

CNN "State of the Union," aired October 24, 2021

TAPPER: Welcome back to STATE OF THE UNION. I'm Jake Tapper.

Some Americans are now getting another covid shot this weekend, after the CDC approved boosters for those who got the Moderna vaccine, as well as everybody who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at least two months ago.

But as the pace of boosters rise and the federal government prepares for the possibility that vaccines for 5-to-11-year-olds will be approved in the coming weeks, some states are still struggling to get their citizens vaccinated at all.

Joining us now to discuss, Arkansas Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson.

Governor Hutchinson, we will get to the pandemic in a sec.

But, first, I just want to get your reaction. You heard Speaker Pelosi lay out her plans for the legislation coming her way, Secretary Yellen, Treasury secretary, talking about inflation. You're a governor in the middle of the country. What's your reaction?

GOV. ASA HUTCHINSON (R-AR): Well, the greatest concern Americans have right now is the rising cost of fuel, gasoline and groceries.

And whenever you hear Speaker Pelosi talk about the trillion-dollar package, she -- it hasn't been written. It can't be explained. You did a great job asking her questions about it, but it was as clear as mud.

And what that tells the American people is, we have got inflationary pressures that impact them. It's the cruelest tax. And now all we see is more government spending, a trillion-dollar plan that's out there, multi-trillion dollars, and it can't be explained.

So it's really worrisome, as a governor, to hear what's planned. We do need the bipartisan infrastructure bill. It is critical for roads. It's for broadband. It's for water infrastructure. But this social engineering plan that they have that's trillions of dollars is simply going to add to inflationary pressures that's already costing the average American a great deal.

TAPPER: Let's turn to covid if we can, because only 47 percent of your state, Arkansas, is fully vaccinated against covid-19. It places Arkansas in the bottom 10 in the country for vaccinations.

Now, you're vaccinated, and you have been very clearly encouraging Arkansans to get vaccinated for months. Why are so many Arkansans still refusing?

HUTCHINSON: Well, first of all, we are making progress. And those that have been vaccinated are now lining up to get their booster shots. So, we do see it as our way out.

The resistance is hard in some areas. And part of it is simply because of the controversy because of the mandates. It deepens the resistance. And so that's something we have to overcome.

But I don't see that controversy going away any time soon. With OSHA issuing mandates for businesses to require vaccination of employees, that's going to intensify the controversy.

We can make progress step by step in terms of increasing vaccination, but the side circus in terms of that controversy, there will be lawsuits filed. So that's going to continue for some time. We're going to continue to push for vaccine adoption. Whenever you see what's happened in the U.K. with an increase in cases, we know that covid can throw us more curves coming down the road. We want to be prepared with increased vaccination.

TAPPER: So, last week, you admitted that businesses imposing their own vaccine mandates are effective in getting vaccine rates up. You also said you're -- quote -- "a defender of the employer's right to provide a healthy workplace" -- unquote -- if they decide to impose those.

Now, I understand you are not comfortable with the government, whether state or federal, imposing mandates on businesses. But wouldn't you be saving lives if you imposed a vaccine mandate on state employees who ultimately work for you?

HUTCHINSON: Well, they would -- it would probably increase vaccination rates.

But it also would increase the resistance of some. Some would lose their job. It would hurt their families. And it would in the broader population also create that controversy and resistance. So it's a balance there.

And that's why private businesses should have the opportunity, the -- if they want to require a vaccination in their sensitive workplace, they ought to be able to do that. But government doesn't need to tell them to do that. I'm for reducing mandates across the board in regard to the vaccinations.

People will make the right decision over time when they get the right information. And so, sure, Tyson's have required vaccination. Their rate goes up. Others that are urging it to happen in their workplace, it goes up there as well.

And so I think it's a balance. But what works in Arkansas is not the mandate side of it, but it's the education side and businesses having the prerogative to make their own decision without the government telling them what to do.

TAPPER: Arkansas requires children entering schools to be vaccinated for diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis B, hepatitis A, chicken pox.

Once it is fully approved by the FDA, would it save lives if you added the covid vaccine to this list for mandatory vaccines for children?

HUTCHINSON: Well, let's look at that more deeply.

First of all, those are state-by-state vaccine requirements. And so the federal government has never mandated what happens in the states and schools.

TAPPER: No, I'm asking you.

HUTCHINSON: Those are state-by-state decisions.

(CROSSTALK)

TAPPER: Yes. I'm just talking about what Arkansas mandates. And these are Arkansas mandates.

HUTCHINSON: Absolutely. And so there may be a time in the future that you would want to mandate that in the schools. But that time is not now. We need to have more experience with that. We need to have more public acceptance of it, of the vaccine.

And so it could happen down the road. It also depends upon the severity of the covid outbreak and whether the cases skyrocket again or not. Right now, they're at a very low level in Arkansas. And so it can happen. It may happen. But now's not the right time to do that. We need to know more information and to be able to build public confidence at a greater point.

But it is a state decision.

TAPPER: You have said -- quote -- "Relitigating 2020 is a recipe for disaster in 2022," as President Trump is still out there pushing the big lie, attacking your fellow Republicans for sticking to the facts, going after individual lawmakers who maintained the rule of law in the 2020 election, like Secretary Raffensperger in Georgia, for example. How worried are you about the state of the Republican Party as we approach the midterms next year?

HUTCHINSON: I'm actually very optimistic about the Republican Party, because, first of all, you look at our competition, and the Democratic Party is divided. They have their extremes that they're concerned about.

Secondly, when we're talking about keeping the line on taxes and government spending and reducing inflation, that's where America is right now. And then we have got great candidates.

Glenn Youngkin in Virginia is doing a great job there, has a great potential to win that race this year. And so that's an example of what we need to do in looking at the future, providing solutions for America, vs. the past and 2020. Let's move on.

TAPPER: Well, the one thing I'd say about that is Glenn Youngkin has not fully embraced Donald Trump the way that I think he would like to be embraced, in the way we have seen other people do it.

Do you think that's one of the reasons why this race is competitive?

HUTCHINSON: Well, I think Glenn has balanced and handled it very well, talking about the future.

TAPPER: Yes.

HUTCHINSON: And I -- he hasn't depended -- his race has not depended upon Donald Trump, nor should it.

TAPPER: All right, Governor Asa Hutchinson, thank you so much. Appreciate your time.

HUTCHINSON: Thank you, Jake.