

Press Briefing by Scott McClellan

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James S. Brady Briefing Room

12:37 P.M. EDT

MR. McCLELLAN: Good afternoon. How is everybody doing? I want to begin with one world leader call the President had mid-morning today. The President spoke with Prime Minister Badawi of Malaysia. The President called the Prime Minister to wish him well on his visit to Austin, Texas, where he is participating in the world conference on information technology. The two leaders discussed Iran and agreed on the importance of finding a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue. They agreed on the need for the regime in Iran to come into full compliance with its international obligations. They also discussed their shared concern about high energy prices and the importance of promoting alternative sources of energy. And they discussed the Israeli-Palestinian situation, and reiterated the importance of a two-state solution.

And with that, I will be glad to go to your questions.

Q: Scott, the Vice President said today that Russia has unfairly and improperly restricted the rights of her people, and he warns that its actions could risk damaging ties with the United States and Europe. Do you think his remarks are going to color the atmosphere of the summit that President Bush will attend in St. Petersburg —

MR. McCLELLAN: Actually, I think it's important to look at the full context of his remarks. The Vice President was talking about the President's freedom agenda, and our hope that democracy will continue moving forward in Central and Eastern Europe. And I think what you are referring to is a reiteration of concerns that we have previously expressed. Secretary Rice has expressed them, the President has expressed them, and the Vice President even talked about how a Russia that increasingly shares the values of this community can be a strategic partner and a trusted friend as we work toward common goals.

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So I think this is something we've previously talked about, and the President has a good relationship with President Putin, to where they can spoke — where they can speak openly and candidly about concerns that we have.

Q: Was the Vice President trying to set a tone, a sharp tone for the summit in —

MR. McCLELLAN: I think it's consistent with what we've said previously, and he indicated that we would engage on these issues at the G8, as well.

Q: Scott, the Senate, I think, has just passed 78-20 the supplemental spending bill, and it's certainly a lot higher than the limit the President — the ceiling the President put. Now, the President said, I think yesterday, "The Senate needs to hear me loud and clear." Does this mean I haven't heard them loud and clear?

MR. McCLELLAN: This is another step in the congressional process, first of all. This is the emergency spending legislation. The President believes this is vital legislation to continue to provide our troops in the war on terrorism with vital resources they need to continue to win the war on terrorism and to provide critical resources to the people of the Gulf Coast as they continue to rebuild their communities.

The President made it very clear yesterday; he reiterated some of his points. He said that this is a test on spending restraint, and he calls on Congress to fund our troops and fund the rebuilding efforts along the Gulf Coast, and then hold the line on spending elsewhere. That means don't put unnecessary spending into this emergency legislation.

Q: So did the Senate just fail the test?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, this is going to conference committee now. The House has passed legislation; the Senate has passed legislation. Differences will be worked out in conference committee. And we urge the conference committee to resolve those differences quickly, get a bill back that meets what the President called for in terms of support for our troops and the Gulf Coast, and then not including unnecessary spending — and get that to the President's desk quickly, because our troops need these resources.

Q: And if that number that it comes back in is over \$94.5 billion, no question it will be vetoed?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President has made it very clear he would veto legislation that goes above and beyond what he called for. And also members of both the Senate and House have expressed that they will sustain that veto and that they have enough votes to sustain such a veto.

Q: Does the President resent at all being put in a position where he wants to fund the troops and he wants to get relief to Katrina, he wants the bird flu money to be in — but does he resent being put

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in the position where he now has to veto a bill that would do all those things because the Senate can't control —

MR. McCLELLAN: There are still some steps to go in the legislative process. And leaders in both the House and the Senate have praised the President for making very clear that we need to make sure we meet our commitments to our troops and the Gulf Coast, but we also don't need to be including unnecessary spending in emergency legislation like this.

And so we will continue to work with congressional leaders in conference committee and urge them to move quickly and get him a bill that meets what we called for.

Q: On the sentencing of Moussaoui, I know the President made remarks about this yesterday, but is he disappointed in the sentencing, or does he feel justice has been served?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we respect the decision. The jury concluded that Mr. Moussaoui should spend the rest of his life in prison. The President talked yesterday about how our thoughts are with the families of those who lost loved ones on September 11th and our thoughts are with those who were involved in the rescue efforts, and those brave souls that brought a plane to the ground to help save lives elsewhere. And Mr. Moussaoui is never going to get out of prison. He's going to spend the rest of his life behind bars. Justice is being served. We certainly can understand the disappointment that some families feel in the verdict. At the same time, this is our judicial system, and justice was served to Mr. Moussaoui.

It's also a reminder that we remain engaged in an ongoing war on terrorism. We are going to continue taking the fight to the enemy. We have scored many victories. We are bringing terrorists to account. We are either capturing them or killing them on the battlefield, and we will continue to move forward and deny them safe haven and disrupt their efforts to plan and plot against America. And the best way to disrupt their plans and plots is to stay on the offensive and take the fight to them, and that's exactly what this President is going to continue to do, and we will prevail.

Q: Scott, if justice was served, why not bring some of the others — Khalid Shaykh Muhammad — to stand trial here out in the open?

MR. McCLELLAN: We're engaged in a different kind of war, and we've talked about how the enemy that we face is sophisticated and lethal and determined. We know that they want to hit us again. We know that they want to continue to carry out attacks against innocent Americans and against innocent civilians in the civilized world. That's why we are engaged in a comprehensive war on terrorism. That's why we are going after terrorist leaders like Khalid Shaykh Muhammad and others and bringing them to justice. And we will continue to do so.

Q: Scott, but I don't think that really answers the questions. I mean, why not bring them here if Zacarias Moussaoui won't be planning anything?

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MR. McCLELLAN: I think it did answer the question, because of the nature of the war that we're engaged in. And we have an obligation to make sure that we get the kind of intelligence we need to be able to prevent attacks from happening. And this President will do that.

Q: Just to follow up, does the President think that Moussaoui deserved the death penalty?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, again, I think that what the President talked about yesterday was that he received a fair trial. It was a jury verdict, a jury that concluded he should spend the rest of his life in prison. And we respect that decision. And so that's the way the President looks at it.

Q: And just back on the spending plan, that includes \$4 billion for farmers, disaster aid, \$700 million for a railroad in Mississippi. Are these the — is this necessary spending or unnecessary spending?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we spelled out in a statement of administration policy our concerns about some of the spending that you referenced, and how we believed it should not be included in the emergency legislation.

Q: So those are two items then?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I would refer you back to the statement of administration policy. I know we specifically referred to, I think, those two items in that statement we put out.

Q: Scott, a follow-up on Moussaoui. A family member today said he lost confidence in this administration to find bin Laden; that he looks forward to the next administration to bring him to justice. How high of a priority is it for the President while he's still in office that bin Laden is caught?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we have been pursuing al Qaeda leaders wherever they are, and we will continue to go after them. And that's why we are taking the fight to the enemy abroad; we're fighting them overseas so that we don't have to fight them here. And it's making them much more — making it much more difficult for them to plan and plot against America and attack innocent civilians. We will continue to keep the pressure on them. We are winning this war on terrorism. We are bringing people to justice.

They are on the run — Osama bin Laden and other leaders that you've mentioned, they are on the run, they're under a lot of pressure. I think we see that through their recent statements that they have made, and we will continue to pursue them. They will be brought to justice for the crimes against humanity that they have committed, and the crimes against this country that they have committed.

Q: Scott, following on that, there's that al Zarqawi tape from last month, I guess, there are some

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outtakes that have emerged now, showing him in sneakers, with his fatigues, it shows him not being able to operate a gun. Some experts who have seen it are suggesting this sort of raises questions about his seriousness as a terrorist leader. Is there any White House view on that?

MR. McCLELLAN: I haven't seen the parts of the videotape that you are referencing. I think our military commanders over in Iraq have talked about it, and they provided some of that videotape to the public. But I would go back to something I would just talk about. Here is another al Qaeda leader that is under a lot of pressure, that is still trying to engage in desperate attempts to derail the transition to democracy in Iraq. And Zarqawi and his terrorist allies were dealt a real blow in Iraq by the formation of a unity government that represents all of Iraq's communities.

Now, we know that they are determined, and they want to continue to try to carry out attacks. And that's why we are partnering with Iraqi security forces and continuing to go after people in Iraq that are enemies of freedom. And we will continue to do so.

We will also continue to beef up the Iraqi security forces. They are making substantial progress. They are taking more of the lead in the fight, which enables coalition forces to focus on al Qaeda and terrorist leaders inside Iraq. They recognize the stakes involved there. This is the central front in the war on terrorism. And it's vital that we prevail inside Iraq, and we will.

And the Iraqi people are showing that they want to live in freedom, time and time again, when they go to the polls, and nearly 12 million show up and vote, and by the formation of a unity government, where leaders came together and said, we are determined to build a peaceful and democratic future that will be representative of all Iraqis.

Q: Can I just quick follow on what Terry asked for the Vice President Cheney? Mr. Cheney also said that Russia cannot use oil and gas as tools of intimidation or blackmail. Does this administration have concerns that they are using them —

MR. McCLELLAN: We have expressed concerns previously. A good example is the situation that occurred a couple of months ago with Russia and Ukraine, and we spoke out about that at the time.

Ivan.

Q: Scott, I know you addressed the takeover of the natural gas fields by the new President of Bolivia, but there are experts on Latin America who feel that this is but the latest indication of a move away from the United States by countries in Latin America, and they quote Bolivia with Morales, Venezuela with Chavez, of course Castro, and now upcoming — obvious incoming President of Peru. Is the President concerned about these warnings? Is he doing anything —

MR. McCLELLAN: Incoming President of Peru.

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Q: Well, they're going to have an election, and the indications are that he will be left of center.

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm not so sure I'm going to accept the premise of your statement. There's an election going on.

Q: Let's move that aside then. Let's just say that there are other countries in Latin America that give indication that they have moved or are moving away from a union with the United States. Is the President concerned about this? Are we doing anything —

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you're —

Q: — to try and win friends down there?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you're wrong to try to make this about the United States. There are many countries in this hemisphere that are committed to continuing to move forward on democracy and good governance and rule of law. Those are values and principles that most of this hemisphere shares. And our relations will continue to strengthen with those who are committed to the principles that we hold dear — the principles of democracy, the principles of good governance, the principle of investing in health and education of the people.

The President had a good meeting with the President of Uruguay earlier today, President Vázquez. And they talked about how much the United States has invested in development in the hemisphere. The United States I think has provided some — nearly \$2 billion. The President I think referenced that in his remarks earlier today — to invest in health care and education, and invest in the people of the region.

It's also important that we continue to move forward on expanding trade, because trade helps lift people out of poverty and gives them the opportunity to realize their dreams. And this is a hemisphere that the President has been very committed to since the beginning of his administration. We've had good discussions at a number of summits in the hemisphere, and countries have come together to reiterate their shared commitment to those important principles and values.

Q: So you don't view Morales and Chavez as a growing cancer in the region that has to be dealt with?

MR. McCLELLAN: Again, I think that our relations will continue to be based on countries' and leaders' commitments to democracy and rule of law and good governance and their investment in their people.

Q: With regard to —

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MR. McCLELLAN: And let me finish one thought. I mean, the President and President Vázquez did talk about the hemisphere and those values and their shared commitment to democracy and freedom. Those are values that unite us in this hemisphere.

Q: With regard to the President's speech tonight to the American Jewish Committee, has there been progress that has been made behind the scenes in getting Hamas, the Hamas government and Palestinian Territories to soften its stance toward Israel? Have there been negotiations going on, working with them at all?

MR. McCLELLAN: Are you talking about the United States? We don't deal with an organization that remains committed to terrorism. The Quartet has provided a way forward for Hamas, for Hamas to realize better relations with the international community, and to get assistance from the international community. But so far, Hamas has rejected what the Quartet called for. The Quartet — which is made up of the U.N., Russia and European Union, and the United States — clearly expressed what Hamas needs to do. They need to renounce terror and violence; they need to recognize Israel's right to exist; and they need to renew the commitment of previous — previously of the Palestinian Authority to moving forward on the peace process.

Q: Has anyone talked to — who is talking to Hamas, anyway?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think countries can speak for themselves. And there have been public comments made and I'll let others speak for themselves. But we don't think — if countries are meeting with Hamas, they ought to be reiterating the importance of Hamas making the right choice to agree to follow what the Quartet called for.

Q: Scott, two-part. In March, the Kentucky legislature passed, and Governor Fletcher signed a law banning protests within 300 feet of memorial services, wakes and burials, with punishments up to a year in jail. And my question: While the American Civil Liberties Union contends that this is unconstitutional, surely the President believes that the funerals of our military should not — should be allowed to be kept clear of funeral disrupters, doesn't he?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President believes we all ought to respect the privacy of families of the fallen, and respect their wishes.

Q: Democratic Party strategist Donna Brazile has written that potential candidates who back New Hampshire's effort to preserve its primary's traditional role are insensitive to the concerns of minority voters in other parts of the country. And she even denounced the New Hampshire Union Leader's cartooned Democrat donkey as non-white. And my question: Does the President — the President does not agree with this, or with the idea that Iowa and New Hampshire are too white to have —

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't think the President has spent too much time focusing on the '08

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presidential election. The President is focused on getting things done for the American people.

Q: Yes, I understand, but he certainly disagrees with Donna Brazil, doesn't he?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you've heard his views previously.

Victoria, go ahead.

Q: Yes. Scott, Elizabeth Dole, as head of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, has sent out a fundraising email, and in it she says that if the Democrats take control of the Senate this year they're going to try to call for endless congressional investigations and possibly the impeachment of President Bush. And she also says that that is worse than losing the war on terror. What is your reaction to that?

MR. McCLELLAN: You know, I haven't had a chance to look at the fundraising letter. I think that if you have questions about it you ought to ask Senator Dole. We appreciate all that she does to help advance the ideas that the President has outlined in his agenda for the American people. And we appreciate all that she's doing to support Republican candidates for the United States Senate. But I think we've previously talked about how there are some Democratic leaders who think the enemy is the President. The enemy is the terrorist. And that's why we're going to continue the stay focused on winning the war on terrorism and doing everything within our power to bring the terrorists to justice and prevent attacks from happening.

Q: Would you not think that losing the war on terror would be worse than a congressional investigation of the President?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry?

Q: Would you think that losing the war on terror would be worse than —

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't know you're trying to equate the two.

Q: Because they're in this letter.

MR. McCLELLAN: The top priority of this President is winning the war on terrorism. I'm not going to comment on a letter that I haven't even seen.

Q: Scott, over the past few years bin Laden continues to remain a fugitive. There's a resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Is there concern in the administration that possibly elements of the Pakistani secret service are giving bin Laden cover?

MR. McCLELLAN: We have removed — we have removed a terrorist-sponsoring regime from power

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in Afghanistan. We have denied the Taliban and al Qaeda a safe haven from which to plan and plot. Now, there are still remnants of the Taliban. The Canadian forces just recently went after and brought to justice a significant number of Taliban members in Afghanistan. We're continuing to continue to support the efforts of the Canadians and the NATO-led forces that will be coming in there in the southern region of Afghanistan. I think that's the region that you're talking about. The President discussed it with President Karzai earlier this week, and they talked about the outstanding work of the Canadian troops and what they're doing there. And they discussed the security situation there.

Q: If the Taliban was supported by elements within Pakistan, specifically the secret service, and again, are you concerned that maybe elements of the secret service —

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, what Pakistan did before September 11th is not what they're doing post-9/11. Pakistan is now an ally in the war on terrorism. And we appreciate Pakistan's efforts to go after terrorists that may be operating along the border region, and we will continue to work with them and help in those efforts.

Connie.

Q: Thanks, Scott. One on Great Britain, one on Israel. There's a number of important elections concluding now, as we speak, in Great Britain. If Prime Minister Blair's party loses a lot of seats, as is expected, will that retard the —

MR. McCLELLAN: Is this hypothetical day?

Q: Well, will this retard the U.S. —

MR. McCLELLAN: The President has a great relationship with Prime Minister Blair. We don't get involved in internal politics within other countries.

Q: If he steps down within the year —

MR. McCLELLAN: Oh, I'm not going to play into such hypotheticals like that. I think that's just an endless game you can play.

Q: This time on Israel. Do you have any words for the new Israeli government, which was sworn in today, and also the statements about unilateral borders, including Jerusalem, which Prime Minister Olmert —

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we believe that the road map is the way forward to the two-state solution. But you have to have partners in peace. And we do not have a partner in peace in Hamas. Until Hamas makes the right choice to follow what the Quartet called for, they cannot be a partner in

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peace toward that two-solution. And that's what we want to see occur in the region.

In terms of Israel, the President looks forward to working with the Prime Minister and the new government. No one has been a greater friend of Israel than the United States, and this President has been a staunch supporter of Israel, and he will continue to be so. He will talk about our relationship with Israel this evening when he goes to speak before the American Jewish Committee, at their centennial celebration. And so I'd encourage you to listen to what he has to say there, as well.

Q: Thank you.

MR. McCLELLAN: Thank you.

END 12:58 P.M. EDT