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Press Briefing by Tony Snow

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James S. Brady Briefing Room

12:32 P.M. EDT

MR. SNOW: Good afternoon all. The President's schedule: at 7:30 a.m., he, the Vice President and Mrs. Cheney attended a service of prayer and remembrance at St. John's Episcopal Church. The President and Mrs. Bush, and the Vice President and Mrs. Cheney participated in a moment of silence on the South Lawn at 8:46 a.m. Normal briefings this morning.

At 2:55 p.m., the President will meet with bicameral and bipartisan leadership in the Cabinet Room. Participants will include the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, Senator Reid, Senator Durbin, Senator McConnell, Senator Lott, Speaker Pelosi, Congressman Hoyer, Congressman Clyburn and Congressman Blunt. Congressman Boehner will be attending services in memory of Congressman Paul Gilmore. He will not be in attendance.

In addition, the President today has announced Henry C. Lozano to be Deputy Assistant to the President and Director of the USA Freedom Corps. Mr. Lozano recently served as the President and Chief Executive Officer of Californians for Drug-Free Youth, Incorporated, as a nonprofit organization working to bring parents, youth, schools and communities together to create and support safe and healthy communities. The President created USA Freedom Corps to build on the countless acts of service, sacrifice and generosity that followed September 11th. As we remember the lives lost six years ago today, the President continues to encourage all Americans to serve causes greater than themselves.

Questions.

Q: Some Republicans started expressing skepticism about what they were hearing in the hearings with General Petraeus. And Senator Norm Coleman said, "Americans want to see light at the end

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of the tunnel.” Is the President, when he addresses this, going to be able to talk about light at the end of the tunnel, point to the end?

MR. SNOW: Well, I don’t know precisely what one would mean by that. What do you mean by “light at the end of the tunnel”?

Q: It’s not me, it’s Senator Coleman speaking.

MR. SNOW: I know, but you’re asking — your asking me to respond to a figure of speech was a little difficult.

Q: I think he was referring to —

MR. SNOW: No, I watched the colloquy.

Q: Okay, then you know —

MR. SNOW: I think what General Petraeus was pointing out is that we have seen considerable signs of progress. And frankly, I’m not going to get into the business right now of trying to anticipate what the President might say. But, look, war is a complicated business, but I think what you have seen — and this is something that General Petraeus pointed out in considerable detail — are a series of trend lines that have been promising, not merely in terms of suppressing violence and reducing the slaughter of innocents in Iraq, but also of generating among Iraqis a kind of passion in defense of their government and in defense of the democratic system that had not existed before and is beginning to spread not merely in Shia areas, but also — I mean, in Sunni areas, but also in Shia areas, as you’ve seen also reactions against recent bursts of violence by Jaish al-Mahdi and also Iranian-backed forces.

All of these are signs that the Iraqis want peace. They want a light at the end of the tunnel, which is a stable democracy where they are able to handle the means of security and so on. And that is something that remains the goal of U.S. involvement. But I’m not going to try to presage what the President may say.

Q: Tony, one of the things that you’ve been seeing in the press, that’s accompanied a lot of the analysis of what’s going on right now, is the idea of bottom-up de facto partitioning has been taking place in the country, and that that’s where Iraq seems to be moving. What does the White House and the administration feel about the idea of some sort of de facto partitioning taking place?

MR. SNOW: I’m not — I’m going to leave that to experts, including Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus. What you’re talking about is chin-pulling on the part of the opinion class. In fact, what you have seen in Iraq is something that is less de facto partitioning than, in fact, de facto fighting back against the forces that have been trying to blow apart a democracy that millions of

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Iraqis voted for not so long ago.

Q: — a reflection of what's going on there.

MR. SNOW: No, I think it's people trying to do their own analysis at a distance. I would defer to General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, who spend all their time there.

Q: General Petraeus said he'll reevaluate the troop levels in March. Is the President asking lawmakers and the American public to give his strategy six more months before he'll decide whether there needs to be a change in strategy?

MR. SNOW: Well, what we have here is we have what appears to be trend lines that are pointing to success. Now, it seems to me if you've got something that is succeeding, you want more of it. And what General Petraeus is arguing for — and, again, I will — please do not read this as an endorsement or an early preview of what the President may say, but I will try to interpret what General Petraeus has been saying, which is that you have had — you have the ability — you've had success on the ground so far, not only in terms of building greater capabilities with the Iraqis, but also in seeing these significant changes that I've talked about in terms of hearts and minds in Iraq.

He also has said, as a result of that success, we're going to be able to bring, at least in his opinion, several thousands Americans home. Whether the President agrees or disagrees, we're going to find out. But General Petraeus's view is that that has yielded the kind of success that is going to make it possible to hand over more day-to-day responsibilities to the Iraqis in places like Anbar and, therefore, give you two things that Americans want: One is returning some American forces home and, at the same time, have greater security and success within Iraq.

So, I mean, I think any questions about precisely what General Petraeus had in mind are probably best addressed to him. When the President has made any of his comments about the testimony that takes place this week, then I'll be happy to give you interpretations.

Bret.

Q: Can you provide any more details about this afternoon's meeting? Is this a preview of the President's national address?

MR. SNOW: No, this is — we have regular meetings with bipartisan, bicameral leadership.

Q: But this is specifically on Iraq?

MR. SNOW: I think Iraq is likely to be the dominant topic. Quite often, other things will pop up. There are — you've got intelligence reform and education and so on. But I honestly don't know

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exactly how it's going to break down, but I would expect Iraq to be the dominant topic.

Q: So after almost two days of testimony by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, is there a growing confidence in this building that Democrats do not have the votes to force the President's hand on a change in Iraq?

MR. SNOW: Again, what you're trying to do is to get me to sort of wink, nod and show a little ankle —

Q: Valiant effort.

MR. SNOW: It was valiant, and it was very clever. He is a professional. (Laughter.)

Helen.

Q: This is not a hypothetical question. Does the President feel that he has the right to attack any country without going first to Congress?

MR. SNOW: No.

Q: He does not feel he has — he can't attack Iran, for example, without first asking permission?

MR. SNOW: We are not getting into hypothetical questions about Iran.

Q: It's not hypothetical. I'm asking you if he has the authority.

MR. SNOW: Excuse me, it absolutely is hypothetical.

Q: Does he have the authority?

MR. SNOW: Again, what you're asking is — what the President did, for instance, in Iraq was pursuant to United Nations resolutions, many of them, including Resolution 1441.

Q: Would he do the same thing?

MR. SNOW: I'm not — I'm sorry, but that is hypothetical, and I'm not going to play. What I will tell you is that at all times the first position of this government is to pursue diplomacy. And we have pursued it actively and continue to do so with regard to the government of Iran. We had said that there are a number of areas in which they need to take a very careful look at their behavior, including the import of arms and fighters into Iraq, also the development of a nuclear program. We've also said that if they were to suspend movement toward a nuclear program and do other things, they, in fact, would be welcomed with open arms with the kinds of relations — economic,

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cultural, political and so on — that they desire. This was done in coordination with our allies, with the United Nations and the — so the fact is —

Q: Every day you have a drumbeat on Iran; in one way or another the President mentions Iran. Is there some sort of —

MR. SNOW: It's not a drumbeat, but it is clearly true and I think — this is not hypothetical — that Iran has been playing a deeply non-constructive role when it comes to moving EFPs and resources into Iraq to destabilize the government.

Q: I know you don't want to preview the President's address, but can we expect to know more at the time of the address about such things as whether he's going to be requesting more money for Iraq and details like that?

MR. SNOW: Again, I'll just — I know it's maddening, you're just going to have to wait for the President's address.

Q: Tony, what is the administration's view of the overall goal of the U.S. military forces in Iraq at this point? Obviously, political reconciliation is what we had heard about early on when the President announced the surge. But now you have Senator Hagel saying, "Are we going to continue to invest American blood and treasure at the same rate we are doing now, for what?" You have Senator Lugar saying, "We need to see a strategy for how our troops and other resources in Iraq might be employed to fundamentally change the equation."

MR. SNOW: Well, I think one of the things that again was being argued by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus today is that there have been fundamental changes in the equation. And in point of fact you've seen Iraqis now standing up and putting their own lives on the line, going after people — for instance, al Qaeda: al Qaeda in Iraq was beheading children to intimidate their parents in Anbar province. There was an extraordinarily high rate of attacks on locals. And finally, what happened is the tribal sheiks said, we're not going to do this anymore. And they came to the United States and they came to the coalition and said, we want to work with you. These are people that they had been fighting against previously.

Furthermore, they have now said — they've made it clear that they view this not merely as a marriage of military convenience, but one of real conviction. And, therefore, you have seen a dramatic change in events on the ground in Anbar, not merely in terms of going after al Qaeda, which has been thrashed in Anbar, but also in terms of the commitment of the people there to a democratic system of government.

You've also seen some signs that there's progress in places like Diyala. And as I pointed out, this is not simply a Sunni reaction to al Qaeda, you've also seen Shia reactions to recent things such as the bombing in Karbala, the assassination of two governors, all of which was done by Jaish al-

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Mahdi, the Mahdi Army. You've seen the reduction in sort of power and esteem for Muqtada al Sadr, who six months ago was preaching sermons in Najaf and is now hiding out in Iran.

The fact is that there have been profound changes in the way Iraqis themselves are viewing the military operations, but also the development of a government, as General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker also pointed out. When it comes to a lot of the political benchmarks we've been discussing — distribution of oil revenues, it's happening without a law. De-Baathification, some of that is happening without a law. In other words, people are taking the business of reconciliation into their own hands.

Now, both of them have made it clear that they would like to see more in the way of active political reconciliation on the part of political forces within Iraq. But I think it is safe to say that, you go back and look at their testimony, they do believe that, in fact, what we have seen is an important increase in security, but also maybe even more important, a sense of empowerment on the part of the Iraqi people that they not only have a stake in democracy, but they have the ability to go ahead and fight against those who have been using terror as a way of frustrating their dreams and aspirations.

April.

Q: Tony, six years to this day, the worst terrorist attack happened on American soil. What is President Bush's feelings today? Osama bin Laden has not been found; he continues to make tapes. What is his feeling today?

MR. SNOW: What is his feeling? The feeling is that September 11th not only changed America — many people see this as a cleavage point, where before September 11th we may have been naive about the existence of a terror network; after September 11th, it is a shadow over our lives. And therefore, it is the commitment of this President to fight a war on terror and terrorists so that future generations will not have to worry about September 11ths in the future, and that although this is a long battle — which he said at the very beginning — on September 20, 2001, he said, this is going to be a long battle. He pointed out that the terror network was not confined to one nation, but it was spread throughout the globe, and that it was important for us to use our resources and our commitment to fighting it.

Six years simply demonstrates that we have a determined enemy, but we also have a noble and worthy goal, which is to advance the cause of liberty, and also to demonstrate to the rest of the world that mere acts of terror will not be enough to dissuade the United States from following through on its word. And furthermore, mere acts of terror are not the kind of thing that ultimately are going to allow terrorists to continue to take over governments and to oppress and to betray the aspirations of people in nations that become captive to the terrorists themselves.

Q: Understanding that, but again, what is the President's feeling about the fact that Osama bin

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Laden, the mastermind, has not been found?

MR. SNOW: Well, we're going to find him. I mean, we — he said all along we're going to find him. The other thing that is clear is that Osama bin Laden is somebody, again, that does not have the kind of freedom or liberty of movement that he used to have; the tapes we have seen are the first that we've seen in three years; that Ayman al-Zawahiri is the person who has been a lot more active and aggressive in terms of trying to be the ideological leader.

But bin Laden is somebody who is a symbolic leader of al Qaeda. Certainly, the capture of bin Laden will be of enormous symbolic importance. But the fact is that the war against terror is not the war against one guy, Osama bin Laden, it is against a network that uses all sorts of ways of trying to recruit new terrorists, whether it be through the Internet or through training facilities or so on. And it is the responsibility of this government in protecting the American people to pursue terrorists wherever we find them, and, by the way, also, to develop the capability and the intelligence capacity to know what they're doing so that we can protect the American people.

Q: But, Tony, years passed —

MR. SNOW: This will — I know you want a hand-wringing sort of —

Q: No, I don't want hand-wringing. No, this is major, this is major, because he is still out there. He attacked the United States. And many people are concerned that other things have been used as a diversionary tactic. And I'm just trying to get a handle on —

MR. SNOW: Other things have been used as a diversionary tactic — what does that mean?

Q: Other issues have been used as a diversionary tactic.

MR. SNOW: Are you — I don't have any idea what you're talking about there.

Q: Let me ask my question first then we'll go back to that a little later on.

MR. SNOW: Well, it's the tenet of your question, April. It's one of the —

Q: Okay, well "diversionary tactic" meaning some of the other issues about Iraq and things of that nature and what's going on. This administration has said, years after —

MR. SNOW: Wait, you're saying — you're saying that Iraq is a — Iraq, which bin Laden himself has said is a central front on the war on terror, is a diversionary tactic?

Q: In some — some people are saying that Iraq —

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MR. SNOW: In some — who's saying this? I mean, I just —

Q: Many Democrats. You got people who just want to —

MR. SNOW: Okay, I would say that they're wrong, but go ahead.

Q: Okay, here's the issue. Years after 9/11, this administration diminished the significance of Osama bin Laden, saying he was just trying to maintain that he was indeed just trying to survive. Then, a couple weeks ago, at that podium, that exact podium, Fran Townsend said, he's helping to mastermind plots with the Iraq al-Qaeda. Now, a couple days ago, Fran Townsend uses the word "impotent." What is it?

MR. SNOW: What you have is Osama bin Laden is clearly a guy who does not have the kind of freedom or the ability to run terror camps and this sort of thing that he had some years ago. Nevertheless, you've got to keep in mind — what you've done is you personalized it. You've tried to reduce the war to one person. That's not the right way to think about this. The United States government remains vigilant about al-Qaeda. Certainly, we would love to find Osama bin Laden; that has not changed.

Q: Tony, has the White House been surprised by anything that General Petraeus or Ambassador Crocker have said in their testimony?

MR. SNOW: Not that I'm aware of, no. But again, the President had been — as General Petraeus pointed out yesterday, he briefed the President on what his views were last week.

Q: Tony, given some of the doubts that Elaine and Terry were talking about before —

MR. SNOW: Which doubts?

Q: The doubts that were being voiced by Republican lawmakers —

MR. SNOW: A couple of members, yes.

Q: — the concerns about whether the cost is worth it —

MR. SNOW: Right.

Q: — if the gains —

MR. SNOW: Right.

Q: — there are again discussions on the Hill about what would purportedly be compromise

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language, attempting to shorten the withdrawal window that Petraeus has already described and even to force a change in the mission.

MR. SNOW: Mark, I don't — what you're trying to do — again, look, let's wait until the President has given his speech, and then we can do all the what-ifs. As I recall, Senator Warner said he's not going to be ready to talk about anything until after the President has given his speech. Rather than trying to sort of what-if into the void, let's wait until somebody has come up with a proposal, and then I'd be happy to talk about it.

Q: Is the President opposed to any attempt to force his hand?

MR. SNOW: What do you mean any attempt to force —

Q: By Congress.

MR. SNOW: What the President wants is for Congress, A, to listen respectfully to the testimony, and B, to be supportive of succeeding in the war on terror.

John.

Q: Aside from the congressional reaction to the testimony, do you have any way of gauging what public reaction to the testimony is?

MR. SNOW: I'm sure people have been doing polling on it; I haven't looked at it overnight. I'm sure somebody has done some snap polls, some of the pollsters have, but I haven't seen it.

Let me just add one thing. I don't think it can have been good for Democrats yesterday to have had the MoveOn ad or to have had the Code Pink demonstrators, or to have had some members of Congress trying preemptively to smear General Petraeus. But having said that, I just — I don't know what the public reaction is. I think a lot of people in the American public are curious about what General Petraeus has to say. Again, we'll refer back to polling; everybody talks about polls. They want to hear what the generals have to say. They want to hear what guys with dust on their boots have to say. And I'm sure that there will be some pretty extensive polling on it later.

I'm sorry —

Q: When the President meets the deadline for reporting by September 15th, he will do it with a written report and an address to the nation? Is that correct? And is the meeting this afternoon with the leaders of Congress to share his thoughts with them or to once again get their thoughts?

MR. SNOW: No, what the President will be doing is soliciting thoughts from members of Congress. Again, we will announce to you the process and the schedules for things when we're ready to do

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so. I'm just not ready to do so yet.

Q: Is there some reason this is such a mystery?

Q: Yes. (Laughter.)

Q: Tony, two questions. One, today, of course, is 9/11, Tuesday the same day and date six years ago. Although we have not had any major attacks after 9/11 in the U.S., but still Americans are living under fear. Why still we have to live under fear when there is no major attack —

MR. SNOW: I think Americans, for the most part, have responded to terror in the right way, which is going about their normal lives. Are Americans paralyzed by fear? I don't think so. Do they have concern about terror? Of course. So I think fear is probably too strong a word to use.

This is a factor that this President is going to deal with and the next President is going to deal with, and perhaps Presidents after that are going to have to deal with. You have a — you've got an ideological struggle between people who believe in going after democracies like ours, but also going after democracies in Lebanon, going after democracies in Iraq, going after democracies in Afghanistan — in other words, trying to make examples of those — even in the Palestinian areas — trying to do what they can to fight against simply human liberty.

Now I've totally lost my thread on the cut camera.

Q: If I may, second.

MR. SNOW: Very quickly.

Q: Quickly, yes, sir, thank you. As far as yesterday's hearing was concerned, everybody, including the speakers agreed on one thing, that foreign fighters are from Saudi Arabia, and they are the one who also were on 9/11. So where do we stand as far as dealing with Saudi Arabia and —

MR. SNOW: We make clear — if you're asking me to sort of let you in behind the scenes, forget about it, I'm not going to go do it. But the fact is, we've made it clear to everybody in the region our concerns about terror and terrorists who have tried to make their way into Iraq. We've also made it clear with the Syrians, for instance, the transit through Syria into Iraq is a concern.

The other thing is that I think you find that countries in the neighborhood, including the Saudis, are very aware of the threat of terror. They're also very aware of something Helen was talking about before, which is the menace posed by Iran. And they understand that they've got to be part of the solution to terror.

Jim.

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Q: Tony, following on the polling. Having no idea what the American people are making of what's going on on the Hill, does it matter to the President in terms of charting — either Thursday night or beyond that, charting his strategy in the next couple of months?

MR. SNOW: As I've always told you, it's important to have public support, but on the other hand, the President has a practical responsibility to figure out what's going to work, and what's going to make Americans safe and safer in the future. And those are the things that are going to dominate his thinking.

What is constructive is to hear people talking about successes in Iraq, and to hear people talking about their own interactions with leaders in Iraq and in the region, because the American people haven't heard a lot of this stuff. And so for them, maybe it is news, and it is important to have an informed a debate as we go forward. But, Jim, the President's view has always been that as Commander-in-Chief it is his solemn obligation to do whatever is necessary to make Americans safe. And if that makes him unpopular — if some of the steps he takes make him unpopular, he will accept that hit, because he knows ultimately that nobody will forgive, and nobody should forgive, a President who didn't do what was necessary simply to get a point or two in the polls.

Q: Thank you.

END 12:55 P.M. EDT