THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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Press Gaggle by Tony Snow and Nicholas Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs

White House Conference Center Briefing Room

9:36 A.M. EST

MR. SNOW: Okay. Yes, that is Nick Burns. Here's what we're going to do, I'm going to give you a quick readout of the President's schedule, and then I will turn things over to Nicholas Burns, the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs. And we'll talk for a few minutes about the Indian civil nuclear bill, which will be signed into law at about 10:45 a.m. by the President. He will take any questions on that and then I will come back and take on any other questions you may have.

As you know, Bob Gates was sworn in this morning about -- what, 7:03 a.m., is that what we think -- 7:03 a.m. The President then had breakfast with the Secretary of State; normal round of briefings; at 8:30 a.m., National Security Council meeting, which is why all the cameras are pointed at folks who have been walking into the West Wing. The topic is Iraq. There will be a meeting with the Secretary of Defense in the Oval Office afterward.

Then at 10:45 a.m. the signing of H.R. 5682, the United States-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act. At 11:25 a.m., a meeting with Jewish leaders in the Roosevelt Room; there will be a photo release. A ceremonial swearing in for the Secretary of Defense at 1:15 p.m. The President will have economic policy time -- topic: energy issues -- and a Hanukkah reception at 5:30 p.m.

Also this morning at 10:00 a.m., Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Fran Townsend will speak at the National Press Club about progress the U.S. has made in executing the actions in the six months since the national strategy for -- the pandemic influenza implementation plan was released.

So without further ado, I will -- we'll jump to other questions. First I thought I'd bring up Nick to go ahead and talk a little bit about the India civil nuclear legislation and answer any questions you may have, and then at that point, we'll let him step aside and you can toss whatever you wish at me.

Nick -- where's Nick? There he is.

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Good morning. Nice to see all of you. Tony told you that the President is going to sign this India civil nuclear legislation this morning. I'd be happy to take any questions, but let me just give you a little bit of background.

This is a major initiative for this administration, and, indeed, for the United States, because what the legislation does, it permits United States companies to trade in nuclear fuel and to invest and to construct nuclear power plants in India for the first time in three decades; and legislation specifically exempts India from the provisions of the Atomic Energy Act of 1974, and as it was amended in 1978 after a series of India nuclear tests in the 1970s. And when that happened, the Congress at that time, and President Carter, decided that we would shut down the possibility of any American investment or trade with India in the civil nuclear realm.

Now that was important because it essentially put India into isolation for three decades, and India was walled off from the rest of the world, had to develop its own nuclear power industry, its civilian nuclear power industry on its own, and it was a source of major discord and discontent between every administration since that of President Carter and that of President Bush.

The President decided in the spring of 2005, when Secretary Rice went out for her first trip to South Asia, that we wanted to end that isolation; that it was in the interests of the United States to have India fully participating in the nonproliferation regime, and have India have the benefit of American technology and American investment. And the common commitment and advantage was it would break through this terrible problem in U.S.-India relations that had really limited the relationship for three decades.

And so Secretary Rice proposed this on behalf of President Bush in March of 2005. When Prime Minister Singh came to the United States -- some of you may remember -- in July of 2005, the two of them issued a joint statement, announced their intention to essentially bring India in from the cold and relieve its isolation. And then we negotiated between July 2005 and March of this year the provisions of the deal, which the President and Prime Minister then announced when the President visited Delhi in early March of 2006 -- and some of you were on that trip.

So this bill, passed by a wide -- by a bipartisan consensus in the Senate, and in the House by a very, very wide margin for the first time in three decades, would allow us to trade with India.

Now, those are the facts. I think there's a larger story here, and that is that the United States is making a strategic move to build a new relationship with India. And this legislation is the symbolic centerpiece of it. And I was in India just 10 days ago, and I can tell you it's the national story in India, because they look at it as the Bush administration, the United States, essentially accepting India on an equal basis as a global power. And we believe that there's a basis for India and the United States now to become strategic partners in the world. The President and Prime Minister have outlined a broad initiative, series of initiatives, designed to bring the two countries closer together.

This has always been the ultimate unfulfilled relationship since partition in 1947. I think every American administration since then, beginning with President Truman, has had the ambition to have a full relationship with India. It's never been -- it's never materialized. We think it's materializing now.

India has supported the United States in trying to isolate Iran on Iran's nuclear weapons research programs. India is a major proponent of democracy worldwide. It's the largest democracy in the world,

soon to be the largest country in the world by population. It's a country that sees, I think, a strategic interest crossing with ours, intersecting with ours. And so we think this legislation represents a larger attempt by the administration to establish a good relationship with India.

Benefits of this deal: It's going to cement the strategic partnership, number one. Number two, it's going to strengthen the nonproliferation regime. Some of the critics of this legislation said early on that it would somehow weaken the regime, because India is a nuclear weapons power, and we would allow American companies to trade in the civil side.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the Director General of the IAEA, has come out consistently in the last six months to say he thinks it actually strengthens the nonproliferation regime, because we're bringing the largest country in the world into the system. Fourteen of India's 22 nuclear power plants will immediately come under IAEA safeguards; they haven't been for the last 30 years.

So the international community is going to have now a much greater confidence that what is happening in India is under international purview and all the future civilian power plants to be constructed -- and there will be a lot of them -- all of them will come under safeguards in the future. So we think in 10 or 15 years, 90 percent of all India's nuclear facilities should be under safeguards.

That brings India into the system, and that, therefore, strengthens it. Especially at a time when two of the countries inside the nonproliferation system, Iran and North Korea, are cheating on their international commitments, it's important to bring a country that has not cheated, India, that has protected its civil nuclear technology, into this international system.

There are also going to be energy and environmental benefits to this deal. India's coal accounts for about 50 percent of India's current energy usage, and India would like to reduce its dependence on fossil fuel. They have an ambition to build immediately eight 1,000 megawatt civil nuclear reactors, and they will come from overseas. They'd be of American design, we hope, or perhaps some other foreign design. We think American companies, like Westinghouse, should have a leg up when it comes to competing for this. It will reduce India's dependence on fossil fuels; it will be better for global climate change and air pollution.

India, of course, right now is outside the Kyoto regime, but a country that's contributing in a major way, unfortunately, negatively to CO_2 emissions. So we think it has that benefit, as well.

So pleased to have bipartisan support. This is a big day for the relationship. And I'm happy to answer any questions you've got.

Q Why are you proliferating nuclear weapons, basically -- because India will be allowed to produce more on the nuclear weapons side? And also, it isn't cheating, because it never signed the nonproliferation treaty. So why don't you give civil nuclear to every nation, and bring them all into a great relationship that you want?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Helen, this legislation does not speak to the fact that India has nuclear weapons. India is a nuclear weapons power, but India is outside the formal NPT regime for nuclear

weapons.

Q Well, that should be of concern.

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: It has been a concern for a long time. And the question that we had to face and the Congress had to face was this: We have isolated India for 30 years, in the hopes that India would give up its nuclear weapons. India is certainly not going to do that. So the question is, do you keep India outside of the proliferation system for civil purposes and continue to wall it off, as we've done for the last 30 years, which has not worked? Or, do you bring the vast majority of its nuclear power plans under IAEA safeguards, and therefore, have a much better way to monitor what happens in India and be assured that India is living up to its international commitments? We thought that was a good bet, as did the majority of Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill.

Q Don't you enhance the ability to produce nuclear weapons if you relieve them from any civil --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: No, India has sufficient stores of uranium to produce nuclear weapons, a greater number, if it wanted to. But India actually has a fairly modest nuclear stockpile and has been a very responsible steward of it. So we faced a real world problem, and a choice --

Q A real contradiction.

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: We don't see it that way at all. And the choice was continued isolation, which gets you nothing, or bringing India into the international system with all the benefits strategic, and energy, and environmental, and proliferation, that I said.

And in answer to your question, Mohamed ElBaradei, not an American, who is Director General of the IAEA, he came out on March 2nd, the day that President Bush was in Delhi, and made this deal to say that he felt it would actually answer your concern, it would actually stem proliferation in the future, because India has not sold its nuclear technology anywhere. It hasn't sold it outside of India; it certainly hasn't let it go on the black market, as some countries have. And so it's a positive example of a country that's been abiding by the civil commitments.

Q Why won't they sign the treaty?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Actually, they're not permitted to sign the NPT. When the NPT was agreed to, the treaty said that there should only be five nuclear weapons powers in the world. India came along three or four years later, in the mid-1970s, as you remember, conducted a nuclear test. It's not possible for India to join the NPT as a nuclear weapons state.

And so this agreement does not speak to nuclear weapons, but it does allow them, and allow us to have civil nuclear cooperation.

Thank you. Yes.

Q Congress still has to approve the technical details of nuclear trade, this one-two-three agreement. So when are you expecting that to happen?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: There are some -- I think the -- this is the major hurdle. The major hurdle was the agreement between India and the United States, number one, and the votes in the Congress. There was a big vote in the House in favor, in July; a very large vote, 85 to 12 in the Senate, in December; and then this conference bill that passed, I think by acclamation in the Senate, and by a wide margin in the House last week.

In the next few months we have to conclude a civil nuclear agreement, it's called a 123 agreement, between the United States and India. It will essentially be a codification of the last 18 months of our negotiation. So there aren't any major issues left to decide. And then India will have to negotiate an IAEA safeguards agreement with the IAEA, which Helen was referring to. And then we hope the rest of the world will then take the step that we've taken, that we take today, and we hope the Nuclear Suppliers Group -- this is the group of 40 civil nuclear countries in the world -- will agree by consensus that all of them will lift their restrictions on India, as well.

How long will all that take if we're in fifth gear and move real fast at the beginning of 2007? I would hope we could do all that in six months. And this will represent a major sea change in the way the world works, in India's acceptance in the world. It's also, I think, in many ways the emergence -- it details -- it speaks to the emergence of India as a global power, and the acceptance of India by the United States and the other powers in the world.

Q Nick, I was going to ask you about the Nuclear Suppliers Group you mentioned. How likely is there that there's going to be consensus? Are countries on board, like China?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: I'm confident. Russia, Germany, Britain, France, and Japan and Australia have all announced publicly they'll support. I was in China three weeks ago, talked to the Chinese. I do not believe the Chinese will block this. I think they will agree to consensus. There are some countries -- Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, the Nordics -- that have had some questions. But we're hopeful that they will join consensus. And I think they will. I think all eyes were on the United States.

Q Why do you think they will?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: All eyes were on the United States. They wanted to see if the Congress would support it. Now they've seen that in a bipartisan basis. And you have Senator Biden and Democratic Party Congressman Lantos, Senator Lugar, Congressman Hyde were the four who took the lead in this. You've seen the leadership of both political parties; a vote in favor of this. On the Democratic side, John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, Chris Dodd all voted for it.

So I think that the rest of the world is seeing that we're united in the United States, that we're willing to take this step forward. And there's a strong sense that India should be rewarded for the fact that during the last 30 years, while we've had a disagreement with them on the issue of nuclear weapons and nuclear testing, they've been very responsible, unlike some of their neighbors, and they have not

exported their technology. They've protected their nuclear technology.

And so having them inside this nonproliferation system worldwide is going to strengthen us. Having the largest country in the world -- soon to be largest country in the world by population -- outside, just didn't make a lot of sense in the 21st century.

Q Just to follow. Do you think U.S. is working directly or indirectly with these 40 countries for the --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: We're working as, essentially -- we're working very hard to convince the Nuclear Suppliers Group countries that they ought to take, now, international action that would be commensurate with the action that the President and the Congress have taken. And I'm confident -- I've talked to each one of those countries, and I'm confident that the Nuclear Suppliers Group will act.

Q And, second, you have worked very hard, day and night, you have made so many trips to India, back and forth to Washington, and recently you were there when Congress was already voting (inaudible). Was there any problem between -- as far as India accepting of the congressional passage of this?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: We had to explain to the Indians that when Congress writes a bill, there are operative paragraphs and there are non-operative -- non-binding provisions of any bill. And I think some of the Indians -- this is a very -- as you know, there are 22 parties in the Prime Minister's coalition, and there was a lot of interest in some of the provisions relating to Iran. But we explained that there are binding commitments and then there are non-binding commitments. And I think that that has settled down pretty much in India.

You've seen the Prime Minister today, and the Foreign Minister of India last week, stand up in the Indian parliament to defend this deal. And as I read the press in India -- and I was there last week -- I think there's been broad scale support, across the political spectrum, but also in the population at large.

This is a great event for the Indians. They feel, in essence, that they are being liberated from what they felt was an unfair three-decade long effort by the rest of the world to isolate it. And at a time when India has become one of the major partners for the United States -- on counterproliferation, on the spread of democracy worldwide, on stability with Pakistan, on the Iran question -- this is very good news that the United States has taken the lead internationally to do this for them.

Q How would you describe this, as counterweight to the relationship with China?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: I wouldn't describe it that way. We have a -- I think one of the more interesting foreign policy developments of the last few years is the degree to which the U.S.-China relationship has improved. And we feel that China is an important friend of the United States. We have some issues that separate us, but in general the direction is good there. And we don't have a policy that would build up a relationship with India to contain China. But it's also true that our strategic interests in South and East Asia dictate good relations with the major powers.

And now for the first time -- for the first time I think since India's creation in 1947, we have an excellent relationship between India and the United States, improving relations with China and the United States, and improving Japanese-Chinese relations. These are all good signs for stability in Asia, South and East Asia, and among the great powers of that region, very important that we're cooperating on a number of issues.

So we feel very good about the strategic equation and the fact that this deal -- this bill signed by the President this morning serves that end.

Q Since we're talking nuclear and China, can you talk to us a bit about the six-party talks, and what you hope --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: I think Tony and I can say just a little bit this morning. I'll just take a stab at it. Chris Hill, our negotiator, had his first day of six-party talks today in Beijing with the other parties. Each of the six made a statement. And, obviously, our administration wants to see if progress is possible. Progress, in our view, will be in convincing the North Koreans, especially, that the September 19, 2005 agreement should be implemented in full.

And so we'd like to see some early indication from the North Koreans that they're willing to begin implementing September '05. We had a number of discussions, weeks of discussions, that the President had with the Chinese leadership, Secretary Rice. I went to China three weeks ago on this account to try to convince the Chinese that they ought to work in tandem with us. And they have.

And so we'll see where we are by week's end. You saw a fairly stiff, formal statement by the North Koreans this morning. It didn't surprise us at all. If past is prologue, that's the way the North Koreans operate. Let's see where we are by the end of the week.

Q No indication you're talking to each other yet, just talking at each other?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: We've had a lot of direct conversations with the North Koreans over the last month. Chris Hill, I believe, has had three separate bilateral meetings with the North Koreans -- one in November and two last week. And so it wouldn't surprise me at all if he had a bilateral on the margins of this with the North Koreans. That's been the pattern of these negotiations now going back a year-and-a-half.

Q Do you know if that happened today?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: I don't believe it did. I think today, it was just the -- they convened the six parties. But this will go on for several more days. We'll try to get Chris home for Christmas, and then we'll see where we are.

Yes.

Q Nick, what's your understanding of why Congress inserted in the bill a requirement that the

President certify there's no transfer of India nuclear technology to Iran? Why is there that concern?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think from the very beginning, when we began the talk to Congress about this a year-and-a-half ago, there has been concern from many members about this issue. There has been no history of India transferring nuclear technology to Iran, but because Iran is one of our greatest concerns these days, and we're looking for ways to shut down any possible provision of capital or technology to the Iranians for their enrichment program and at Natanz, I think based on my own conversations with members, I just wanted to make absolutely sure that this was going to be part of the agreement and part that the Indians would acknowledge, and the Indians have.

You remember, there were two important votes over the last 14 months in the IAEA to essentially repudiate and sanction Iran, and India joined the United States in both of those votes. It was the first country outside a P5 major country to do so. And that allowed Brazil and Egypt and some of the other non-aligned countries to follow the India lead.

So we don't have any doubts that India also wishes to deny Iran a nuclear weapons capability, and I think India has had a very responsible policy in that regard.

Q Chris Hill said today that we should be a little less patient and pick up the pace and work faster, and you're saying you'd like to see him home by Christmas. So are you saying that --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Well, yes, Chris -- I think Chris' wife would like to see him home by Christmas, and his kids would, and I'm sure he would be, too. (Laughter.) And so we've always figured that this round of talks would be a couple of days, three or four days. We haven't put a time limit on it. I don't know if he'll finish by the 21st or 22nd. We'll have to see how it goes and how promising these talks become.

Q But you're not threatening to, sort of, end things if it doesn't come by --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: The United States is not making any threats. In fact, we worked very hard to bring these talks together. And the President, on his trip to Hanoi, and the Secretary of State did so, but it just stands to reason that -- poor Chris Hill, he's been on the road half of the last couple of months and I think he would very much like to get home by Christmas. If it's necessary to talk after that, we'll talk. But we're hoping to make some progress this week.

Q And may I ask one follow up on the India nuclear deal? What would it take to offer Pakistan a similar deal?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: I think we made clear -- we've made clear all along that this is a unique deal to India only. This is an exemption, that gets back to Helen's first question. We're making an exception for India only, and an exemption to the law for India only. India is a unique state. I mean, given the weight that India has, given the impact that India has on global warming, on air pollution because of its dependence on fossil fuel, from an environmental standpoint, an energy standpoint, this makes sense.

We also want to see India decreasingly dependent on Middle Eastern oil, including oil from Iran -- oil and gas from Iran, and serve that interest.

And so India is unique in that respect. We have no plans whatsoever to provide this kind of legislation for any other country, including Pakistan.

Yes.

Q I guess you were sort of implying that the provision about Iran was causing some consternation or some concern with the Indians. When you went over there, what were you talking about and what, specifically, was their concern?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Well, we've had a conversation with the Indians for the last year-and-half on the question of Iran. Now, India is a great country, it's a sovereign state, it's going to make its own decisions. But I've been -- we've been pleased that India has joined the international mainstream in these two critical votes at the International Atomic Energy Agency that repudiated Iran -- September 23, 2005 and February 4, 2006.

From the very beginning when Secretary Rice and I testified before both Houses, many members -- Republicans and Democrats -- said they wanted to write into the legislation provisions concerning Iran, and we had absolutely no objection to that. We thought it made sense because we thought it was consistent with what we had heard from the Indians and what they were doing publicly. And I don't think these provisions on Iran provide any kind of problem -- present any kind of problem at all. In fact, they strengthen the bill.

Q But was there concern within India? Is that what you were getting at? Because apparently there was some --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think -

Q -- a non-binding provision --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: To transport yourself to Delhi for a moment, this is a great democracy with a long-standing democratic tradition, and India is a proud, sovereign country. And India had not engaged in this type of cooperation with any other country before. They hadn't had to look at another country's parliament, our Congress, legislate in a way that they felt had a direct impact on them.

And so the Indian parliament did react to some of the provisions in various elements of the House and Senate bills that they felt -- some of them felt were intrusive. I think we were able to convince the Indian government, and the parliament -- I met with, gosh, 25 members of the parliament last week in Delhi -- that this is not in any way intrusive, and it's part of the legislative process in our country.

Q But was that the concern with the -- was the concern with the Iranian provision, then, along the lines of "we're a sovereign nation, you can't tell us what we can and can't do"?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: I think that was pretty much the concern that India -- the Indian parliamentarians who were quoted felt that they wanted to protect Indian's sovereignty. This bill does, it doesn't intrude on India's sovereignty in any way, shape or form. It's a contractual arrangement between the United States and India as to what we will do and what the Indians will do. What we will do is change our law to allow American companies to invest in civil nuclear plants. What India will do, for the first time since the dawn of the nuclear age in India, 35 years, open up its entire system to international inspection. So that -- we felt it was a good deal for the United States.

Q Will you take one last --

Q Is the Iranian provision binding or non-binding in the law?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Well, I believe the one that -- I believe the one is a non-binding provision. It's a sense of the Congress, and it's appropriate that it should be a sense of the Congress, we thought.

Yes.

Q Thank you, Mr. Undersecretary. There was a brief mention of Pakistan in the previous question. Did the administration have contact with the Musharraf government during the debate on this, and have you had any reaction from them?

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: Oh, yes. We've kept the Pakistanis -- Pakistan is a very, very strong friend of the U.S. It's our most important partner in countering al Qaeda and the Taliban in that part of the world, obviously. So we briefed the Pakistanis in July 2005, and all the way through to last week, every step of the way as to what was happening. We didn't want them to be surprised.

The President, when he was in Islamabad on March 3rd of last year, described the civil nuclear accord with India to President Musharraf. And it is what it is. There are some Pakistanis who may not -- who have been, I think that on the record, you've seen them over the last couple of months, who are not happy about it -- not President Musharraf, but people beneath him. But I think the Pakistanis know that this is something very important that will build a new strategic relationship with India. So it's in our national interest.

Q Can you talk about the broader partnership with India and what kind of progress you hope to make, particularly in trade --

UNDERSECRETARY BURNS: I think the emergence of this partnership between the U.S. and India is one of the most important strategic initiatives of this administration, and in U.S. foreign policy in some time. India is rapidly becoming a military partner. There are very close military-to-military ties. India is considering a dramatic overhaul of its military technology, and we hope that India will look at American military technology -- fighter aircrafts, army helicopters, that kind of thing.

And India is emerging in terms of counterterrorism -- given the fact that India has been victimized by

terrorist attacks over the last year-and-a-half -- as a very important partner. President Bush and Prime Minister Singh were the first two world leaders to support the Global Fund for Democracy. So here you have the oldest democracy in the world, the United States, the largest democracy in the world, India, operating together for the first time since 1947 on democracy promotion. This deal, and the emergence of this relationship, could change the strategic landscape in Asia, in South Asia, and all of Asia to the benefit of the United States.

So the real importance of the legislation the President is signing today is not just the nuclear aspect, it's the wider implications for the benefit to the United States strategically of having this huge democratic power now very close to the United States and us close to them.

Thank you very much.

MR. SNOW: All right, other topics.

Q Was he speaking on the record, or background?

MR. SNOW: Yes, that's on the record.

Q On the record, okay.

MR. SNOW: All on the record.

Q Today's NSC meeting on Iraq, where did that -- did that move the ball out further?

MR. SNOW: Well, it's still going forward. One would assume that any meeting in some way moves the ball forward. Over the weekend, Prime Minister Maliki had a reconciliation conference -- I mentioned that at the end of last week. A number of important and encouraging things came out of that reconciliation meeting, especially -- maybe most notably -- was talk of working on de-Baathification, to say to those members of the Baath party who have not been involved in inciting or creating acts of violence, that in fact there ought to be a way to include them in the political mainstream in the country.

In addition, the Prime Minister -- well, the Prime Minister talked about a number of things also: the investment law, the oil law, a housing project which I've discussed, the international compact. There is discussion of moving forward on constitutional reforms that are going to be important, because as you know, in a number of provinces, Sunnis still do not participate fully, and as a result, there is less than full participation in some areas with significant Sunni populations in the government.

So a number of those things are underway, and it's important to take a look at that as the Prime Minister tries to put together all the pieces of building an Iraq that can stand on its own, and that includes, obviously, political reconciliation. He also reiterated his belief that militias and insurgent groups -- that the government needs to be working in such a way as to address the issues of sectarian and insurgent violence.

So this is kind of a follow-on and an analysis of people who are doing their own readouts and analysis of what went on. And I can't speak to anything further, because they were still meeting when I walked over here.

Q This was a briefing on everything that happened -

MR. SNOW: No, this was a National Security Council meeting.

Q Well, I mean, you've just gone through a list of a bunch of things that happened in Baghdad, and I was asking about what happened across the street.

MR. SNOW: Well, I know, but -- you're asking about what was happening across the street and talking about what was going on in Baghdad, and I was giving you a readout of what happened in Baghdad over the weekend.

Q Right. (Laughter.)

MR. SNOW: Well, what would you expect them to do, other than in a meeting of Iraq, talk about Iraq?

Q What I was looking for is how the President is moving forward --

MR. SNOW: I know, it's a process question, and it's one of those things where I'm not going to give you any sense, number one -- I know you want, you know, "is the President six inches closer?" If we're talking a football field, "is he five yards closer or two yards closer?" And as tempting as it may be to try to give an answer on that, the President will -- when the President is ready to lay out the way forward, he will share it with the American people. But constantly --

Q Did he move back?

MR. SNOW: No, he didn't move -- oh, my goodness. (Laughter.)

Q Was there a loss?

MR. SNOW: These are all forward-leaning. No, this is -- this is all progress all the time. So it's -- but what the President is doing is he is consulting with all the key leaders. I mean, when you have a National Security Council meeting, you talk -- you do a combination of analysis and discussion.

Q Tony, there seems to be an assumption now in this town that there's going to be some surge, maybe 25,000, maybe 40,000 or more. Is that a safe assumption?

MR. SNOW: No. I think the assumption is that the President will announce what he's doing when he does it. And I would warn people away from confident assumptions about what's going on. I have noticed that there have been a lot of very specific talks.

The one assumption that you can make is that the President is working with the Iraqis and also with military commanders, civil authorities, the State Department and others, to find a way forward in Iraq that is going to deal more effectively than we've been able to deal in recent months, with the problem, especially of sectarian violence, but also of insurgent violence, so that this Iraqi government is going to have the ability sooner rather than later to handle all of its responsibilities, and that the United States will be in a position to stand down as soon as it's feasible.

Q So when he talked to Prime Minister Maliki on Friday, in the afternoon, and we weren't notified about it until five or six hours later, he wasn't calling Prime Minister Maliki to say, look, a surge of troops is coming?

MR. SNOW: No. It doesn't work that way. And what he was getting was a readout from the Prime Minister about the speech that was going to take place the following day, the reconciliation speech. That was really the bulk of the conversation, was talking about what the Prime Minister intends to do. And the President did question him on this.

Again, Iraq is a sovereign government. The United States does not issue orders to the Prime Minister. What we do is in support of that government, and we do it in full consultation with the government. The President also did read out his meetings with Mr. Hashemi and Mr. al Hakim, both of whom had also reported to the Prime Minister.

So the bulk of the conversation really was listening to the Prime Minister talk about what he intended to do next.

Q Does that mean he has ruled out a surge? Will you say "no"?

MR. SNOW: No, it means that I am not going to answer any questions about what he's ruling in and out; and I expect to receive those questions each and every day until the President delivers his speech.

Q What did the President think of his own former Secretary of State, Collin Powell, saying that he doesn't think additional troops would do anything?

MR. SNOW: If you look at the transcript, what he said was that -- Secretary Powell talked about if you're going to send troops, you have to answer some pretty important questions: One, what is the mission, precisely what is the mission; number two, do you have -- can they accomplish the mission, do you have sufficient troops and equipment? He also talked later about a backlog of equipment and other things.

In addition, Secretary Powell made the same point that the President has made all along, which is, ultimately, this is going to be -- the Iraqis are going to have to accept responsibility. He mentioned, significantly, the kind of political reconciliation that I've just read out, in terms of the Maliki conference on Saturday.

So what you saw is Secretary Powell acknowledging what we have acknowledged, which is the situation did change dramatically after the Samara mosque bombing, because you have had since then sectarian violence that had not previously been as major a concern, but really is a major concern now. And you do have to find ways of addressing it. And the military piece is certainly a part of it, but you do have economic pieces, you do have diplomatic pieces, you do have matters of political reconciliation. All those have to work together. And Secretary Powell also made mention of those in the context of his answers on the program.

Q He also said we are losing.

MR. SNOW: Well, yes, he did. He said -- the way he put it was, he said, we haven't lost, is what he said. He did not say we were losing. He said we have --

Q He said, "we are losing," and then he said, "we haven't lost." He said both.

MR. SNOW: No, no, he said, "If it's grave and deteriorating, and we're not winning, we are losing." That was his, "we haven't lost." So that's his characterization of the situation. He also made it clear that in his view, that the proper -- that he suspected that the President was going to pursue a strategy that would, in fact, attack the kinds of problems that we're discussing -- political reconciliation, building capability among the Iraqis, the recognition that the Iraqis, themselves, ultimately had to have responsibility for taking care of things, and that, again, whatever you did, you had to make sure that the military had a clear mission. I don't see any big disagreement.

Q But he said he also hadn't been persuaded that some sort of surge would accomplish anything that --

MR. SNOW: I understand that, and I'm not going to talk about theories of surges or non-surges or commitments or any of that sort of stuff.

Q Secretary Powell also acknowledged that it is a civil war. Why won't you make the same acknowledgment?

MR. SNOW: Well, again, because I'm not going to get into the nomenclature game. What you have is a situation of sectarian violence, and it's of concern to us.

Q You don't see any big disagreement --

MR. SNOW: I pointed to Helen, then I'll point to you.

Q If the people of this so-called sovereign nation ask us to leave, would we leave?

MR. SNOW: If the government said, we want you to leave, we would leave.

Q If the people. I mean, there is a difference, apparently.

MR. SNOW: Well, I don't know -- I'd think that you deal with the government. The people elected the government, and the people risked their lives to vote for the government.

Q We've giving orders to the government.

MR. SNOW: No, we're not. Sorry.

Q Just to be clear, you don't see any big disagreement on Powell's part with the President, or are you saying you don't see any big disagreement on your part with what Secretary Powell --

MR. SNOW: No, I think when you look at the parts that I highlighted, these are all things that the President has talked about in recent weeks.

Q So it's the Secretary you don't think is disagreeing with the President?

MR. SNOW: Look, ask the Secretary. I think what you're trying to do is to create fights and friction where none exist.

Q I just want to make sure I understand what you were saying.

MR. SNOW: What I was saying is that if you take a look at one of things he was saying, that the military needs a clear mission -- agreed. When he says that, in fact, the Iraqis are going to have to have full responsibility -- agreed. When he talks about the fact that you also have to have political reconciliation as a large part of it -- agreed. So, I mean, all of those -- if you look at key parts of what he's saying, yes, it's agreed. And he also was pretty clear not to --

Q -- on the civil war part?

MR. SNOW: What?

Q About the losing and civil war part?

MR. SNOW: No, well, he -- there, I think if you drill into what he's talking about, "grave and deteriorating," he's referring to sectarian violence as he discusses later on. There may be some -- I'm just not going to get into assessing the labels that he attaches, but the underlying situation on the ground is one that we are certainly aware of. And what he talks about is the most serious phase began earlier this year, with the blowing up of the Golden Mosque in Samara, that turned into sect-on-sect violence, communitarian violence, which is what I think is generated into what some of us are calling, anyway, a civil war. That's what he's calling; we call it a situation of alarming sectarian violence.

Q He also says we don't have enough troops to secure Baghdad; we just don't have them.

MR. SNOW: Right. He's making the obvious point that the United States is working with the Iraqis in

securing Baghdad. What he's making the obvious point is that U.S. forces alone will not "secure Baghdad." And that's where it gets back to asking your basic questions: How do you work together? And you'll note that he made the pivot there to the necessity for Iraqis to assume primary control over security operations. And they talked about the fact that, in fact, they are increasingly taking command of security.

He also pointed out, as I've said many times here, that the police are a concern -- and you do have to have police forces that are capable of creating peace rather than disturbing peace. So, I mean, all of those reflect things that we have discussed here.

Q Tony, his point goes beyond that. His point is -- at a time when the government or the administration is apparently sending a surge of 25,000 to 50,000 more troops in -- his point, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is, we don't have the troops.

MR. SNOW: No, if you take a look, he talked about stretch -- but, again, I'm not going -- what you're trying to do is to draw me in to a discussion of options. We will discuss those when the time comes. But what he said was -- let me just flip to it -- first, number one, he says the situation is, in his opinion, recoverable. And the second is that he worried about some of the strains on the army, in particular.

Hang on a second, we have a -- you'll forgive me -- how does this one open? I apologize. Somebody's recorder -- if this happens to be your recorder, please come forward, because I don't know how to flip it open -- never mind, I do. There we go.

So in any event, he has particular concerns about the army, and those have been expressed.

Q Am I allowed to ask two?

MR. SNOW: Please.

Q So can I clarify? The NSC today, the meeting that I -- in the beginning when you were reading through the schedules, NSC, you said there was a meeting with Rice and there was a separate meeting with NSC, or --

MR. SNOW: Yes, those are separate meetings. He had breakfast with the Secretary of State, and he will be meeting later with the Secretary of Defense.

Q No, no, there's an NSC meeting after the breakfast --

MR. SNOW: Yes.

Q And then, in terms of the level of discussions, I know you don't want to say where you are in the field, et cetera, but, I mean, we are still -- you had told us last week that he was -- the President was closing in on a plan.

MR. SNOW: He was moving in a direction.

Q So is he still moving in a direction? Is it basically -- I mean, are --

MR. SNOW: I've just -- you know what --

Q -- how active are the discussions, how wide are the discussions that are continuing?

MR. SNOW: They're active and they're wide. (Laughter.) I mean, you have just given me two terms that are very difficult for me to answer. It would be very -- if I were describing a refrigerator, I could work on it.

Q Well, there were those who were saying that perhaps there's a delay in an announcement because it's Christmas coming up and if there's going to be a surge then --

MR. SNOW: Like I said, everybody -- I know you all want to know surge or no surge, the answer is, no answer. But the fact is that the President is taking a very careful look, and as I also noted, that when you're looking at Iraq policy, it is not strictly military. There are lots of pieces that have to be done here, including working with the Iraqis, taking a look at how it affects others in the region. And it's a very complex situation where you have all sides taking a good look at it so that you can try to make sure that if there is a diplomatic issue raised by some military action, then you want to find out. If you want to find out that there are military implications to some diplomatic initiative, you have to figure those things out.

So I think what happens is that there is so much intense concentration on the military piece, that people allow themselves to think that that is the only thing under discussion here. And in a situation as complex as the one in Iraq, you want to make sure that you are looking at every possible way of advancing the goal of that strong, independent, free, self-sustaining Iraq.

And therefore, you have to -- the reason you bring in such a variety of people as you do into NSC meeting is so they can all discuss this and give the President the advantage of their knowledge, as well as their insight into how these things may or may not unfold and how they --

Q Is there any other leading --

MR. SNOW: We will let you know as it goes on.

Q Tony, on the economic policy thing, energy issues --

MR. SNOW: Energy. Yes, it's energy.

Q Is that in regard to the State of the Union or budget or both?

MR. SNOW: Probably both. I mean, at this point, one of the things that does happen is that you take a

look at a lot of the options as you move forward. The President, as we've said many times, intends to have a very active final two years of his presidency. So at this point we are looking at budget issues, as the President, obviously, and OMB gets ready to try to wrap up budget deliberations, and at the same time, also working in concert with that, any policy options that you may want to present at the State of the Union Address, or as the new Congress begins its work.

Q Can you describe what this energy issue is, or issues?

MR. SNOW: No. I'll give you a better readout tomorrow.

Q Is the NSC meeting a session in which options are being discussed, if not decided?

MR. SNOW: I don't think so.

Q Really?

MR. SNOW: Yes.

Q Anything about the schedule for Tuesday and Thursday, which I think both days are --

MR. SNOW: No, I don't. I will try to see if there's anything further that I can give you at the on-camera briefing, but I've got nothing on them.

Ann.

Q Has the President talked to Colin Powell directly about any of this? And what kind of weight does he give to Powell's opinions, since Powell has been out of office for almost --

MR. SNOW: Well, let me put it this way, the President and Colin Powell -- I don't know if he's spoken to him directly. But the President likes and respects Colin Powell. They still have a social relationship, and they still talk, and I suspect even if they haven't talked, I wouldn't be surprised if Secretary Powell has had conversations with others in the administration. I don't know if he has, but he's somebody who we quite respect.

Q Would the President give much weight to the comments he made yesterday?

MR. SNOW: What the President -- again, Ann, I don't know how you assign weight. What the President is doing is very practical business. It's not like saying, aha, so-and-so has spoken. What he looks at are the real data and the real options that are presented to him. And many of the things that Secretary Powell has said have been reflected in things that others have said to the President. So certainly those are going to factor in.

One of the reasons -- you heard the President say this, he's not going to rush to a decision. He is

moving as rapidly as possible, but this is one where you do have to be able to explain to the American people what you're doing, why you're doing it, what you hope to achieve. And it's important to get all the pieces right and be able to answer as many questions as possible because it is a complicated issue and therefore certainly he's going to listen to what Colin Powell has to say as he's been listening to quite a few others.

John.

Q Thank you, Tony. Can we expect an announcement on the United Nations ambassador today or tomorrow, and a change --

MR. SNOW: I have no idea. Sorry.

Q And a change at the Department of Housing and Urban Development by New Year's Day?

MR. SNOW: No. To the second, no. To the first, I don't know. Sorry.

Q Anything about this congressional delegation that came back from Cuba?

MR. SNOW: To tell you the truth, I have not paid a whole lot of attention to it, other than the most important thing for us is that the Cuban people deserve freedom and democracy. And we hope they get it.

END 10:23 A.M. EST

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