returns like this young lady -- this lady's returns, her organization's returns, if they're going around systemically looking for the right wing, it could be the left wing next year. That's my view. I think the president was right. I think he should have been tougher.

JOY REID, MSNBC CONTRIBUTOR: Well, Chris, you know, I think there's a couple things here just to impact.

First of all, obviously, the people in that Cincinnati office -- and we're not talking about people in Washington. We're talking about people in Cincinnati, Ohio.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: No, but Cincinnati was tasked with this nationally.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: No, they had the national -- you can't -- you can't pigeonhole it in Cincinnati. This was the national effort to go through the review of these organizations. This is where it was tasked, one place, Cincinnati. So you can't say it's a local operation somewhere. Go ahead.

REID: Right. But these were low-level staffers in Cincinnati.

I think that the problem here is the attempt to immediately go from that to the White House and say, well, you know what? The White House was going after --

MATTHEWS: No, I'm not doing that.

MARTIN: No, not you.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: Well, let me ask you a question. Lois Lerner, head of the whole operation that looks at all these nonprofits, knew about this a year before, according to the record now. You knew about this a year before. They were denying it was happening.

So, why didn't she fire the people who did it? Why weren't steps taken to seriously discipline those who had done it? Why didn't she simply say, well, do it a little differently this time?

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I'm concerned that people weren't taking responsibility on

behalf of this republic within our government, not being responsible to the organization of the IRS, but being responsible to the country. And that's the question.

REID: First of all, we haven't gotten the final report yet. But the report that I have read, I think the AP report that was out there was that Lerner ordered that the criteria and that the review process be changed immediately when she learned of it. And --

MATTHEWS: Well, what about the people that did it?

REID: Well, that's the good question. That's a decent question.

But asking whether Barack Obama was using the IRS to go after his political enemies, which not you're doing, but which I'm starting to see on the right, is -- it doesn't make any sense.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: Well, I'm not going to go after a straw dog.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I'm concerned about the government.

REID: Right.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: In this case, Joy, the president is head of this government. If there are screwups, if it's down in Albuquerque at the lowest level of a government, if somebody there is speaking for Uncle Sam, he's got to deal with it.

REID: Well, of course.

But Doug Shulman, who was the head of the IRS at the time, I think the idea that he was engaged in some kind of conspiracy to go after Tea Party groups on a political basis, when he, himself, is a Republican and a George Bush appointee, who had already told the president that he was resigning from one of only two appointed political positions in the IRS, that he was resigning in November --

MATTHEWS: Yes.

REID: So the idea that there's some conspiracy, Doug Shulman being the head of doesn't make sense.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: Let me go back to Jenny Beth.

MARTIN: Chris --

MATTHEWS: Your view, because, I believe, what I believe, what I have been able to understand is that the national effort to review these kinds of applications like yours, the national effort was tasked to the Cincinnati office and they were handling all this across the country.

This wasn't some little pigeonholed operation. This was the effort to do this fairly. And apparently they weren't doing it fairly. They were

targeting the right. Your thoughts.

MARTIN: They weren't doing it fairly.

And is Lois Lerner a low-level employee? Because she knew about it last year. She knew about it in 2011. And on Friday, she was saying it was only low-level employees involved. So, is she a low-level employee or not?

MATTHEWS: Well, she was on the Federal Election Commission.

(CROSSTALK)

MARTIN: Well, I would say that's probably not a low-level job.

And it doesn't -- if it was a Bush appointee, an Obama appointee, I don't care who appointed them. Whoever -- the people who were responsible must be held accountable. This is not Republican. It's not Democrat. It's wrong to do, and it's about the people who are unelected who have too much power abusing the power that they have. We cannot have that in this country.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: The one good news, Jenny Beth, the good news is the I.G. caught them. Their own inspector general caught them.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: And that's the good thing.

(CROSSTALK)

MARTIN: Thanks to Landmark Legal for asking for that investigation to happen.

REID: OK. Actually, three quick things.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: Quick, Joy.

REID: The idea that the Tea Party Patriots and these other groups are nonpartisan, that they are social welfare organizations is my other point, that the 501(c)(4) process has attracted every low-level political consultant in the country to create the (c)(4) when they saw the Tea Party coming.

They weren't creating these groups to be nonpartisan and do policy. Everyone who's observed the Tea Party knows they're political. That's number one.

And, number two, I wonder if the same level of outrage existed back in 2004 when the IRS not went after, looked at applications, but audited the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, audited the NAACP, and launched a two-year investigation into them simply because the president of the NAACP, because one person made comments that they thought were negative toward George W. Bush.

And I think it's great that we're going to look at the IRS process. Of course it should be looked at if people did wrongdoing. And it was clearly stupid to target groups in this way. They didn't understand the law.

Then, yes, people should be disciplined. But let`s just try to make sure that we`re just as outraged when the IRS goes after the NAACP.

And I don`t remember this level of outrage in 2004 before this election.

MARTIN: And did the IRS in 2004 say we`re going after them because of comments they made toward the president?

(CROSSTALK)

REID: Yes, the letter that was sent --

(CROSSTALK)

MARTIN: Then it`s just as wrong then. It`s just as wrong then.

(CROSSTALK)

REID: -- that Julian Bond`s -- that Julian Bond`s statements about George W. Bush and his opposition to the war, that was in the IRS letter that went to the NAACP.

MATTHEWS: OK.

REID: They had disclosed that they were going after them because of --

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: OK. I think one thing. Thank you, Joy. And I think everybody understands what you said, and Jenny as well. I think people all at home are going to make a judgment about this. Two wrongs don`t make a right. Both are wrong.

Thank you very much, Jenny Beth Martin. Thank you for coming on.

Please come on again.

Joy, as always.

REID: Thank you.

MARTIN: Thanks, Chris.

MATTHEWS: I agree with you, mostly.

(LAUGHTER)

MATTHEWS: Up next, turn -- of course you`re right. Up -- turns -- especially about the NAACP. They got a rotten deal there.

Up next: Turns out there are a few things Republicans and Democrats actually agree on coming up on the "Sideshow."

And this is HARDBALL, the place for politics.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MATTHEWS: Back to HARDBALL, and now to the "Sideshow," the real "Sideshow."

First, the word from "SNL" `s Seth Meyers on the National Rifle Association`s plan to appeal to women.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP, "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE")

SETH MEYERS, ACTOR: In an effort to appeal to women, the NRA is highlighting a number of products for women's self-defense, including purses with hidden handgun pockets, because if there's one thing women are good at, it's quickly retrieving something from their purse.

(LAUGHTER)

(CHEERING AND APPLAUSE)

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MATTHEWS: Well, that's like going through that bag I tote to and from work with all the homework and stuff in it.

By the way, it was just announced that Seth Meyers will take over NBC's "Late Night" when Jimmy Fallon goes to host "The Tonight Show" next year.

Next, it's pretty clear where most of America stands on background checks for gun purchases. Several polls out there show that nine out of 10 Americans, as you know, are in favor of those wider checks. So, here's a question. What other issues have nine out of 10 of us on the same page?

Well, the Associated Press put together a list. And the results are pretty basic, things like admire those who get rich by working hard or believe it's wrong for married people to have sexual affairs, or consider preventing terrorism a very important foreign policy goal.

Well, backing wider background checks fits right onto that commonsense list.

Also, Michele Bachmann's back in the "Sideshow" today. It seems like she's kept a low profile since her presidential run, such as it was. Bachmann spoke at a prayer event in Washington last week and suggested that the attacks of 9/11, both in 2001, the big one, and at the diplomatic mission in Benghazi last year were actually cases of, big surprise here, divine intervention.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REP. MICHELE BACHMANN (R), MINNESOTA: It's no secret that our nation may very well be experiencing the hand of judgment. It is no secret that we all are concerned that our nation may be in a time of decline. Our nation has seen judgment not once, but twice, on September 11.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MATTHEWS: It's our judgment. Seems to be a rather stunning conclusion, I would say.

Anyway, Bachmann had floated the same idea two years ago after Hurricane Irene, saying that hurricane was a sign of the evils of government spending.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BACHMANN: I don't know how much God has to do to get the attention of the politicians. We got an earthquake. We have had a hurricane. He said, are you going to start listening to me here?

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MATTHEWS: We're listening.

Finally, you know the David Bowie song "Space Oddity"? How about a taste of that song being performed from outer space?

Enter Chris Hadfield. He's commander of the International Space Station. And commemorating his last day on the job, here he is before coming back to Earth.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

(SINGING)

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MATTHEWS: Well, Hadfield got a treat there from -- actually, a tweet from David -- quote -- "Chris Hadfield sings Space Oddity in space. Hallo spaceboy."

That's it for the "Sideshow," a zero gravity rendition of "Space Oddity."

Up next: the other big political controversy of the day, as I promised, Benghazi. President Obama called the Republican focus on those talking points about the attack on Libya a sideshow. He stole our title. And that's ahead.

You're watching HARDBALL, the place for politics.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BERTHA COOMBS, CNBC CORRESPONDENT: I'm Bertha Coombs with your CNBC "Market Wrap."

The Dow falls 26 points. The S&P 500 finishes flat, and the Nasdaq, which touched a 12-year high earlier, ends up two.

Worries about the Fed weighing on stocks. According to "The Wall Street Journal," the Fed is looking to end its \$85-billion-a-month bond-buying program.

And on the economic front, retail sales rose unexpectedly 0.1 percent last month. Excluding gas and auto, sales were actually up 0.5 percent.

That's it from CNBC. We're first in business worldwide -- now back to HARDBALL.

MATTHEWS: Welcome back to HARDBALL.

After days of taking hits over new disclosures on Benghazi, the president pushed back hard today. He ridiculed the idea that there was a cover-up coming from his administration. He called it a political circus, accused his critics of playing political games and insisted there was no there there.

Well, on the issue of the talking points, the president was especially animated. On Friday, we learned that the CIA talking points went through 12 rounds of changes, with the heavier-than-usual previously thought involvement of the State Department and the White House, that it was

outlined in a series of e-mails.

Here`s what the president had to say about it all today.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARACK OBAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: The whole issue of this -- of talking points, frankly, throughout this process has been a sideshow.

The e-mails that you allude to were provided by us to congressional committees. Suddenly, three days ago, this gets spun up as if there`s something new to the story. There`s no there there.

And the fact that this keeps on getting churned out, frankly, has a lot to do with political motivations. We`ve had folks who have challenged Hillary Clinton`s integrity, Susan Rice`s integrity, Mike Mullen and Tom Pickering`s integrity. It`s a given that mine gets challenged by these same folks. They`ve used it for fund-raising.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MATTHEWS: Well, is the president right? Is the issue of how the talking points were changed a political sideshow?

Well, U.S. Congressman Michael Turner is on the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which held last week`s hearing on Benghazi.

Congressman, thanks for coming on.

What is your view of this whole thing?

REP. MICHAEL TURNER (R), OHIO: Thank you, Chris.

MATTHEWS: Do you think the president has been dishonest? He`s saying basically his integrity has been challenged. Let`s go to the issue of the talking points. Do you think he was involved in cleaning them up, changing focus on them, covering up in some way to get reelected? What do you think his role was? Let`s start with him.

TURNER: Well, first off, the truth is never a sideshow.

And what we learned in the past week with the congressional hearings is that the narrative that was coming out of the administration from these talking points has no basis in fact. It is, in fact, a fiction. Mr. Hicks, who testified before us, said that Susan Rice hadn`t even spoken to him, the lead diplomat on the ground, after the ambassador was killed.

And, you know, he clearly said that there were no demonstrations, that this was a terrorist attack. They knew it was a terrorist attack. They knew who had perpetrated the terrorist attack. They`ve already claimed credit.

And yet the White House and the administration chose to write a narrative that was based on fiction.

MATTHEWS: So you know the president was involved, or who in the White House? You said the White House. Let`s nail you down here.

Who told Susan Rice to say what she said that day? Was that the president, personally, deputizing her to say it was a spontaneous demonstration that evolved into a terrorist attack of some form? What do you think did it? Was it the president or one of his people? What do you know?

TURNER: Well, what we know is that Susan Rice --

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: No, do you know if the president was involved? Just tell me.

TURNER: -- created this fiction. And Susan Rice went on national television and made statements that had no --

MATTHEWS: I watched it.

TURNER: -- no basis in truth.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I saw everything you saw. I want you to tell me something I don't know.

TURNER: When you have a lead administration official --

MATTHEWS: Tell me something I don't know. OK. You're repeating yourself.

TURNER: When you have a lead administration official go on television and absolutely not tell the truth --

MATTHEWS: This is the third time you're saying it.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I'm asking you, what's the president's role -- let me ask you another question again. The same question again. I've asked you three times. What did the president know to your knowledge in terms of having her say what she said on "Meet the Press" that Sunday? I watched it. You watched it.

Did the president have a role in that or not?

TURNER: I think he has a role today. And that is as you and I both have said, we know what she said is not true. And the administration insists --

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I agree with that. The fifth time you're saying it.

TURNER: -- that it wasn't true.

MATTHEWS: OK. So, you don't know any more than I do.

TURNER: It's wrong for the White House to perpetrate this truth. I can tell you that I know from our hearing that Mr. Hicks wasn't -- who was on the ground, was not even consulted as the administration, who knows why, perpetrated this narrative that was based on fiction.

MATTHEWS: OK.

Let me ask you, do you know if the secretary of state at the time, Hillary Clinton, was involved in any way in prepping Susan Rice for that appearance on "Meet the Press"? When you said -- I think appropriately, you said, didn't give the full or accurate story. Was the secretary of state involved?

Because what's going on here, the big names are getting --

(CROSSTALK)

TURNER: The story that she gave was fiction.

MATTHEWS: Sixth time you said it. I just want to tell me who did it.

TURNER: The administration official goes on national television and says a fiction -- well, that's what obviously we're trying to get down to. Now, the president says he has released e-mails only because the Congress asked. He's not stepped forward and said, excuse me, I've now learned that a lead administration official on my behalf told a fiction to the nation. That's what he should be focusing on. And that's what we're trying to find out --

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: Fair enough. In the course of your investigations, Mr. Turner, have you come up with any e-mail that suggests the president was involved? Any mail that suggests that the White House through Carney or anybody else seriously changed the message of that performance by the ambassador to the U.N.?

TURNER: The -- well, I'm going --

MATTHEWS: Any evidence supporting this discussion?

(CROSSTALK)

TURNER: The e-mails show which is why there's an ongoing investigation that there was a dialogue that changed this narrative to a fiction. What we need to find out is who did this, why did they do it?

MATTHEWS: OK, so you don't know.

TURNER: And why isn't the White House coming forward and saying they told the American public a lie? It's a fiction.

MATTHEWS: No, you just said you didn't know the White House told the lie. I've been asking you now for five minutes to give me any evidence you have that the president was involved --

TURNER: We have --

MATTHEWS: No, you have to answer this question. You can't skip my questions and end up with an accusation. You just said the president did this. Tell me how you know this.

TURNER: Chris, what's great is you get to ask the questions and but I get to do the answers. You agreed with me that what Susan Rice said was a fiction. Do we agree there?

MATTHEWS: Yes, I agreed with you five times.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I continue to ask you a simple question. What role did the president play here? What role did he play, sir?

TURNER: What's wonderful about you asking these questions is that's why Congress is doing an investigation.

MATTHEWS: So you're investigating whether what you're talking about is --
OK.

(CROSSTALK)

TURNER: -- to make certain we get down to who did this, why did they do it, and really where did this fiction come from?

MATTHEWS: I think it's odd to have an investigation to find out if you know what you're talking about. That's what you're saying.

I, sir, I Congressman Turner am holding a investigation --

TURNER: You try to find out the truth.

MATTHEWS: By the way, watch this show at 7:00 and see yourself saying the president did it. You said the president did it. You said the White House did it. You keep saying --

TURNER: I have never, Chris.

(CROSSTALK)

TURNER: Absolutely. Absolutely. There is no question that this administration has told a fiction to this nation.

MATTHEWS: Oh, now, it's the administration.

TURNER: While the president says it's a sideshow, he's never said it's troubling.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I know you got your points down. I want to ask you one last time, in all fairness, Congressman. Do you know if the president had anything to do with Susan Rice's performance on "Meet the Press" that Sunday? Anything? Do you know anything you can tell me about that?

TURNER: He appointed her and he certainly has done nothing since to correct the fiction and to say there's a problem in my administration that someone would go on national TV and tell a fiction.

MATTHEWS: I understand everything you're saying, by the way, except the fact you're bringing the president in, the White House in. You admitted now you need to hold an investigation to find out if you know what you're talking about, which is amazing admission, sir.

TURNER: The president is responsible. It's his administration. It's his appointees. It's his administration. He's the one who took out Benghazi, took down Gadhafi without a post-Gadhafi plan.

MATTHEWS: Mr. Turner, you're doing your job, but you're not answering my questions.

TURNER: Chris, I really appreciate it.

MATTHEWS: Thank you.

TURNER: And thank you for your comments on the IRS. You're absolutely right there.

MATTHEWS: We may agree on some things, but I`m still trying to get, and by the way, if you --

TURNER: We do.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: -- if the president has any role in this, let me know, will you? Thank you, Congressman Turner.

Our apologies to David Corn who`s sitting here idly with much to say.

Up next, how should President Obama navigate the Benghazi and IRS controversy? We`re pure (ph) politics now, and what effect will they have in 2014 and 2016?

The HARDBALL strategists join us next.

This is HARDBALL, the place for politics.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MATTHEWS: Coming back to talk to our HARDBALL strategists about how these two big political controversies can be played by both sides. Benghazi and the IRS, how are they going to affect the midterms in 2014? And big question, how are they going to affect Hillary Clinton in 2016?

Back after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MATTHEWS: Back to HARDBALL.

As we`ve been discussing tonight on the show, the IRS and Benghazi stories are dominating politics right now, and the strategy each side uses to play these could affect their political positioning in the new elections coming up next year and two years after that. In Washington, the words cover up carry particularly resonance as you know. And this weekend, with regard to Benghazi, that grenade was lobbed.

Let`s listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN (R), ARIZONA: We now know any reference to terror, any reference to al Qaeda, were removed from those talking points and it was done at a deputy`s meeting just before Susan Rice went on television.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Would you call this a cover up?

MCCAIN: I`d call it a cover up. I would call it a cover up in the extent that it was willful removal of information which was obvious.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MATTHEWS: Well, that`s John McCain.

Now it`s time for the strategists to get into this. Joining me is Republican strategist John Brabender, and former San Francisco Mayor, Willie Brown.

John, I want to tell me right now, is the Benghazi issue something that's important -- the Republicans can win seats with in 2014, perhaps mar the reputation of Secretary Clinton. How big an issue was this? It's a grenade.

JOHN BRABENDER, REPUBLICAN STRATEGIST: Yes, I think it's big for a number of reasons. One is there is going to be a lot more investigation on this. You saw the word "cover up." Those are dramatic political terms.

Second of all, I think there's a lot of suspicion that something politically happened.

And number three --

MATTHEWS: What? You've got to tell me. This guy wouldn't tell me. You think the president of the United States sat down and (INAUDIBLE) talking points.

BRABENDER: No, I don't. I think there were people in the State Department, though, that worried that this could be a political nightmare and were very careful in how they crafted it. So I do think that's a problem for him.

MATTHEWS: You think they wrote the script for Susan Rice, Hillary Clinton's people did?

BRABENDER: Well, her spokesperson certainly made changes. So, I mean, that's far that I go. But number three, the fact that --

MATTHEWS: I think it's complicated but I don't think that's it.

Let me go back to Mayor Brown. I think it's very complicated. I think it has to do with turf between the Obama people and the Hillary people, and the carefulness with which they have to walk on that turf. You can never be seen as shifting blame. You must always accept blame.

That's my theory about this. It's walking on the egg shells kind of thing. Your thoughts, Mr. Mayor? Is this something that Democrats got to worry about, Hillary Clinton has to worry about? Benghazi, the word?

WILLIE BROWN (D), FORMER SAN FRANCISCO MAYOR: No, I don't think so, Chris. Simple providing the explanation, whatever it happens to be -- for most of the American people, they accept that explanation. There is no accusation that there was any improper conduct that caused the death of Ambassador Stevens and his other people.

The question about whether or not there was sufficient amount of security, whether or not reasonable resources were there, all those are just questions, they don't go to the competence of individuals seeking public office in 2014 and it will not even be a spectrum on the whole horizon by 2016.

MATTHEWS: I agree with the mayor on '14. I'm not sure about '16. It depends on how your generation generates this thing.

Do you think it's a 2014 issue? Next year.

BRABENDER: Well, I think it's 2014 and 2016, because it's Hillary Clinton. If she wasn't involved, I think it would be off the table.

MATTHEWS: I`m not so sure, because Hillary has got a pretty clean image.

Let me go to the IRS issue, which I do think has legs. You`re first on this, Mr. Mayor. The IRS issue, if it`s clean now, clear, rather, that agents of the IRS have been singling out conservative organizations for special harassment, if you will, or special difficulties or whatever, or simply or whatever, or simply targeting them for audits or whatever, is this going to hurt this administration?

BROWN: Excuse me, Chris.

Yes, I do think it will hurt the administration if the administration doesn`t move very quickly to eliminate those people from any position of public service, in which they have exercise the horrible judgment that they`ve exercised.

MATTHEWS: I agree.

BROWN: That`s a terrible thing to have done. If you did it, you shouldn`t be working for government and I think the administration will say exactly that and exercise those people very quickly.

MATTHEWS: I think you`re right. Your thoughts?

I think it`s Jonah and the whale from the Bible. As long as Jonah stays on that ship, the Obama ship, that ship`s got problems.

BRABENDER: Here`s the problem. You have to look at this in the total perspective. You have Benghazi. Now, you have the IRS.

MATTHEWS: Stick with the IRS.

BRABENDER: Well, it`s a terrible story.

MATTHEWS: What`s the connection?

BRABENDER: The connection is somebody in that administration thought that we are going to penalize Obama opponents, and he still is the head of the administration.

MATTHEWS: We don`t even know if it`s a political appointee, though. We don`t think it is.

BRABENDER: Regardless, it looks bad for the president.

MATTHEWS: So, what does he do about it? Help him out here. Is the mayor right, fire the bastards?

BRABENDER: Well, yes, absolutely, they should be fired. In fact, they should to investigate to -- maybe you were polled. I don`t know.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: We had a guest that said (ph) they have been hit by this and it looks like it`s happening.

Thank you, Mayor Brown, so much for that incisive thinking, and, John Brabender, mostly.

We`ll be right back after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MATTHEWS: Let me finish tonight with this.

"What difference does it make?" That`s what Secretary Clinton insisted.

"It`s a side show." That`s what the president said about it today.

But it remains, Benghazi.

The speaker of the House says he`s committed to it. He`s going to ride it as long as he can.

So, what can the president do to protect himself in 2014 when Republicans are going to use the issue to fight for control of Congress? What can Secretary Clinton do with it if she runs for president?

My hunch is that Obama has other fish to fry. He can push Benghazi off a bit to the side, not off the road entirely, but a bit to the side.

The secretary isn`t so lucky. Benghazi happened on her watch. I think assuming that she did the right thing there, in the wake of the tragedy. She can grab ahold of the matter and stand out there before the American people and explain to all of us minute by minute how she dealt with the matter.

I think she can. You know why? Because she really liked Chris Stevens. You can tell that. And because she really does care about her diplomats in the State Department, especially those out in the field.

You hear that about her. And because she also is not a callous person.

I know the Clintons had it rough down in Arkansas with their conservative critics. I know they had a deal, tough deal with Ken Starr and Tom DeLay and the rest. But she came through it looking pretty good.

I think she can deal with Benghazi because at its bottom line, she didn`t do a thing wrong.

And that`s HARDBALL for now. Thanks for being with us.

"POLITICS NATION" with Al Sharpton starts right now.

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