



# THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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## Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

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12:30 P.M. EDT

MR. FLEISCHER: **Good afternoon.** Let me fill you in on the President's day, and I have one announcements and several phone calls to provide you, as well.

The President began, as usual, with an intelligence briefing, followed by an FBI briefing. Then he convened a meeting of the National Security Council. He met with the Secretary of Defense. And that is it for his events for the day, other than some of the usual, behind-the-scenes events involving briefings and meetings with Cabinet Secretaries, et cetera.

The President has so far today made three phone calls to foreign leaders. He spoke this morning with President Aznar of Spain. The call was part of our regular consultations on Iraq and other topics of mutual concern between two close allies. The two discussed the situation in Iraq and post-Saddam Iraq. They pledged to work together to closely assist the people of Iraq.

They also discussed the peace process in the Middle East. The topic of peace in the Middle East was a subject the President also discussed with Crown Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, as well as President

Mubarak of Egypt. With the Crown Prince he also discussed the importance of providing humanitarian aid to the people of Iraq.

And in one announcement for you, the President and Mrs. Bush will welcome Prime Minister John Howard of Australia, and Mrs. Howard to the ranch at Crawford, Texas on May 2nd through 3rd. Australia has stood as a strong ally and close friend on the major security challenges we face today. The President looks forward to extensive consultations and discussions with Prime Minister Howard about how to rebuild a liberated Iraq, ensuring the elimination of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, expanding global trade and advancing peace and stability in Asia and the Pacific region.

And with that, I'm happy to take your questions. Helen.

**Q Are there plans on rebuilding Iraq?** I mean, do we actually have a plan for restoring the police service and water system and government, per se?

MR. FLEISCHER: Indeed, and this is something that General Garner is in the region for the purpose of leading up, reporting to General Franks. And General Brooks in his briefing this morning started to describe many of the operational features that are already underway.

Q Who did that?

MR. FLEISCHER: General Brooks, this morning in the briefing from Doha. Interestingly, one of the things that is increasingly being seen around Iraq is stepped-up cooperation and participation from Iraqi citizens. It varies from region to region across the country, but in many cases, it is engineers, people who have infrastructure ability to work with Americans, coalition partners in turning on water and repairing some of the infrastructure, or getting the infrastructure up and going again. In other sectors it involves the presence of increasing numbers of police patrols, et cetera, as General Brooks reported.

Q Is that tantamount to nation-building?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, it involves exactly as we've said, that part of the military mission is the reconstruction phase designed and built in to the military plan.

**Q Have you got any feedback yet from Syria?** And when you talk about the possibility of Iraqi officials going into Syria, do you know exactly, have any, for sure, gone into Syria, or are you just guessing at this?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, we do know for certain that Iraqi officials have crossed the border and gone into Syria. And it's very important for Syria not to harbor those officials.

Q Do you know how many? I mean, of the 55?

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't have specific information to report, no.

Q Have you gotten any feedback yet from Syria?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think that Syria has received the message. Keep in mind, the United States does have diplomatic relations with Syria. We have an ambassador in Damascus. Syria has received the message not only from the ambassador, but from other officials in the government.

And I think it's important for Syria to recognize that not only is it important for -- the wise way to conduct diplomacy, but also as a way of sending a message to the people of a newly-liberated Iraq, the people of Kuwait, others in the region who do not want to see Syria take in or harbor those who have been engaged in decades-long practice of tyranny, of brutality and of persecution against the Iraqi people. Why would Syria want to harbor those people? It's an important question, and we look forward to Syria's response to it.

Q In recent days, many announcements by senior officials about Syria's weapons of mass destruction have led people in other parts of the world to believe that Syria is probably next on the United States target list. And I'm wondering if you want to disabuse us of that notion?

MR. FLEISCHER: Thank you. Let me make two points. What's next on the United States target list is Iraq. What is next is exactly what we have described, which is completing the military mission in Iraq, because there still are dangerous places and there still is risk of pockets of fighting and resistance. What's next is the reconstruction of Iraq, working with Iraqis, working with the international community, working with the coalition to rebuild Iraq. If you want to know in the President's mind what is next, that is what is next.

In terms of Syria and chemical weapons, indeed, the President was asked a direct question yesterday: does Syria have weapons of mass destruction? And, indeed, as the President's habit, he answered the direct question. Syria does have chemical weapons according to a report that was just released by the CIA to the Congress. It's a public document and an authoritative one. I brought it to your attention earlier today.

So when the President is asked a direct question, he answers it.

Q But both you and the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense have talked about Syria's weapons, as well as about the Iraqis who Syria may be harboring -- and have couched that all with a certain kind of warning, saying it's time for Syria to understand. That is taken by many people as a threat.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, it is time for Syria to understand. This is a day of emerging liberation for the people of Iraq and it's important for President Assad of Syria -- who is a new leader, a young man -- to understand that the future needs to be different from the past, and that the Iraqi people deserve no less, the region deserves no less.

Syria is a nation that has long been on the list of terrorist nations. They should not do that. They should not be that way. No nation should be. And that's a message the United States will not be shy about saying to Syria or other nations.

Q But then what?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think that what's next is Syria needs to seriously ponder the implications of their actions in terms of harboring Iraqis who need not and should not be harbored. They should think seriously about their program to develop and to have chemical weapons. I think it's time for them to think through where they want their place to be in the world.

Q Why shouldn't people take that as a threat?

MR. FLEISCHER: John.

**Q How does the American military success** in Iraq improve -- or does it improve -- the prospects for the Mideast peace process between Israel and the Arab world? You're going to come out with a road map. You could have come out with a road map at any time, but now it's going to come out after this military success. So are the prospects for that road map and for peace improved by the fall of Saddam Hussein?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, if you recall, the President gave what he said at the time it was a major address to the American Enterprise Institute, where the President talked about what he thought could happen as a result of changes in the Middle East and the importance of pursuing peace in the Middle East based on the road map, which is soon to be shared with the Israelis and the Palestinians. It still remains contingent an Abu Mazen being able to successfully complete the appointment of his Cabinet.

But the President does, indeed, have high hopes that a variety of factors are coming together in the Middle East that can lead to peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. That is based, in part, on successful conclusion of a war that hopefully can change the dynamic in the Middle East. Certainly, the absence of Saddam Hussein's payments now to suicide bombers can lead to greater security on the ground in the Middle East. The more security there is between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the more the prospects of them making progress on the political front.

But it's also important to recognize -- and this existed prior to the war with Iraq and still exists today -- that there are a number of nations, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Jordan, which have played a very constructive role in helping to bring Israel and the Palestinian Authority together. That continues. And so there are a variety of signs of hope in moving forward on peace in the Middle East. It remains important for Abu Mazen to be able to complete the naming of his Cabinet. We would like to see that happen. And we will continue -- the President has said to pursue this.

The Middle East is a region under change right now. The President's hope and the President's effort will remain to make that change in a positive, peaceful direction.

**Q Does the American military success send a message to the Israelis, as well as to the Arabs?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think it sends a message to nations that engage in terror, and nations that engage in tyranny, and nations that engage in the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction that that is a route that does not lead to a good future.

**Q Can I follow-up on John's question? Is the road map open to revision?**

MR. FLEISCHER: When the President announced the road map he said that upon its presentation we will welcome contributions from the parties, and we will. We will welcome contributions from the Israelis, contributions from the Palestinians.

**Q So these -- an Israeli spokesman has already said that they have a number of changes they would like to make. Are you discussing that with them now?**

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, it hasn't been formally released to them. And so I think that working through the proper diplomacy, once the Palestinian Cabinet is in and confirmed, the road map, as the President said, will be released. And of course it is important to listen to the parties.

Ultimately, as much help as the United States will be -- and the United States under President Bush will be an amount of tremendous help to the parties -- so, too, some of the other nations in the region, a

Quartet. But, ultimately, it's not a matter for the Quartet or a matter for the United States or a matter for the Arab nations to deliver the peace. It does come down to a matter of the Israelis and the Palestinian working together to deliver the peace, with the assistance of the United States and these other parties.

So their thoughts and opinions about the road map are important. We've said that we would welcome contributions to it. But the direction of the road map is the direction to peace, and the President will fight for it. And that is increased security, the development of political consensus and action on the ground by both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

**Q On another subject**, is it the President's view now that enough has been achieved in Iraq that he can shift his focus, his attention, his public schedule to the economy and domestic concerns?

**MR. FLEISCHER:** Well, even with what was happening in Iraq

-- which, clearly, was a presidential priority -- much did happen on the domestic front. So I think it's -- may be worth somewhat of a review about what has taken place.

Here is what has been passed by the Congress and will shortly sent to the President for signature: the emergency wartime supplemental appropriation bill is heading this way, the President will sign it Wednesday morning. The children's protection safety act, which includes the National Amber Alert System, is also coming to the White House for signature -- which is a helpful way of protecting families and children. The smallpox compensation legislation, which is part of Homeland Security, has been passed by the Congress and will be signed. And in an hour we'll measure the tax relief for members of the armed services has been passed and will be signed.

During the last seven weeks, which, interestingly, is the longest period of time that Congress is in Washington in the entire year without a recess, Congress passed the following: the House passed on ban on human cloning; the House passed bankruptcy reform; the House passed medical liability reform, which was a presidential priority; the House, earlier in February, passed welfare reform; and the House also just recently passed comprehensive energy legislation, including opening up the Alaska -- the ANWR facility for exploration.

The Senate has taken action and passed a ban on partial birth abortion and the CARE act, the faith-based legislation with the charitable provisions.

So there has been a lot of activity in the Congress on these measures. And, of course, the Congress just passed a budget resolution, which is the necessary first step to getting the tax relief done. In fact, this is the first time -- or this is only like, really, the sixth time in the last 28 years that the budget resolution was passed prior to its April 15th statutory deadline.

So it still is early in the congressional cycle. A lot of action has taken place. The President has made a lot of phone calls. There have been meetings here, many of which you know about but, of course, didn't receive the attention they typically would if much of the public focus was on the domestic agenda. So, yes, there is a lot of work both on the international front and the domestic front. The President is committed to doing both.

**Q** Just real quick -- I mean, this is the first week he's gone out, done a big speech on the economy. There are plans to do another speech on the way to Crawford. I mean, we are seeing a change from what we've seen for the last several weeks, over the course of the war. It seems like now, in terms of his public schedule, he's talking more about the economy. Is that what we are to expect in the weeks ahead? That

he's done enough with Iraq, that he can focus his public attention --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think in terms of the President's mind set he is still very strongly focused on what is happening in Iraq. Congress is gone, and gone for two weeks. There are going to be a wide number of appearances by administration officials throughout the states over the next two weeks -- Cabinet and sub-Cabinet level. And the President, of course, is going to be speaking out tomorrow on the domestic economy because it's tax day, and the American people are over-taxed. And the President also believes one of the best ways to create jobs in the economy is to continue to stimulate the economy. The President will also have remarks on Wednesday on his way to Crawford, in St. Louis.

So, yes, the President will increasingly speak out. But I do want to also advise you, we still are in a phase where the President is very much focused on what is happening on the ground, so long as we have American men and women who remain in a combat zone.

**Q Ari, back on Syria for a second.** What do you want Syria to do with these Iraqis you say they are holding? Turn them over to U.S. custody?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, Syria needs to broadly assess what role it wants to play, cooperatively with the rest of the world and with its neighbors -- and now, with a newly-liberated neighborhood, newly-liberated Iraqi people, where the Iraqi people, themselves, have a strong message to Syria: don't harbor these people who oppressed the Iraqi people.

So, most importantly, the President wants Syria to get the message that they need to reexamine themselves; they need to examine their ties to terrorists, their harboring of terrorists, their harboring of Iraqi leaders, and their development of weapons of mass destruction. So it's a broad message the President is sending to Syria. We hope that they will refocus. As I mentioned, President Bashar Assad is a young leader. He is an untested leader. He has his chance to be a leader who makes the right decisions. We hope he does.

**Q** What's the punishment? Are you contemplating sanctions?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, there are a variety of levers that are available in diplomacy, a variety of levers that are available. We're working bilaterally, multilaterally. And I think it's too soon to say what the final outcome will be, but for the cause of peace, it's important for Syria to reexamine its role in the region. They are a state that sponsors terrorism. They have no reason to do that, to act like that. And, certainly, they have no reason to harbor these Iraqi officials. They should not be able to find safe haven in Syria.

**Q** Can you rule out military action as part of the consequences?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, as we've always said, every region of the world is treated uniquely; every nation is treated uniquely. There are a variety of different levers that apply to different regions.

I will make a blanket statement as overall policy around the world, and that is that that is a statement that we don't make about anywhere. We always leave options on tables. But our course of action with Syria is focused on reminding Syria that this is a good time for them to re-examine their support of terrorism. And a good place to begin is with their harboring of these Iraqi leaders who have fled to Syria. They should not be allowed to find safe haven there.

**Q** So you're not taking military action off the table as --

MR. FLEISCHER: But I want you to be very measured in how you understand that when I say that it is a blanket statement around the world that we always give.

Q Okay. And on the Iraqi leaders they're harboring, has someone -- following up the previous question -- has someone said exactly what Syria needs to do with these leaders? Just to get more specific here --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I can --

Q -- they expect to be turned over in the next --

MR. FLEISCHER: I can assure you that there are conversations that are at the diplomatic between the United States and Syria, as well as others and Syria, and we shall see what Syria decides to do. It's important for them to make the right decisions.

Q Have you given them any deadline?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's important for Syria not to harbor Iraqi leaders.

**Q Ari, how much does the United States have to find**, in terms of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, to vindicate the arguments that were made beforehand? Is it a small amount that a terrorist could use sufficient? Or do you need a militarily significant quantity?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I have not heard any talk of quantification of it. As we have said repeatedly, this remains a military mission. Our forces went to Iraq for the purpose of engaging in combat. And that was their design, that was the set-up, that was the mission. There are other elements that are part of the armed forces, much smaller in number, that have the ability to find. And I'm in no position to judge what quantities. According to the United Nations resolutions, any quantity was prohibited -- any quantity. And I'm not saying that as an effort to set a bar any level or another level. Because we'll find exactly what we find, and the world will know.

Let me also add one other point to this question, while the inspectors were in Iraq, I want to remind you, we always maintained that one of the best ways -- and we knew this from the results of the '90s -- to find weapons of mass destruction was to interview Iraqi scientists out of the country. We always said one of the best ways to find it would not be to hunt for it, but to receive information from the people involved in the program who, for whatever reasons, would turn on Iraq and tell us. Certainly now, as the Iraqi regime passes into the dust bin of history, we will have conversations with people as they emerge. They're starting to emerge. And we believe that that will lead to more information available.

Q Is progress being made? Do you have a sense of how long it might take?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, that's an operational issue that I don't think I'm the one to give operational updates on. It is still part of the military operation.

**Q How high up in the food chain do you think it goes**, in terms the type of Iraqi leaders that you think might be in Syria? For instance, do you think that Saddam's sons might be there?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not in a position to start naming names of who may or may not be there. Whoever it is, they shouldn't be. And this is not so much -- it is an issue between the United States and Syria, because we've expressed it to Syria. But it's an issue between the Iraqi people and Syria, the Kuwaiti people and Syria. Even think about the Iranian people who fought years' worth of wars with the

leaders of Iraq -- to know that another nation, an Arab nation like Syria would take them in and harbor them, provide them safety. That is why this is such an important issue. This is about fundamental human rights and the way people should be treated. Syria should not end up on the wrong side of that line.

Q Just to follow up on the Syria question. You're saying that you're intentionally leaving it sort of open and vague on whether or not military action is on the table, which you're saying it always is. But the British are saying today that it's not on the table, explicitly. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said, we have made it clear that there are no plans for Syria to be next on the list. Is there a difference here?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I've already told you what is next on the President's list; and what's next on the President's list is Iraq.

Q In terms of beyond Iraq, in terms of what might be next in terms of military action?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think --

Q They're making it very clear, Great Britain --

MR. FLEISCHER: I really have answered the questions about how we are approaching Syria. And as I mentioned to you, every region is different. We apply different levers in different places, and we shall see what the results are. I'm not going to go beyond that.

Q **Ari, since we talked last there appears** to be a pretty firm deal in the Senate not to allow tax cuts higher than \$350 billion. Does the White House still believe that that deal can be undone?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think it remains to be seen what the exact nature of what the senators have agreed to is. There's some dispute among senators about it, themselves. From the President's point of view, what's most important is that we create the greatest number of jobs for the American people. Clearly, a tax bill that has only \$350 billion worth of tax relief in it will not create as many jobs as a tax bill that has \$550 billion or higher for the American people.

The President's focus is on jobs, and it will remain on jobs and the creation of jobs through an economic growth package. And the higher the tax number -- even in excess of \$550 billion -- the more jobs will be created. And that's what the President is going to fight for.

Q Specifically, do you still think you can change the views of the Snowe and Voinovich, who have vowed that they will not support --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I never make any predictions. But the leadership of the Senate is important at times like this. All individual senators have a voice, and we will continue to work the process. The House has a voice, and it's important for the voice in the House to be heard, as well.

Q Can I ask one more? Does the President believe that Republicans have any kind of special obligation to support the President on domestic initiatives like this during wartime?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the President recognizes that members of Congress have a right to vote their conscience, speak their mind, and act accordingly.

Q **On the people who went into Syria**, I wasn't quite clear what you were saying the nature of these people is. Is this just a cross-section of people who fled into Syria? Or are you saying that Syria is now

harboring people who were responsible for orchestrating the oppression of the Saddam Hussein --

MR. FLEISCHER: Our concern lies fundamentally with the leaders of the Iraqi regime. I think it's safe to say that people have crossed the border. And our concern remains with the people who have led the Iraqi regime.

Q Now, the people who crossed, do you have evidence that the Syrian government helped them cross? Or that they just found their way into Syria?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I'm going to leave it just as I did. But Syria is an knowledgeable country.

**Q What can you tell us about the meeting** tomorrow, the first meeting aimed at generating leaders for an Iraqi interim authority?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, tomorrow, in Nasiriyah will be the first of what will be many meetings that involve the preliminary work of organizing for a future, led by the Iraqis of Iraq. And so this will be a preliminary session, a planning session. It will also be an important and great day for the Iraqi people, because they will start to learn how to represent themselves through voices of democracy and not tyranny. And that's what tomorrow represents, and it's going to be a very hopeful day for the Iraqi people. We're proud that it's happening.

Q Do you have a number of people who will attend? And can you tell us whether or not this is people who are potential leaders, themselves, or sort of second level or sherpa-type people, aimed at sort of preparing the way? In other words, is Ahmed Chalabi and others going to participate, or is this a lower level?

MR. FLEISCHER: This is not the first meeting of the IIA, or the interim Iraqi authority. This is a meeting that will help, we believe, pave the way preliminarily for what will eventually become the Iraqi interim authority. This is the first of what will be many meetings in different places all around Iraq, as Iraqis start to gather. This meeting will be done with the help of United States officials. The President's Special Envoy, Zal Khalilzad, will be there. And so this is an important meeting, and it is a precursor of many more such meetings to come.

Q Chalabi will be there?

MR. FLEISCHER: You'll have to ask the officials who are involved.

Q A couple more on Syria. You said that people crossed the border and that the administration's concern is about the leaders. Does the administration know that leaders, that Iraqi's leaders crossed the border, or just people crossed the border?

MR. FLEISCHER: We have information that leaders have crossed the border, people who are important. I'm also allowing for people who may have, for humanitarian reasons, average Iraqis may have tried to get across the border. Our interest is in the leaders. That's why I say Syria should not harbor any Iraqi leaders.

Q And does the administration know specifically who crossed the border?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm just not going to get into any discussions about who.

Q But do you know?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, there's various bits of information. I'm just not going to go beyond that.

Q When you talk about military action, when we've asked all these questions and you talk about not taking it off the table -- I'm going to try to turn the question just slightly. You said that it's an option on the table in the broadest sense, that the administration is never going to take any action off the table in whatever region in the world.

But in the comments today, and in the last few days, has the administration intentionally tried to threaten military action? Is that what you are trying to do, or is that not what you're trying to do?

MR. FLEISCHER: Let me see your turn table and raise you one. (Laughter.)

Q I just want to figure out how to say this right.

MR. FLEISCHER: But the point I'm making here and what the President is saying here is can you imagine a day or a time when the President of the United States would not speak out about a nation that harbors the leaders of Iraq? After we just went to war with Iraq, for another nation to take them in? Of course we're going to say what we're saying, and I'm not going to go beyond and define it any more specifically or not. We have made the point diplomatically to the leaders of Syria and it's important for them to listen to the point. I'm not going to define it beyond that.

Q Here's what I hear -- what I think I hear what you're saying is that you've delivered these strong messages to Syria to change and to deliver up these leaders, et cetera. But it sounds like what you're looking at is diplomacy or bilateral conversations and that sort of thing. And that you're specifically, while not taking it off the table, you're not trying to put the emphasis there like North Korea -- the emphasis -- you've never taken it off, but the emphasis has always been on diplomatic solutions.

And I want to be sure I know what you all are trying to say to us so that we can accurately report it.

MR. FLEISCHER: I think you have it, you understand what it is --

Q What is your intention in terms of Syria?

MR. FLEISCHER: -- it's everything I have said before. I'm not going to refine it any further.

Q So it is diplomacy that is the solution, as far as the White House is concerned right now? Which would also be consistent with what Britain has said.

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm just not going to refine it any further than I have. Ken.

Q Why not?

MR. FLEISCHER: Ken.

Q Why not clarify it for us? This is important.

MR. FLEISCHER: Because this is our approach.

Q But people are afraid that there might be another war in Syria. I mean, why not --

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not sure people have come to that conclusion. Ken.

Q Two questions. One concerning the Pentagon. The Pentagon seems to be exercising great sway over events, including some areas that aren't directly connected with military action and are not traditionally associated with the Pentagon. Is the White House concerned, is the President concerned about if an impression is being created of a kind of militarization of American foreign policy?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'd just differ with the characterization. The President knows that we've got, number one, a war is that underway. And of course, if there's a war underway, the Pentagon is going to be lead agency fighting the war. And that's why we've won, is thanks to the Pentagon. And that's why we're winning. But there are a whole area of issues that get discussed directly with the President on a variety of matters. And that's why we have a National Security Council meeting every day. I report it to you every day. I don't go into the details of what they discuss every day, but as you know, Secretary Powell, the National Security Council advisor -- National Security Advisor, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, is there. It's a broad group of people that meets.

Q Let me try one more on Syria. You said earlier that Syria needs to seriously ponder the implications of their actions. Do we also want Syria to seriously ponder the implications of the American military success in Iraq?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm just not going to go into any of these. I understand what you are looking for -- or trying to avoid looking for. I'm just not going to go down every road with that type of precision. I think it is very understandable from a human point of view, from a human rights point of view, and from the point of view of protecting the newly-found freedom for the Iraqi people that Syria not engage in this type of behavior.

Q I understand that. What I'm asking you is, do we want Syria -- in its decision-making process, as they ponder the implications of all these things -- to factor in what happened in Iraq?

MR. FLEISCHER: As I said, Bashar Assad is a young leader. He will make his decisions. We hope he makes the right decisions. He has a variety of factors that he will have to consider.

Q **Ari, to go back to the budget** -- I mean, obviously, you're not really accepting the \$350 billion --

MR. FLEISCHER: Correct.

Q -- as a done deal. Presumably, that's because you believe that's too low a figure to help the economy. Could you spell out the scenario of just why that's not enough?

MR. FLEISCHER: If you take a look at the economy today and compare it to the economy at the time the President announced the jobs program, which was at the level of \$726 billion, we have not yet seen sufficient improvement in the economy that suggests it is time to shrink the size of the tax cut, or shrink the number of jobs created for the American people because the economy's present condition demands congressional action. It demands action like the President recommended, not less action.

If the economy had dramatically improved to the point where fewer jobs need to be created, or less action was called for, that might be one thing. The economy has not gotten to that point. So from an economic, job-creating point of view, stepping backward from the President's proposal for jobs and

growth is the exact wrong remedy for people who seek work.

Q So based on that, if Congress stays with \$350 billion, they'll be responsible for keeping the economy from recovering?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, this is a collaborative process, let's wait and see what the ultimate outcome is. We are fortunate in that Congress is moving earlier than usual. As I mentioned, it's only the sixth time in 28 years that Congress has completed its budget resolution as early as it did. Now comes the harder part, the tax-writing phase of this. And that's where the real aid is delivered to people who are looking for work and for economic growth.

I remind you that in all the private sector forecasts about growth this year, they have all baked into their cake the assumption that Congress will pass a sizable amount of tax relief. Failure to get it done at a sizable level will mean less growth, less jobs.

Q **Ari, two questions**, please. First, when you speak of the leaders, Iraqi leaders who may go or have gone to Syria, are you talking about the 55 that have been in that deck of cards that is circulating, that number?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's just as I indicated earlier. It's leaders, and I'm not going to give names or define them any more specifically than that.

Q **Second question, Ari**. Just a few days ago from that podium, you said that the meeting, the visit of President Bush to Canada was on because it was very important for the relations between both countries, neighboring countries. Now it has been postponed or put off.

MR. FLEISCHER: Correct.

Q At the time you said that, the President was very busy conducting the war and the whole economic thing. What has changed between now and then, that that visit has been postponed?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think it was just an assessment that was made by the President, by his National Security Advisor, in consultation with Canadian officials, about whether the meeting would be able to proceed. As you know, every meeting is on until the announcement is made that it is no longer on. And so, as they examined the situation, they mutually came to the decision.

Q Could it be something Mr. Chretien said that brought about this change?

MR. FLEISCHER: No. I think it's the reason that were laid out in the news release.

Q **Ari, in his State of the Union address**, the President said that he would not pass current problems on to future Congresses and future generations. There are an awful lot of independent analysts, budgetary analysts, out there who say that any kind of tax cut package like he's proposed would do just that, in terms of federal deficits; and that the deficits generated by this plan would far outweigh any economic growth that we've got, particularly now given the war in Iraq and the costs associated with that. Does the President believe that if the Congress passes a package like his, there won't be long-term financial consequences for future Congresses?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think there are two schools of thought when it comes to this type of issue, about deficits and growth. And the President is squarely on the side of the growth school. There are

some who believe that the best way to eliminate deficits is to, one, raise taxes, which the President will never subscribe to. There are others who still subscribe to the raised tax school. And there are others who believe that tax cuts should not be passed if you have a deficit because you have a deficit.

The President believes that the best way to create growth and to create jobs and, therefore, reduce the deficit, is through tax cuts, tax-cutting policies, particularly the 100 percent exclusion on dividends and also the other accelerations of the tax cuts that the President has sought. And that's the side of the debate that he comes down on.

Of course, there are others who disagree with the President on that. Some of them happen to be economists. The President has many economists who think what he is doing is the right thing to do. You've met with them, many of you, yourselves. He's met with many of them here at the White House and we made them available to you.

Q So he doesn't agree with all these forecasts that say, yes, there will be growth created by this, but not enough to offset the deficits?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, clearly, as I just indicated. If you take a look at the blue chip estimates, which is probably some of the biggest collection of private sector economists from all stripes, they have baked into their predictions for economic growth the fact that Congress will pass an economic growth package.

Q Some version --

MR. FLEISCHER: Some version, correct. Some version of it. And if you take that --

Q That --

MR. FLEISCHER: Correct. And if you take that out, they are predicting less growth. And as we all know, if there's less growth, there are fewer jobs. And the President is focused on jobs for the American people. And one of the worst things you can do for next generations, if you want to talk about what you'll leave a next generation, is to leave fathers who are unemployed for their families. The President's focus -- or mothers who are unemployed -- and the President's focus is on making sure we have jobs in our economy.

Q **On Syria, in a peace talk**, is the Syrian track part of the peace talks? And does the U.S. believe that Israel has to leave the Golan Heights?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the road map lays out a timing and a process for many of these decisions to be made by the parties. This is part of the political talks that deal with the exact borders for Israel. This is part of the process. What's important is to get to the process so these issues can be addressed.

Q Does the Bush administration have a preference of --

MR. FLEISCHER: No, this is all part of the process.

Q Ari, if I could just come back to the tax cut. Does the President consider the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee somebody who keeps his word?

MR. FLEISCHER: I would never make any statement about any of the 535 members of Congress to the contrary.

Q I mean, you're basically -- so, that's a "yes"? So how can you say yes, and make the statement that you said --

MR. FLEISCHER: Because I think you're turning it on a false choice.

Q No, but you're assuming that it's still possible to go to \$550 billion, but if he keeps his word, it won't.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's why it's a false choice, because many members of Congress believe in things, fight for things, and not everything everybody believes in and fights for gets agreed to. That's why compromises are forged as part of an institution with 535 people. If every time any one member of Congress said, this is the final outcome, well, then we would never have anything done in the Congress. That's why the President believes you have to work together with all members of the Congress, and that's why he's going to continue to fight for the jobs package.

Q Right, but the Conference Committee is where most of the country stuff gets decided, as you well know, having worked on the Hill, and he's going to be the chairman of the Conference Committee, unless -- barring some unforeseen circumstance. And as that --

MR. FLEISCHER: And I've sat at enough conference committees to know that they have a number of influences on what the ultimate outcome of the conference is. And the members of the conference are there to represent the 100 members of the Senate and the 435 members of the House, and the leadership plays a role.

Q So he might change his mind?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think you're trying to say again that any one member of Congress can, just by virtue of saying something, create reality, and that's now how it always works.

Q So you agree with the Speaker that he's irrelevant?

MR. FLEISCHER: Go ahead.

Q A lot's been said and written about the coverage of this particular war. Is the President satisfied with the embedding system that was instituted, and does it appear that it will continue if something else occurs?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I have not specifically talked to the President about the embedding since the war began. So I think it's an interesting question. I can tell you this, from my point of view and from the point of view of those who talked to the President about these issues, we do think the embedding process worked very well. This has been a Pentagon-led effort, a Pentagon decision. And from the point of view of the White House, it's been a very good one.

Q Ari, does the new axis of France, Germany, and Russia concern the President?

MR. FLEISCHER: As always, nations have the right to have conversations and relations with each other as we approach these issues. It's no secret or surprise that Germany, France, and Russia had a different position on the use of force heading into the war with Iraq. But, in any case, no matter what happens after the war, we will continue to work our relations with not only those countries, but other countries around the world. There are many nations in Eastern Europe that have thoughts about how France conducted its diplomacy, for example. And I think that different nations will react to each other in

different directions.

Q On the Middle East, is the President prepared to pressure Israel on the settlement issue, or is it your view that you'll put it out there, and if they don't like it, that's fine?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, the President made clear on June 24th that all parties in the Middle East have responsibilities, and that includes Israel. The Palestinian Authority has responsibilities, Israel has responsibilities, and the Arab nations in the region have responsibilities. The President believes that the best way to accomplish a real, lasting peace where Israel and a Palestine can be created, and Israel is side-by-side in security with Palestine, is for all three parties to honor their obligations. So, yes, the President will work with Israel on those obligations just as he'll work with the other two parties.

Q **Ari, what did the President ask the** leaders of Saudi Arabia and Egypt to do about this Syria issue?

MR. FLEISCHER: Those are the discussions I had with the officials who participated in the phone call, so I don't have anything for you beyond that.

Q So there is no indication that that subject came up?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I know it came up at many other levels and other channels. I don't know that it came up to the presidential level.

Q If I could ask you to answer a question that you posed a few minutes ago, why would Syria harbor Iraqi fugitives?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think when you take a look at why nations find themselves on the State Department list of terrorist states, it's because they made bad choices and bad decisions. And what the President is hopeful of is that in the outcome of this war, nations will examine the decisions they have previously made, and hopefully make new decisions based on new reality in the Middle East.

Gone is the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Next, hopefully, is a re-examination by Syria and, perhaps, others about how they conduct their affairs and how diplomacy is conducted and whether or not they believe they should continue to be terrorist states or not. And an early indication of Syria's actions would be whether or not they harbor these Iraqi leaders.

Q So you're not going to answer the question as to why they wouldn't?

MR. FLEISCHER: I can't put myself in the head of somebody who acts in way that harbors terrorists or is engaged in support for terror the way Syria has. They're the only ones who can answer a question like that. I can't answer why people make bad choices.

Q **Mr. Fleischer, any new communication** with the Turkish government regarding the Kurdish people of -- Iraq? And how do you comment on new approach of cooperation among Turkey, Syria and Iran vis-a-vis on this issue?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's a very interesting question about what we hope will be a peaceful future in a region that has been marked by ethnic tensions. And I think if you see what is happening so far leading up to where we are, this has been an issue that the State Department and others have worked very hard on with quite a bit of success, working with Turkish officials and working with Kurdish officials to maintain a peaceful outcome so Turkey did not cross the border. A humanitarian crisis was averted. And

we will continue in that vein. So we have already seen some good signs of success in managing relations between the Turks and the Kurds. We will continue because it remains a very important issue. It will not go away.

Q About the cooperation with the three countries?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we will see. I think it's still a little early to measure what ultimate cooperation the outcome will be.

Q Ari, Lawrence Eagleberger, the Secretary of State under George Bush, Sr., told the BBC yesterday, "If George Bush, Jr., decided he was going to turn the troops loose on Syria and Iran, after that he would last in office about 15 minutes. In fact, if President Bush were to try that even now, I would think he ought to be impeached. You can't get away with that sort of thing in this democracy." Can he get away with that sort of thing?

MR. FLEISCHER: I've answered that question previously up here.

Q Thank you.

MR. FLEISCHER: Thank you.

END 1:15 P.M. EDT