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PRESS BRIEFING BY
TONY SNOW

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MR. SNOW: Welcome. A few notes before I take questions. The President today spoke with Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolaños to thank him for his service to his country. He later spoke with President-elect Daniel Ortega, to congratulate him on his election victory, to express America's strong commitment to the well being of the Nicaraguan people and our continuing interest in a relationship with Nicaragua, noting such ongoing areas of concern as CAFTA and the Millennium Challenge Account. The President also noted that reconciliation, unity, democracy and job creation -- the centerpieces of President-elect Ortega's platform -- are also possible areas for cooperation.

Also the President has been meeting and continues to meet right now -- well, they may be out by now -- with José Barroso of the European Union. In a meeting in the Oval Office, they covered areas of economic cooperation, trade, the Doha round, global warming; they talked about Middle Eastern peace, and also regional issues -- larger regional issues, energy cooperation -- that pretty much does it. Darfur, they actually said that they would take up at the beginning of lunch. They were hoping to do it during the Oval Office session, but they, after a very brief conversation, were going to follow up, all expressing their desire to continue to focus international attention on the ongoing genocide there.

Scheduling announcement: The President will travel to Fort Benning, Georgia, on Thursday. He'll visit with troops and make a statement to the press. We'll give you more details as they become available.

With that, I'll take questions. Terry.

Q With the President's speech set for Wednesday night, is it fair to say that he's settled on all the details now?

MR. SNOW: Not all the details, but very close to wrapping them up.

Q I take it that the major decisions have been made. Is what's generally been out there, the 20,000 troops, just a --

MR. SNOW: As I said, you'll have to wait. I'm not at liberty up here to make comments on news reports about it. As we've explained before, as matters of courtesy to members of Congress and others who are involved and being notified, they will be notified before we'll be making any public announcements.

Q When will that be?

MR. SNOW: I don't know precisely when the notifications will start, but not in today's news cycle.

Q Tony, if you take the Reid-Pelosi letter as any indication, it would appear as though the President and the congressional leadership are on a collision course.

MR. SNOW: I'm not so sure. I think you're going to have to wait and see, Jim, how members of Congress react. I can tell you, for instance --

Q I mean, how else could you read that letter?

MR. SNOW: Again, you've got the -- one of the other things that they talk about is their desire to make sure that the people of Iraq succeed. And they want to have Iraq succeed as a country, they want to support American troops.

I think what will happen is that when the President's plan becomes known in detail, then people will be able to talk sensibly about the details and about how the pieces fit together. At this point, I think -- and Senator Reid and Speaker Pelosi will have their opportunities to express

what they think is necessary for success in Iraq and how they define success. They'll have their opportunity to talk about how they support troops and what they think the troops need. So all of that will be part of the debate.

But the President continues to reach out. A number of members of Congress on both sides said they want to take a good, hard look at it, as they should, and as we invite them to do. A number have expressed support for the determination to go ahead and make sure that we've got an Iraqi democracy that stands on its own.

Q What are you expecting the American people to hear on Wednesday that will change the mind of the majority of American people who don't want to see an open-ended escalation of troops?

MR. SNOW: Well, again, Jim, any sensible answer to that would require my discussing details that I can't give you right now.

Q Is he confident they will?

MR. SNOW: Look, I think what you do -- when you talk about something as tough and important as a war, it is important to take a good look at what the President is proposing, how it fits together, how it meets our national aims and objectives, and how it's going to make us safer. And those are all issues that the President is going to address, and I think at that point you can have a debate about something far more than hypotheticals that are being brooded about, some of which are on target, and some of which aren't.

And I think, therefore, as frustrating as it is, my caution is wait until you see the whole package and then the debate will begin. And, also, at that point, people who are opposed to it are going to be able to give a lot more focused critique in terms of what they like and don't like, and I think at that point I can give you a lot better answer, frankly, than to give you a generic answer.

Q Tony, does the President believe that up until now the policy of what to do with our troops -- their posture, how to deploy them -- has been a failure?

MR. SNOW: No, but it is clear that -- you need to take a look at different phases. Early on, we had what Tommy Franks described as catastrophic victory, sweeping, swift victory in the early combat phases. There was an expectation a year ago, and I think a lot of people in this room probably felt and shared it after the elections, that there might be a possibility of drawing down troops at this juncture.

But the sectarian violence was something that al Qaeda had sought to foment and succeeded in so doing, and they did it at a time when the Iraqi government, itself, had not yet had an opportunity to stand up -- there was a transitional period of four months there where you didn't have the government of Prime Minister Maliki, and then time for that government to form. There were two plans to secure Baghdad that didn't achieve the desired results.

I think what you can say is that what's happened in the wake of sectarian violence clearly did not fully anticipate the way in which that problem would arise and manifest itself, and the plans in Baghdad did not succeed. And, therefore, you need to take a look not merely at the critical issue of Baghdad, but the larger issue of who handles security, what's the best way to deal with it, and how you deal with the other pieces that are absolutely vital to any successful democracy in Iraq, which include building the economy, having political institutions that people trust, having law enforcement institutions that are going to enforce the law fairly with everybody. And all of those considerations have to be taken in mind.

Q At this stage -- you don't want to get into the details of the policy, so I won't press you on that -- but at this stage, the President's previous commanders on the ground who were just replaced said publicly they didn't think additional troops would help. Leaders of Congress who are Democrats don't think additional troops will help. A number of Republicans feel that way -- and there are some who don't, like McCain and Graham and others who support a troop surge. When you look at public opinion, you know where that stands.

The President is isolated in terms of the Iraqi policy and he seems to be among the few who thinks that this step, or any step can actually result in victory. I'm wondering

where his mind-set is, how he arrived at this point in doing something that remains quite unpopular?

MR. SNOW: Again, I'm going to be able to give you a lot better answer -- I would warn against the theme that the President is isolated, or even -- if you go back, for instance, and you look at John Abizaid's testimony in December, saying, well, properly done, yes, we could use more troops. I mean, there have been a number of different characterizations by members of the military.

I think what you have to do is to take a look at the whole package and how it fits together, because I think Americans are concerned -- they want to know questions that are often asked: What does it mean -- what is your military objective, precisely what is it? How do the Iraqis fit in? How does the international community fit in? How does it fit in with the war on terror?

So a lot of those key questions I think are worth laying out for the American people. And, furthermore, even within the speech to the nation, there are going to be a lot of details that you're going to be interested in that we're not going to have time -- we're going to spend a lot of time, whatever time you need briefing you on background on that, as well.

I think a full, informed debate allows people to get a sense of what's going on in Iraq and all the various forces that are at play, and how we think one needs to address them. It's going to be useful, and it's worth having a very thoughtful debate about the details and about how the President plans to move forward.

Q I guess the challenge would be who besides the President thinks that the war is winnable at this stage?

MR. SNOW: I think millions of Americans believe that this war is winnable, and I think, furthermore, that it's important to rebuild the sense of political unity. One of the things the President has often said is, the only way we lose if we lose our will. And it is clear that there have been political debates in this country.

And it's also interesting because, again, I've heard a lot of Democrats saying, we want to succeed in Iraq. And, therefore, the question for them is, that's great, we

agree, so let's find out what your ideas are, if you think you've got a different or a better idea; let's find out how you'll support the military in this endeavor. That's worth doing. And, frankly, done the right way will reassure the American people that all of Washington is serious about doing the right thing and doing it in the right way. And so we've got an opportunity here I think of getting thoughtful debate.

Q Tony, can you talk again about the President's confidence in Prime Minister Maliki? He has said before about hitting these benchmarks -- back in October -- it didn't happen. He said that there was going to be security in Baghdad; the battalions didn't show up. What has changed over the past few months? And where does the President stand today --

MR. SNOW: The President has confidence in Prime Minister Maliki and also knows that there are very clear things that need to be done. Speaking of some of the benchmarks -- I won't get into a lot of detail, but if you're talking about -- political benchmarks have been mentioned. For instance, the oil law, it looks like that there will be before the council of representatives a vote pretty soon on the oil law. Similarly, on constitutional reforms and a political reconciliation, including things that have to do with modifying the de-Baathification laws. All those are important steps. And Prime Minister Maliki, himself, has reiterated the importance of doing benchmarks.

So I'm not going to get into whether there are or aren't -- later in the week we'll have an opportunity to talk a lot more precisely about these things.

Q All right, Wednesday night, will that include a request for funding?

MR. SNOW: At this point, there will be some discussion of what the President thinks we need to do, in terms of going forward. A lot of the details will be coming out in subsequent days, but I'll leave it vague like that.

Q Tony, is the President going to discuss how we get out of Iraq?

MR. SNOW: Well, let me put it this way: If you take a look -- ultimately, the goal is to have an Iraq that does, in fact, stand up for itself and assumes full responsibility for security for the economy, for the legal system, and so on. And at that point, an American presence would be superfluous, at least other than in an advisory capacity. That's where you want to end up.

Q But will he define when we know that and how you --

MR. SNOW: Well, I think I'll --

Q I mean, one of the things in the old plan is you stand up troops -- you stand up Iraqi troops, you stand down. That seemed like you had benchmarks on when you can get out, even though it didn't work. Will there be benchmarks on how the U.S. gets out of there?

MR. SNOW: As I said, I am going to remain vague on this until the President has done his announcement, and then we can go in and you can take a look and ask precise questions about precisely what he will propose.

Q One of the things that Nancy Pelosi has been saying over the weekend, and others, is that this is expanding the mission. You've said part of the problem with the Baghdad plan was there weren't enough troops -- so we can assume beyond a hypothetical that you're probably going to want more troops if you want it to succeed, because you've said, there weren't enough. Do you agree --

MR. SNOW: U.S. troops and Iraqi troops.

Q Do you agree -- but I think the other day you said U.S. and Iraqi. Do you agree with her idea that this would expand the mission? Do you have plans to expand the mission?

MR. SNOW: I think, Martha, again, we're talking into a vacuum here, trying to trade characterizations of the plan. Wait until the plan comes out, and then I'll be happy to deal with that characterization or any others, and be able to do it in a way that provides the level of detail that could make that a useful answer for people who want to know.

Q One of the things that goes back and forth -- and the Democrats say they want success in Iraq. The President says he wants victory in Iraq. That's probably the hardest thing to get your hands around here --

MR. SNOW: We've made it clear that when you talk about victory, what you talk about is Iraq being able to assume full responsibility and full control of its democratic destiny. There are likely to be challenges even after that point where insurgents may challenge the government or where you have acts of sectarian violence, but --

Q But we may not be there?

MR. SNOW: -- they will have the ability to deal with their internal problems, and that is the kind of situation -- when you have a democracy that is able to deal independently with those issues, then you've got success, victory, however you may define it. Now, perhaps others have a different definition. But the point is, if you get a democratic Iraq that is bound together by national interests, national identity, that is enjoying economic growth and political liberty -- that sends a powerful message to terrorists.

And if you take a look, geographically you've got -- there is Iraq, right between Iran and Syria, two of the key players in the terror wars. And for an Iraqi democracy to succeed in the region -- despite opposition from the outside, despite attempts to foment sectarian violence on the inside -- sends a powerful message to terrorists, which is, despite your best efforts, it's not going to happen. And it also sends an equally powerful message to people throughout the region -- in Afghanistan, in Lebanon, in the Palestinian areas, in a number of Arab states that are beginning to expand the franchise -- that, in fact, democracy is something that can work in the region.

And so make no mistake, success in Iraq, not only is it vital to our security for reasons that we've talked about many times, but it also has the chance really to send a definitive refutation to those who believe that it is their destiny to foment terror in the world.

Q But the President will use the word "victory"?

MR. SNOW: Well, again, everybody keeps trying to get --

Q But he still wants victory?

MR. SNOW: Everybody keeps trying to get me --

Q Is that something he still strives for, victory or success?

MR. SNOW: -- discuss --

Q But, Tony, you are calling it "the way forward." That is what the White House is calling it.

MR. SNOW: Yes, that is correct.

Q But, I mean, isn't it true that there are limitations as to what the United States can do in Iraq, that much of this rests on the shoulders of the Maliki government and others within the Maliki government?

MR. SNOW: True.

Q So how can the White House say with certainty that what the President will unveil is, in fact, the way forward for Iraq?

MR. SNOW: Well, what the President is going to do is to unveil -- what you're asking is, does the President have a crystal ball that will project with absolute clarity what's going to happen in the future. Of course not. And what happens with any plan is that you do have to make adjustments when the other side adjusts.

But on the other hand, he will talk about ways of addressing these concerns that reflect a lot of serious thought on the part of a lot of people in the region and outside -- you know, we've done consultations with Congress, with members of the military, with foreign heads of state, with the Iraqi government, with leaders throughout Iraq, with scholars, with people who agree and disagree. There has been a lot of time and effort put in to trying to figure out how do you try to set the conditions that are going to enable you to move forward so that you have an Iraq that can stand up on its own.

So I know, Elaine, that's a very general answer, but on the other hand, the details are forthcoming and you can try to fill in the blanks a little later.

Q Can I follow on what Elaine was asking? As the American people listen to the President describe the new way forward, because of all the things that you just outlined, all the conditions and the things that have gone on in the past, does he want them to look at these at this point as part of a continuum, that he will keep at it until victory? Or does he appreciate that some of them might listen and say, this doesn't work --

MR. SNOW: Well, again, I think the public opinion and public support is a very important part of this. And it is not static. So I think what you have to do is to see how people respond not merely to the speech, but to the particulars of the plan, to the political debate that follows. And, you know, this is going to be fairly complex and it's going to take people a little bit of time to think through. And we will spend a lot of time talking about it, because it's important to do so.

Obviously, I mentioned before, the President has made it clear on a number of occasions: We lose only if we lose the will. It is important to explain to the American people how this fits in to the overall goal of keeping Americans more secure in a world where we continue to be engaged in a global war on terror.

Q And one other follow-up. Do the Democrats or any of the opponents have the executive authority to stop anything that the President is going to present? In other words, is he going to need to ask Congress to approve something?

MR. SNOW: Well, ultimately, anything you do has budgetary implications. I think there was a question earlier today, are we seeking resolutions, and that sort of thing -- and I want to wave you off of that. What you do have, though, is basically budget is policy. So Congress is going to be engaged in the appropriations and authorization process and, you know, through those, they're going to be debating a lot of things. And so that's sort of par for the course.

Q But in terms of anything out of the Pentagon -- the troops, deployment, any of the programs we initiate -- the President, alone, has the authority to --

MR. SNOW: You know what, I don't want to play junior constitutional lawyer on this, so let's wait until we see what happens, if you have specific questions about constitutional authority. But, you know, Congress has the power of the purse. The President has the ability to exercise his own authority if he thinks Congress has voted the wrong way.

Let me just say that the early sessions that I've seen have been conducted, as I noted the other day, in a spirit of real respect and they've been constructive. So I know it's tempting to think, boy, this is going to set off a big old political firestorm -- and it very well may. But on the other hand, it may actually set off a period of reflection and constructive activity. And that would be a good thing, as well.

So I will continue to sort of dance around details until they become available. And then it's going to be a whole lot easier -- my guess is the press briefings will be a whole lot longer as we go through these things, and I'll be able to give you a much better answer.

Helen.

Q >From all the reports of drawdown that we had many months ago, were they phony? And, also, aren't we trying to now inject 20,000 more troops in a sectarian war? What is this all about? And does the President want to leave this war to another President?

MR. SNOW: Okay, several items. Number one, as I've said to everybody else, can't help you on details -- including your assertion of how many troops might be brought in.

Number two, when it came to troop levels last year, I can remember, even in my early days here, cautioning people against stories of buildup and drawdown. Remember there were stories that, you know, "Is it going to be 90,000 by the end of the year?" And I said, just everybody calm down, we operate according to conditions on the ground. And conditions still remain pivotal there.

So, you know, pepper me with precise questions after we've gotten the plan out and I'll be happy to take them.

Sheryl.

Q Tony, we know that the public and lawmakers are skeptical of whatever the President will propose. You talked about the Fort Benning trip on Thursday. Can you tell us about that trip and about anything else the administration is doing to explain this policy to not only the American people and Congress, but also people around the world?

MR. SNOW: The President has got a pretty good start when he speaks to the nation; the whole world will watch. And beyond that, number one, we will do lots of briefings for members of the press and, certainly, you are very important in informing the American people and the world about what we think and how we think the plan will work.

But, Sheryl, we are obviously going to talk a lot about it. It's a matter of real importance, and it's also something that Congress will not have the ability to deal with overnight, and there's going to be a lot of discussion about it. So am I going to tell you with absolute certainty which events we're going to do and how long? No. But it will be certainly a point of focus, it will continue to be something where the President will explain, and a number of others of us within the administration will do the same.

Q But can you talk a little more about the Fort Benning trip? And, also, will we see perhaps Secretary of State Rice take trips overseas to --

MR. SNOW: Again, let's just -- at Fort Benning we'll get you details. But he will certainly meet with troops, he'll make some comments, and we'll get more details as we get a little closer. As far as Secretary Rice's schedule, we'll let whatever announcements be made when they're appropriate.

Q Any domestic trips beyond Fort Benning in the next week or so?

MR. SNOW: I don't know. Certainly this week that's it.

Q Tony, two quick questions. One, can you confirm about ambassadorial changes the President made this morning, the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan --

MR. SNOW: Well, obviously, they're both nominated, and now we hope for speedy confirmation.

Q And Ambassador from Iraq, will he become ambassador to the U.N.?

MR. SNOW: That's correct.

Q Do you know if President is happy with the ambassador, because he was ambassador to Afghanistan, he was a great ambassador to Afghanistan, and now he was in Iraq. So why this change, as far as ambassador is concerned?

MR. SNOW: Well, a couple of things. If you take a look, the ambassadors have been staying in Iraq about a year. That's been more or less normal, and Zal actually stayed on. Secondly, he wouldn't be nominating him to become our permanent representative to the United Nations if he didn't think he was first class. Ryan Crocker also is a guy of extraordinary ability, and therefore we look forward to having him in Baghdad.

Q Last week you said you wanted to --- the President wanted to change the commanders before this new way forward started. Can we expect any other major changes in the national security team coming soon?

MR. SNOW: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q Having now formally put the two nominations in for the ambassador changes at the U.N. and in Iraq, now the national security team responsible for Iraq obviously has changed over fairly significantly. The one place where there hasn't been a change -- not a U.S. change to make -- but is the Maliki government, and that government remains intact, or Mr. Maliki remains at the helm of it. The types of things that you have spoken in the past about wanting to see that government do, it has singularly failed to do, and

sectarian tensions have not decreased, the Saddam hanging has certainly increased them --

MR. SNOW: I'm not sure the facts on the ground support that. There have been a lot of reports about -- I would caution you -- maybe you've got different data sets than we've seen; it stimulated certainly a lot of attention internationally. It is not clear that it has been a major contributor to sectarian activity within Iraq. But I think your general drift is you have sectarian violence -- so complete the question.

Q My gist is this: Can you point to any single, specific thing, other than good intentions, that Maliki has done?

MR. SNOW: Well, take a look at a number of things. Yes, among other things, in a country that has not had an elected democracy you've had a Prime Minister who's been able to stand up a government that involves people from every major sectarian group. He has worked forward on the Iraq Compact. If you take a look at the economic growth numbers, they're pretty impressive. If you take a look at the generation of oil and oil pumping, that has produced a source of revenue. If you take a look at the fact that in at least 14 of the provinces you have peace and growing prosperity and a sense of security.

You also have the fact that the Prime Minister, over the weekend, gave a speech where he talked very directly about the challenges. He has no delusions about the challenges, and said that it's going to be incumbent upon his government to go after those who are creating violence. He has talked about the hydrocarbon law, that which will share oil and natural gas revenues. Everybody agrees that's important; he's committed to it. He talks about constitutional reform. Everybody agrees that's important; he's committed to it.

There are a number of things also on the legislative calendar where it's a legislative system, and people are taking times off and he continues to push for them.

Q These are things, particularly on the security front, that he has said before, almost verbatim, exact same language. And when it came -- when push came to shove, the action on the ground did not correspond to the language.

MR. SNOW: Well, again, I think what you may want to do is ask me that question Thursday.

Q Tony, this thing has been in the works for months now, this change in strategy, and there have been a lot of personnel changes. Can the public, watching and listening and reading about this on Wednesday night, expect that this is going to be the last big change in strategy that the President is going to make in his final two years?

MR. SNOW: I don't know; ask me in four years -- or maybe two years. What you're asking is -- you're asking a look-back question, rather than a look-forward question --

Q No, I'm asking you a look-forward question.

MR. SNOW: Well, but a look-forward question is the President believes it's important to address the situation in Iraq in a manner that he thinks is going to be effective, that's going to make this country, our country, more secure in the war on terror, by addressing violence and uncertainty in the central front in the war on terror. Make no mistake, Iraq is it. Therefore, rather than saying, well, this is the last big speech -- this is the President's proposal for moving forward in a way that he believes is going to be conducive to producing the results.

Now, you've got to keep in mind, when you have changing conditions -- and this is the one thing that has been very clear -- you've got to find ways to respond nimbly. But also what you have to do constantly is build greater capacity on the part of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people. We've talked about this -- and furthermore, one of the other things that's been going on is increasingly moving Iraqi units into leadership positions.

What you ultimately want to see, Peter, is that growing capacity within the Iraqi government, the military forces, the police forces, to deal with this stuff. So all I can tell you is that the President is going to be talking about a way forward that can help address the concerns about sectarian violence, developments within the country, the need for economic growth, political reconciliation, national security, Iraqi responsibility.

Q You never answered Helen's third question there, will this be with the President through the end of his administration? Is he going to leave this for the next person?

MR. SNOW: Well, again, that's a look-back question -- if this could be over tomorrow, we would devoutly wish that were possible.

Q It's looking forward.

MR. SNOW: No, it's -- it is looking forward, but, Peter, I'm afraid I just don't have the God's-eye view that would tell me how the situation is going to unfold in months to come. It is certainly our hope that Iraq has that freestanding democracy as soon as possible.

Q Is there something different about the way this plan was put together that makes it more likely to succeed than, say, Don, or Bremer, or the Pentagon, State, Allawi, et cetera -- was it a procedural --

MR. SNOW: Ask me Thursday. I mean, there are a lot of elements here -- again, a lot of the -- I can give you a much better answer when we have it, because I can start laying out for you different ways in which things are done. I can't do it yet. But I'll be able to give you a better answer --

Q You can't say something like you've reached further to more outside experts, or talked to different levels of commanders, or something like that?

MR. SNOW: All of the above and more.

Q Related to Peter's question, in his mind, is this the final stand? In other words, this has to work or the U.S. has to begin a process of disengagement?

MR. SNOW: No, because the question there is one that seems to be token desperation: It's the last chance. What the President understands is there's a real sense of urgency within the United States for assurance that, number one, we have a plan for building an Iraq that is going to enhance our security, that is going to make us safer; number two, that is done in such a way that also is going to put the Iraqis in leading positions sooner rather than

later. And, so, I'm afraid he takes a much more practical point of view when working through these issues, not, this is the last chance.

On the other hand, I do want to make it clear, he does understand that it is important to get the public on board and it is important to build as vigorous a bipartisan consensus as possible. And this is something also that members of Congress have to be aware of, because all the world really is watching and it is important to get this right. And, therefore, the President has made it clear in all the meetings: If you guys have got better ideas, let's hear them. This is not something where it's, sort of, lay down the law. The President wants to make sure that we make the best use of people's expertise and creativity and insight so that the complex of proposals fits together in such a way that are going to maximize the chances of success.

Q But there is a level of desperation, isn't there, when a lot of people who have a hand in the policy -- i.e., members of Congress or people within the administration -- think it's over, not just your political critics?

MR. SNOW: You know, it's interesting -- I've heard that used by a very small number of people and, yet, you ask the question, must we -- you asked a couple of questions. Do you think, for instance, al Qaeda has given up on trying to do major operations in the United States? Do you think failure in Iraq would make al Qaeda more likely to strike the United States? Do you think if al Qaeda or other terror organizations had the opportunity to use Iraq as a launch pad that you'd be safer or less safe? And I think in each case people would say, oh, no, we'd be less safe.

So I think it's important to realize that in the context of the broader war on terror, most people really do agree success -- again, the letter sent by Speaker Pelosi and Leader Reid, both said, we want the Iraqi people to succeed.

So I think, David, again, I think what members of Congress want is a good look at what the President has in mind, and there will be consultations over the next couple of days. And I think as members of Congress get an opportunity to review and digest the details, some are

going to agree, some are going to disagree -- I mean, that's necessary. But I think if this can be conducted in a spirit of getting it done right, I think it would be constructive for all concerned.

Q The President, obviously, though, did not read what happened November 7th as a mandate to start bringing troops home.

MR. SNOW: The President believes that -- if you take a look, Jim, at the elections, you can read any number of messages -- I mean, when people were asked in exit interviews what was their top concern, Iraq was number four, corruption was number one. And guess what? You had 10 members of the Republican caucus who had problems, and they all lost. So you can read a lot of results. There is an understandable -- people don't want to be at war; we don't want to be at war, the President doesn't want to be at war. But the fact is you've got a situation where terrorists and a terror network is determined to try to do whatever it can to destabilize this country and other parts of the world --

Q But the President is comfortable, then, with saying to the American people, I saw what happened November 7th -- actually, you're upset about corruption?

MR. SNOW: No, I think, Jim, people would be a lot less upset if he didn't take seriously his obligations as Commander-in-Chief.

Paula.

Q Is the focus on this war and the cost of this war drowning out the domestic agenda and your ability to pursue both --

MR. SNOW: Boy, I hope not. No, I certainly hope not. We don't think it is. By golly, we have domestic agenda meetings in house today, as a matter of fact.

No, the President has a vigorous domestic agenda and, obviously, Democrats have some ideas -- you've got the 100-hour clock, I believe, begins to tick tomorrow. So --

Q I believe they delayed that, didn't they, because they didn't want it overshadowed by the speech.

MR. SNOW: They delayed it again? Really? So it doesn't start tomorrow? I didn't know that. I thought it started tomorrow. I could be wrong. Okay, we'll see. Well, in any event, whenever that 100-hour clock starts ticking, you know, you're going to have people beginning to consider a lot of matters.

But, Paula, the question is whether people in this room will ask domestic policy questions. You quite frequently do.

Q May I ask one more?

MR. SNOW: Yes, absolutely.

Q Okay. The Democrats have made one of their agenda items control of the alternative minimum tax. The administration's position on this issue is that, yes, they want to address it, but in the context of tax reform. The administration is not taking up that reform this year, correct?

MR. SNOW: Well, I believe there's also a State of the Union -- when one tries to wheedle from me details that have not yet been made public, I'm afraid I can't play on it. But it's clear that the alternative minimum tax is something that has become a matter of concern. It was put in years ago, you may recall, to "soak to rich." Well, it's soaking everybody who's working. So that is one of those -- when one tries to play class warfare, sooner or later it touches upon every class.

Q At his year-end news conference, the President again did not choose to bring that up. He brought up Social Security reform and directed the Treasury Secretary, in fact, to look at that. And the tax reform recommendations are still sitting in Treasury and it's been over a year.

MR. SNOW: Well, Paula, the fact that the President at a news conference does not mention every item in a budget that goes hundreds of pages probably should not be surprising. We spend a lot of time talking about things, about AMT.

Q Will Wednesday's speech include a recitation or a characterization of the consequences of anything less than victory in Iraq?

MR. SNOW: We'll see. We're still working through the drafts.

Q Does the President have concerns that Americans don't share his concerns or visions of what might happen?

MR. SNOW: No, I don't think so, but I think it's always important -- it is, I think, important from time to time for the President to share a little bit of what he sees and how he thinks about it, because, fortunately, Americans have not been confronted since September 11, 2001, with direct evidence that terrorists are trying to kill us. There was a scare of -- but it's there, isn't it? It's part background radiation. Over the weekend you had something happen at the Port of Miami; today you had gas, which I gather, according to the Mayor, may be passing. (Laughter.) That was his term.

But what was people's first reaction? Gas in New York, is it terror? Whenever you get a big or unusual event in Washington, D.C., or around the country, people think, is it an act of terror? So there is an understanding in the hearts and minds of many Americans that terror is a threat that has not manifested itself on our shores, but about which we ought to be vigilant. And so as a result there is -- I think there's a recognition that this is a serious issue and it's worth having the President describe the way in which he comes to these conclusions.

April.

Q Tony, two things, one on Darfur and the other one on the embryonic stem cell issue. Darfur -- when Secretary of State Colin Powell -- then Secretary of State Colin Powell was in office, he called Darfur genocide; the President followed. Years later -- today, President Bush is now saying, outrageous. What comes next? Is military action against the Sudanese government imminent, or what?

MR. SNOW: Well, again, the United States has been trying to work diplomatically through the African Union and also through the United Nations Security Council on this.

It has also been talking about trying to come up with forces to help secure the situation. And it is important to get allies in the region and around the world to work with us to come up with an effective way of putting an end to the genocide.

I am not going to make announcements about changes in policy, should they be in the offing, but you'll hear about them if and when they come to pass.

Q But when you turn up the wording and he's saying it's outrageous -- I mean, what's next? What's beyond that?

MR. SNOW: Well, we hope that delivery for the people of Darfur is next.

Q Also, on embryonic stem cell, you said this morning that this administration found out about it over the weekend, and you're looking at it. Some are saying that now that it is not as safe as some would say, because, for instance, women who have amniocentesis, it is a threat -- that a viable pregnancy could be terminated because of that. Is that one of the options as to why you're not supporting it as of yet?

MR. SNOW: No. As you know, amniocentesis -- I mean, we went through it a number of times in our household; not I, of course -- is an elective procedure. Just because you find that there is -- that amniotic stem cells have some medical potential doesn't mean that you run around and say, okay, everybody pony up your amniotic fluid. I mean, it doesn't work that way.

So there will always be concerns. But, obviously, there is a difference between using amniotic stem cells that do not, by design, involve the destruction of a human life, and embryonic stem cell research which does.

Lester.

Q Tony, thank you. Two questions. The London Times reports in detail how Israel is planning to bomb Iranian nuclear arms facilities, and I wondered --

MR. SNOW: Yes, where did they get that detail? What sources did it mention?

Q They just said "sources." And I just wondered if the White House believes this is accurate, and if so, we will support our allies --

MR. SNOW: I just -- come on, give me a serious question. Let's try number two.

Q Okay, WorldNetDaily has asked me to ask you this question, but The New York Times -- well, if you don't think The London Times is serious -- but The New York Times reports that General John Shalikashvili --

MR. SNOW: Shalikashvili.

Q -- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Clinton, has called for our armed forces to accept self-announced homosexuals and lesbians, and I just wanted to know, does the Commander-in-Chief agree with this or not?

MR. SNOW: The Commander-in-Chief's position is clear on it.

Go ahead.

Q In the Iraq proposal, you seem to be suggesting that everything the President is going to propose on Wednesday night needs congressional --

MR. SNOW: No, no, no, I'm just saying in this obvious sense, anything this government does requires somebody to look at a budget, then they approve a budget. I'm just going -- that's the simple point I'm trying to make.

Q Including troop --

MR. SNOW: Well, I mean, including whatever. I just -- I don't want to get into --

Q And are you going to brief on Thursday, even though the President is traveling?

MR. SNOW: I think what we may end up trying to do is, there will be some people in traveling parties. Stick with us. We're going to try to come up -- I think I'm going to stay behind, because there still is a lot of follow-on

briefing that needs to be done. It will not be this kind of a briefing, but we're going to find ways to get reporters in touch with folks who can continue to do follow-on from Wednesday night's speech.

Q Tony, you said before that the President believes that Prime Minister Maliki doesn't need any benchmarks imposed on him, and that he can meet his objectives by himself. Does the President still believe that way?

MR. SNOW: As I said, we think it's important for -- why don't we talk Thursday, we can go through all this. It's another one of those things that requires a thorough answer, the level of detail that you'll get Wednesday night.

Thank you.

END

1:44 P.M.

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