



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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Press Briefing by Scott McClellan

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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12:46 P.M. EST

MR. McCLELLAN: Good afternoon. I have nothing to begin with, so we'll go straight to questions. Let's start with April today.

Q Well, thank you very much. Scott, there has been some concern about this Haiti issue. Many persons are saying that, either way, it doesn't -- something is not right, and there are some people out there that are calling for an investigation -- not exactly what kind of investigation, but there should be some investigation into the situation. What is the White House thinking about that?

MR. McCLELLAN: Our thinking is that everybody should focus on what is in the best interest of the Haitian people, and everybody should get behind the international community's efforts to help move forward on a democratic political solution to the situation in Haiti. We are focused on helping to bring order and stability to Haiti, and helping to move forward on a democratic and constitutional government for the Haitian people.

Q But you said yesterday from this podium, it's baseless, it's preposterous, this accusation by Jean-Bertrand Aristide. But isn't there --

MR. McCLELLAN: As did Secretary Powell, who has been very involved in working with the parties in Haiti.

Q Yes, but isn't there some part of this White House who would like to settle this issue, especially in an election year, where you'd like the American people to know that this really is the way we said it happened?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, again, our focus all along has been on bringing about a viable political solution to the situation in Haiti. That's been the focus of the international community, as well, working with all the parties to get a viable political solution in place so that we could then put in a multinational security presence to help move forward on those efforts. And we're --

Q So are you running from the situation?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, I think we've addressed this matter. I think we addressed it yesterday very clearly. And where the focus needs to be is on moving forward on this political solution for the Haitian people and helping the Haitian people. I think the absurd accusations that some have chosen to repeat do nothing to help the Haitian people, and they do nothing to help move forward during this difficult period.

Q Aristide, himself, was on television last night, and said it. People are not just repeating it now; he said it on television last night that he --

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sure he has his own reasons for making those statements, but our focus is on working with the parties to move forward on the framework outlined by the Caribbean Community for moving forward on a democratic and constitutional resolution to the situation in Haiti. Ambassador Foley met yesterday with the democratic opposition; today he is meeting with the Prime Minister and meeting with other ambassadors to move forward on the framework that the Caribbean Community outlined. The situation in Port-au-Prince is much calmer. And so we are focused on moving forward on the constitutional and democratic process in Haiti.

Q Scott, rebel leader Guy Phillippe said earlier today that he has declared himself Haiti's new military chief. Does that give you reason to be concerned, particularly since he seems to be indicating that he wants to reconstitute Haiti's military with such a declaration?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, again, I just mentioned where our focus is. Obviously, people are making a lot of comments during this time period. But our focus remains on working through the CARICOM framework. We are working with the international community; we are working with the government of Haiti, the interim government that is in place; and we are working with civil society in Haiti to move forward on that resolution.

Q Does the United States oppose the reconstitution of Haiti's army?

MR. McCLELLAN: We oppose working with -- under the framework of the Caribbean Community, to move forward on the constitutional and democratic process. I don't think that's something that's being discussed right now, John.

Go ahead.

Q **Senator Kerry** said today he doesn't know the truth of what's going on about Aristide's allegations about being forced out. But he says, "I think it needs to be explored and we need to know the truth of what happened." Do you think that that's a helpful statement?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think that it would be helpful if everybody got behind the international community's efforts to support the people of Haiti in moving forward on a constitutional and democratic process. I'll leave the politics to the campaign. We're focused on helping the Haitian people build a more free and better future.

Q He didn't say anything about politics here. He just says he thinks it needs to be explored. Do you --

MR. McCLELLAN: I understand that he's a political candidate running for office and --

Q Do you think it needs to be explored any further --

MR. McCLELLAN: Terry, I think that the matter has been addressed. Secretary Powell yesterday fully addressed it, too, and outlined exactly how events occurred. The situation -- the crisis in Haiti was largely the making of Mr. Aristide. It was Mr. Aristide's failed government that empowered armed gangs to control the country. It was a failed government that condoned official corruption -- including drug trafficking. It was a failed government that engaged in acts of political violence against a peaceful, democratic opposition. And I pointed back yesterday to the flawed elections of 2000 that were central to the current crisis.

We are strongly supporting the democratic process in Haiti, and we have helped to preserve the constitutional and democratic process in Haiti by the action that the international community has taken.

Q What role does the administration believe that the armed rebels in Haiti should have in the new government, if any?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think, again, we've got to differentiate between all the different people involved here. I mean, there are armed thugs and criminals -- they don't have any place in the government. Then there is the peaceful democratic opposition; there is the interim government of Haiti; there are those in the civil society that want to help move forward on a constitutional and democratic process. And those are the ones that we're working with, along with our international partners.

Q What if the armed thugs don't agree and won't lay down their arms?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, as I pointed out, the situation in Port-au-Prince is increasingly more calm, and so that's where our focus is. But that's why we have a multinational force moving in to Haiti, to help bring about order and stability to the region, and to help advance the cause of democracy in Haiti.

Q Scott, why is it that you believe the people have chosen to believe the version of President Aristide, including some congressmen and some political leaders?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry?

Q Why do you think some congressmen and political leaders have chosen to believe the version of Aristide, and not the version of the U.S. government as put forth --

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you'd have to ask those individuals why they would make such comments. But repeating such absurd accusations are simply not helpful to advancing the cause of democracy and bringing about stability in Haiti.

Q What do you hear about the humanitarian aid that's sorely needed, with all the war that has been going on and the destruction within Haiti --

MR. McCLELLAN: Oh, absolutely --

Q -- what's happening with the humanitarian aid?

MR. McCLELLAN: You might want to check with State Department on some of the specifics, but that's a high priority for the international community, to make sure that those in need in Haiti are getting the humanitarian assistance that they need. That has been a priority, even when the crisis was going on, prior to Mr. Aristide resigning and deciding to leave. So humanitarian assistance certainly remains a priority for the international community, and the United States is included when I say that.

Q Scott, may I follow up on that?

MR. McCLELLAN: Do you mean Haiti or --

Q Right. Assistant Secretary Noriega said last night that Aristide was pathological, erratic and unreliable. Does the President think Aristide is some kind of a crackpot? (Laughter.)

MR. McCLELLAN: I think I've described the President's views from this podium, and I would leave it at that.

Q Scott, on Haiti.

MR. McCLELLAN: Haiti? Go ahead.

Q Aristide's opponents say that one of the reasons for forcing him from power was that he amassed a great personal fortune during his time as President. Considering he's not the first leader to have parlayed the presidency into a personal fortune, are there any steps being taken to make sure that the assets, any assets that were accumulated remain in Haiti?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, certainly, ending corruption and promoting democracy and advancing economic progress is an important priority for this administration and the Western Hemisphere. That is something we talked about at great length at the Summit of the Americas, and we have talked about for quite some time. I think in terms of specifics about what is going on, on those issues, you can direct those questions to the State Department about where some of those matters stand.

Anything else on Haiti? Go ahead.

Q Scott, do you know yet whether South Africa is going to be his ultimate destination? And you mentioned drug-running. Do you have proof that Aristide was involved in drug-running?

MR. McCLELLAN: I just pointed out that -- how he condoned official corruption, including drug trafficking, and we talked some about that yesterday, as well.

But in terms of the final destination, I think that's a matter for Mr. Aristide to decide, along with the country to which he would like to go.

Q In answer to Jeff's question, we don't know whether he took any of that money with him?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry?

Q To follow Jeff's question, we don't --

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you can direct those questions to the State Department. They might be able to give you some better information on that.

Haiti? Okay, one more on Haiti.

Q Thank you. Scott, the Defense Secretary Rumsfeld believes Aristide voluntarily signed and submitted a letter of resignation before U.S. Marines escorted him to the airport. Is that true?

MR. McCLELLAN: He signed a letter of resignation. It was his decision. As I pointed out, it was his decision to leave. And I think the copies of those -- his letter of resignation are available. I quoted from a translation of that letter of resignation yesterday. But it was in the best interest of the Haitian people that he decided to leave.

Q In Iraq, the Ayatollah Sistani is blaming the U.S. for not securing Iraq's borders to allow the infiltrators to come in. Is that a fair charge?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, Steve, I think that you have to keep in mind that Iraq is the central front in the war on terrorism. The President has talked about that. The stakes are very high in Iraq. The terrorists recognize that. There are foreign terrorists who are in Iraq who seek to undermine a free and peaceful future for the Iraqi people.

I think you heard from members of the Governing Council earlier today on the brutal terrorist attacks that took place on Iraqis who were celebrating a religious holiday earlier today. Members of the Governing Council all talked about how -- well, one, they stood firmly together in the condemnation of these terrorist attacks. They all noted that these are the kind of tactics that were outlined in the letter al-Zarqawi sent to some members of al Qaeda that we discovered. It all -- they made clear that these attacks were attacks on the Iraqi people, and that the Iraqi people are united in their determination to defeat terrorism.

What we are doing -- one, the Iraqi people are providing more and more of their own security. They're the largest contributors to their own security. They are working to bring to justice the remnants of the former regime and the foreign terrorists who are seeking to undermine a better future for the Iraqi people. And we are working right alongside, with them. We have been taking the fight to the enemy in Iraq. We have been working with the Iraqi people who have been providing more and more intelligence, actionable intelligence that we can act on, to bring these people to justice. So I would point out that that's what we are doing and that's where our focus has been. And we will continue the job until it is finished.

Q Do these attacks change the timetable for the transfer of sovereignty?

MR. McCLELLAN: Democracy has taken root in Iraq, and there is nothing that can stop democracy from taking hold in Iraq. The Iraqi people aspire to a free and democratic future, and the efforts by these terrorists will fail. The time line for transferring sovereignty remains June 30th.

Q Let me ask you about gay marriage. Now that the President has spoken out on a constitutional amendment, does he feel it serves no purpose to continue to speak out on it, even though it's a somewhat divisive issue, an emotional issue around the country -- is he going to remain fairly quiet about this issue, at least until it goes through the legislative process? Does he feel he's already out there, has stated his position, so that's sort of the end of it?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, he will continue to talk about it. He will continue to talk about it. This is an important debate for the American people to be involved in. And the President supporting the constitutional process allows the people's voice to be heard in this debate. It was the actions of a few

activist judges and local officials that led the President to this decision. And the President is strongly committed to protecting the sanctity of marriage. I think the American people are strongly committed to protecting the sanctity of marriage, as well.

Q He's going to be very close to San Francisco this week when he goes to California. Of course, that's where some of this happened, some of the activism you're talking about -- would be the Mayor. Is he going to speak out on the issue while in California?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, he's got a couple of -- a few events while he's in California. One of the events will focus on his faith-based and community initiative, our efforts and the progress we're making to reach out to faith-based groups to help those in need. And then he's got some political events there, as well. And I think he will continue to talk about the importance of defending values that we hold dear in this country. He talked about it in his State of the Union address. And as far as his actual remarks, you'll be there to cover it.

Q Scott, to follow up on that, does the President, during his trip, plan any meeting with Governor Schwarzenegger, who has just announced that same-sex marriage should be a state issue and that he opposes the President's support for a federal marriage amendment? And I have one more.

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, in the constitutional process the states will be involved, the states will get to have their say. And it's the members, elected members -- members elected by the people that will be able to express the will of the people in the constitutional process.

Q Does the President, as a leader who is deeply concerned about the health of all Americans, believe that it was at all wise for California to cancel the requirement of blood tests for marriage licenses, given California's rise in AIDS cases?

MR. McCLELLAN: Les, I think that's a matter that you need to address to the state of California. We certainly --

Q The President -- does he feel that it's wrong to have a blood test for marriage?

MR. McCLELLAN: Les, I think that California issues you can address to California. I'm not familiar with all of the specifics of it. I'll be glad to look into it and get you more information if I can.

Go ahead, Mark.

Q Can I go back to Steve's question?

MR. McCLELLAN: Mark, do you yield?

Q Yes --

MR. McCLELLAN: Okay.

Q **I wonder**, in light of the fact that the U.S. is the occupying power in Iraq, exactly how much responsibility you feel this country has for securing Iraq's borders?

MR. McCLELLAN: We are working side-by-side with the Iraqi people to improve the security situation in Iraq. And by moving forward on the democratic process, that will help improve security for the Iraqi

people. But we're working hand-in-hand with the Iraqis. I just pointed out that the Iraqis are assuming more and more responsibility for their future in all areas, including in security.

Q But at this point, you don't feel we bear responsibility for the borders of Iraq?

MR. McCLELLAN: We're working very closely with the Iraqi people. The Iraqis are providing more and more support for their own border security. They're providing more and more support for police forces.

Q So it's their responsibility?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, we're working hand-in-hand with the Iraqi people to improve the security situation in Iraq. And we will continue to do that until the job is finished. We will be there as long as it takes to finish the job.

Go ahead, Mark.

Q **The gun ban vote on** -- I'm wondering your reaction to having the gun ban extension attached to the bill protecting gun makers from liability?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, one -- and I talked a little bit about this yesterday -- the legislation before the Senate on the gun manufacturing liability issue is about stopping lawsuit abuse. The President views it as a lawsuit reform issue. The House passed legislation to address these important reforms. The Senate should pass it, as well, to implement meaningful reforms. Our concern is there are some that are using amendments to try to undermine this important legislation and these important reforms.

Q You're attaching things that they think are equally justified. Is there -- what's wrong with that?

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes, but --

Q You supported the gun law -- the gun ban extension.

MR. McCLELLAN: The President's views are very well-known. And first and foremost, when it comes to crimes committed with guns, it's important that we strictly enforce our laws. And that's exactly what this administration is doing. I would remind you that federal firearm prosecutions have increased 68 percent in the past three years. This has been a high priority for the Department of Justice. We have also implemented Project Safe Neighborhoods, which is a comprehensive strategy to vigorously enforce existing gun laws and deter crimes committed with guns, working with federal, state, and local prosecutors and law enforcement officials.

And I think that there are some that would use amendments to try to undermine this important initiative to stop frivolous lawsuits. This legislation, the gun manufacturing liability legislation, will prevent frivolous litigation affecting a lawful American industry and the thousands of workers it employs. It will help prevent abuse of the legal system and help curb the growing problem of frivolous lawsuits. And so I think that we have to view it in that context. The House passed legislation to do that, and the Senate should also pass that legislation to implement meaningful reforms --

Q How does it undermine it to have the assault weapons ban?

Q Won't the assault weapons ban save lives --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think you know the way the legislative process works. And there are some that would use amendments simply to undermine this piece of legislation, while also pushing for -- while also pushing for --

Q How is it undermining it? If it's something the President wants, it's like, you know, all the jollier. I mean, if he gets the reform and he gets the extension, why is that bad?

MR. McCLELLAN: David, I think, one, these are two separate issues. You have the issues you mentioned and then you have an issue involving frivolous litigation. The President is a strong supporter of stopping frivolous lawsuits and stopping lawsuit abuse. That's the context in which he views this legislation.

His views are very well-known on the other issues, as well. But there are some --

Q But you still haven't explained why it's bad --

MR. McCLELLAN: -- that know that with these amendments, that this legislation will not pass the Congress. And this is important legislation that will bring about meaningful reform.

Q Well, let me just -- what a lot of people are saying is, look, the President was for an extension of the assault weapons ban, but really wasn't going to do anything to fight for it, hoping that it would die. Yet, he's for immunity for the gun manufacturers. So if he's for both these things --

MR. McCLELLAN: You mischaracterized the first part of it. These are separate issues. These are different issues.

Q -- why not fight for both of them then?

MR. McCLELLAN: His views are very well-known, David. I just said that. But --

Q His views are separate from the amount of political capital he's willing to expend.

MR. McCLELLAN: No, no, there are some that recognize that by passing certain amendments to this issue that is about lawsuit reform, that they will undermine the legislation, that it will not have the votes necessary to pass Congress. We're working to pass this important piece of lawsuit reform.

Q Scott, on that point, which is more of a poison pill, the assault weapons ban extension or closing the gun show loophole?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, again, I think I'll -- I think that the amendments that are being pursued, some are more interested in undermining the legislation. You mentioned a couple of them. Our views are very well-known on those issues.

Q It seems that extending the ban isn't so much of a poison pill as closing the gun show loophole.

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, you have to -- you always have to look at the votes. I mean, there are two chambers that have to pass the legislation. One chamber passed this legislation and passed meaningful reforms on the gun manufacturing liability issue, and now the other chamber is trying to pass amendments on to that legislation. And I think some are simply more interested in undermining that piece of legislation than they are in necessarily getting the other legislation passed.

Q If I could just ask this one more time, in terms of the balance of what's needed for American policy. It's your view that the merits of tort reform and getting that passed are more important than measures that police departments across America say will save lives?

MR. McCLELLAN: That's not what I said, Mark. I said this is an important piece of legislation that has already passed the House, that has the support in the House to be implemented. And now there are some in the Senate who are seeking to undermine that legislation with certain amendments. That's not the issue here. The issue here is about passing a meaningful piece of lawsuit reform.

This legislation, I would point out, preserves the right of individuals to have their day in court with civil liability actions. They're spelled out in the piece of legislation. We would urge Congress to pass this legislation as it is.

Q **The President of Venezuela** this weekend said he won't let President Bush push him around the way he pushed around Aristide, and he doesn't want the U.S. meddling in his business. What's your response?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, one, I've seen some of his comments and I'm just not going to dignify them with a response from this podium. The focus of the United States and the Organization of American States and others is on a peaceful, democratic and constitutional resolution of the political crisis in Venezuela. The United States continues to urge the Venezuelan National Electoral Council to finish its work in a timely and fully transparent manner. This is about allowing the people's voice to be heard through the democratic process. And we caution all Venezuelan parties to refrain from the use of violence and the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that may encourage it, especially at this critical point.

So we share the views of the Organization of American States, the Carter Center and the international democratic community that the recall process that has been underway in Venezuela remains the best constitutional option for achieving national reconciliation in Venezuela, and preserving Venezuela's status as a democratic society. We are increasingly concerned about the situation in Venezuela. We have some real concerns about it.

Q **Scott, I'd like to** know what the President thinks about -- many think-tanks are asking the United Nations Security Council to investigate A.Q. Khan's activities, because they are saying that it's not A.Q. Khan, but Pakistani military was behind, and his daughter said that his father was forced to say what he didn't want to say. And also at the same time, General Musharraf said that it is an internal matter of Pakistan, but India said, no, it's not internal matter, it's an international matter because non-proliferation and also the spread of nuclear materials to many countries now around the globe. So do you think President supports this -- and United Nations Security Council?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think, Goyal, that we've addressed this issue. The Pakistan government has been a strong partner in the global war on terrorism, and we have worked closely with them in the global war on terrorism, and in efforts to stop proliferation. And the Pakistani government took action to unravel this network of A.Q. Khan, and we appreciate the action that they took. The story is still unfolding; we're learning more and more about this global network that was going on.

Q But what the U.S. is doing about it? It looks like the case is closed now, because nuclear --

MR. McCLELLAN: No, there is still -- this is a network that is still unraveling and we are still learning more. And it's important in our efforts to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The President talked about this very recently in remarks focused specifically on the spread of weapons of mass

destruction. And I would refer you back to those remarks.

Q And finally, Pakistan support for --

MR. McCLELLAN: Let me keep moving.

Go ahead, Ron.

Q **Is the President** doing anything to get his immigration proposal through Congress, and will you have anything new for President Fox on that when they meet this week?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, stay tuned for the meeting with President Fox. We'll have more for you -- to say later in this week. But, no, that's a -- it's an important priority for the President, for the reasons that he stated. This is about addressing important economic need. It's also about bringing about a more humane migration policy. And so he remains firmly committed to it, and we'll continue to work with Congress on moving forward on it.

Q **United Nations?** A United Nations report delivered today claims there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after 1994. What's the President's reaction?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I'm not sure on the exact timing of when that report is going to be released. So I think we should wait until we see the report. But let me make very clear that the intelligence that this administration had, the intelligence that the United Nations had, the intelligence that members of Congress had, all led everyone to the same conclusion that Saddam Hussein's regime was a threat and was a danger. That was very clear. And I would point you back to UNMOVIC's final report, their working document, where they spelled out some of the unaccounted for biological weapons that the regime in Iraq had failed to account for.

Q Can I follow on her question?

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes.

Q Any evidence that some of the WMD is hidden in Syria or in other countries?

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't have anything to report on that, Connie. But there are a lot of different theories out there. The work of the Iraq Survey Group continues. It's important that they complete their work. But make no mistake about it, Saddam Hussein's regime was a danger before the war, and everything that we've learned since the war only reconfirms that he was a danger. And the world is safer and better because of the action that we took.

Q **Scott, Justice Scalia** apparently is in the habit of going on hunting trips with people who have cases before the Supreme Court. This has been reported on the front page of The New York Times. He took Vice President Cheney on a duck hunting trip to Louisiana when Vice President Cheney had the energy task work case. And just recently, the LA Times reported that he took the dean of the Kansas Law School on a pheasant hunting trip, and the dean had a case pending before the Supreme Court, and he sided with the dean in that case.

Does the President believe -- and when I asked you about this, you said you weren't familiar with the specifics, even though it's been on the front page of the LA Times. Does the President believe that it's appropriate for a Supreme Court Justice to go on hunting trips with the Vice President while the Vice

President has a case pending before the Supreme Court?

MR. McCLELLAN: Russell, I think I've addressed this matter. I think I said, as recently as yesterday, that in terms of the issue, if you're asking about recusals or things like that, those are issues to address to Justice Scalia. And I think Justice Scalia has addressed that matter. And

if you have specific questions about vice presidential scheduling matters or trips, you can refer those questions to the Vice President's office.

Q Well, I was asking whether the President believes it's appropriate.

MR. McCLELLAN: All right, thank you.

END 1:14 P.M. EST