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PRESS GAGGLE

BY

SCOTT McCLELLAN

James S. Brady Briefing Room

10:00 A.M. EST

MR. McCLELLAN: The President this morning called President Kwasniewski. This was a previously scheduled call. The President called to thank President Kwasniewski for his leadership and support in the war on terrorism and in Iraq. Both leaders agreed that in the wake of the attacks in Madrid, Poland and the United States must continue to stand firmly together in fighting terrorism. President Kwasniewski reaffirmed Poland's commitment to the coalition in Iraq. The leaders also discussed Russia and the Ukraine and underscored the importance of strengthening democratic institutions in both states.

Following that, the President called President Chirac -- where's Jean-Louis, is he in back? Jean-Louis, listen up. (Laughter.) The President confirmed that he -- President Bush confirmed that he looks forward to attending the 60th anniversary D-Day celebration in Normandy on June 6th. The President thanked President Chirac for his strong statements of support for fighting terrorism in the aftermath of the Madrid terrorist attacks. President Chirac expressed that France shares our commitment to showing strength and resolve in the fight against terrorism. And the President raised -- President Bush, that is -- raised the importance of forgiving the vast majority of Iraq's foreign debt.

And then, Bill, the President --

Q Had his usual security briefings.

MR. McCLELLAN: Okay, thank you. (Laughter.) The President will be taping his radio address shortly -- the war on terrorism in Iraq being the topic. Then the President will be making remarks in the East Room on the war on terrorism and Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. I gave you a little bit of a read on that yesterday and Condi was on some of the morning shows today talking about it, as well.

I expect there to be more than 80 countries represented in the audience, with either ambassadors or other senior diplomats from those countries.

Then this afternoon the President and Mrs. Bush will go to Walter Reed Army Medical Center to visit with soldiers, wounded soldiers and their families. It will include soldiers from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

And State Department has a briefing at 1:00 p.m. today. And on Ask The White House, we have Jim Wilkinson to discuss progress in Iraq, and that will be at 3:30 p.m.

Q Does the President have anything new to announce in this speech?

MR. McCLELLAN: You lost out.

Q Darn. (Laughter.)

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I gave you the general preview of it yesterday. In terms of announcements, I don't know what you're looking for. This is a --

Q News.

MR. McCLELLAN: -- broad speech.

Q We're looking for news.

MR. McCLELLAN: This is a broad speech on the war on terrorism. I think you will find that it is an important speech, giving some context to the war on terrorism and talking about its scope. And I think yesterday I covered some of the general topics of it that you all already have.

Q Do you have anything from the search in Pakistan --

Q Scott, the President's call to the Polish President --

MR. McCLELLAN: You lost again. (Laughter.) Terry.

Q Do you have anything from the search in Pakistan --

MR. McCLELLAN: But we'll get you next.

Q -- for the al Qaeda leaders?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry?

Q Anything about the search in Pakistan-Afghanistan border?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, no update beyond what Condi was saying on the shows. Obviously, there is, as she said, a fierce battle going on in that region, in a region that's known for al Qaeda activity. And that's what we know. We know what you all see.

Q Does the United States know who the target is?

MR. McCLELLAN: No.

Q How do we know it's not Osama bin Laden?

MR. McCLELLAN: You've heard what Pakistani officials have said, and that's the same thing that we know.

Q They keep saying it's not Osama bin Laden. How would anyone know that?

MR. McCLELLAN: Ask the Pakistani authorities. Again --

Q We've been hearing that from the U.S. government. Do you guys know where Osama bin Laden is?

MR. McCLELLAN: We don't know who -- who it is that might be in there, or whether or not it's a high-value target.

Q Is the U.S. helping out in this operation?

MR. McCLELLAN: It's a Pakistani operation. General Myers and Condi both -- both spoke to that.

Q You've got assets there, don't you?

Q Did you just say that the U.S. does not know whether there's a high-value target there?

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes, that's right. And Condi said that earlier, as well.

Q Why aren't you helping out? (Laughter.)

MR. McCLELLAN: We know what you've all heard from Pakistani officials.

Q Why aren't you helping out?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we work closely and cooperatively with the government of Pakistan in the war on terrorism. And if there are requests, we're more than willing to help provide whatever assistance we can.

Q Scott, did the Polish President tell President Bush that he was misinterpreted or -- in the comments yesterday, when it was reported that he said that the U.S. misled --

MR. McCLELLAN: President Kwasniweski brought up the issue, and he essentially referred back to what was said in there, the statement that was put out by his office, that he was -- which said he was referring to Saddam Hussein.

Q The statement that was put out did not say that he was referring to Saddam Hussein, it just said that --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, the translation I have, it says, "The President of the Republic of Poland reminded that Saddam Hussein misled the world in believing that he had had the weapons of mass destruction and might use them. This was the essential reason to take up the mission in Iraq, within a common strategy of a multinational coalition in the war on terrorism." Poland is a strong ally in the war on terrorism. And we appreciate the strong support that they have provided in Iraq.

Q Is that what the U.S. now believes, that Saddam misled the world about WMDs?

MR. McCLELLAN: This was --

Q No, I know that, but is that what the U.S. believes?

MR. McCLELLAN: It was Saddam's -- and the President will talk about this in his remarks, I believe -- it was Saddam Hussein's choice. And he continued to choose defiance.

Q Isn't this apples and oranges? Aren't you translating something there that wasn't what was said yesterday?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm just reading from the statement of the Chancellory of the President of the Republic of Poland.

Q Yesterday's comments were a translation of what he said to reporters, not some statement that was put out. So we're not really talking about the same thing. He can say, on the one hand, that Saddam Hussein misled. But apparently that's not what he said to reporters yesterday.

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I can only tell you what his office has said in their statement.

Q Scott, was there some discussion between the two Presidents this morning as to the timetable of Polish troop withdrawal? According to one wire report today, which was datelined out of Warsaw, and it said, an aide says. Presumably this was based on what an aide to Kwasniweski said -- I wonder if you could confirm it or not -- that the Polish President told President Bush that Polish troops will stay in as long as needed.

MR. McCLELLAN: I said, he reaffirmed his commitment to coalition efforts in Iraq.

Q Does that mean that they'll stay as long as needed?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think his office made a statement to that effect after the call. We appreciate that commitment.

Q Turning to the home front. When Judge Pickering got his recess appointment, we were told Judge Gonzales' office had sounded out others, they were not interested. Then Mr. Pryor was named as a judge. With Congress coming up for the recess appointment, will the President -- for its recess, will the President make similar recess appointments of judges?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I would never speculate about that, but obviously we continue to urge the Senate to give these highly qualified nominees an up-or-down vote and to quit -- for the Senate Democrats to quit playing politics when a majority of the Senate supports these nominees.

Q So there's no chance of a recess appointment over Easter?

MR. McCLELLAN: I just don't speculate on any personnel matters like that.

Go ahead --

Q What do you say about the claims that are printed today in the media that Richard Foster, the Medicare analyst, is now stating that he believes the White House was behind the pressure that was brought to bear on him not to share his analysis of the true cost of the Medicare prescription drug plan with leaders in Congress?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think, one, we've been through this. I think HHS and Secretary Thompson have discussed this matter. But I also noticed, according to the news report, that Mr. Foster acknowledged he had no evidence to support his allegation. And I think Secretary Thompson has also spoken to what the CMS actuary was looking at during the whole Medicare debate.

Q So you deny that any pressure was brought to bear in any way, shape or form?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm not aware of anyone at the White House being involved in what has been alleged. I mean, the bottom line is that the CBO estimate was the only one that mattered. CBO is the official scorekeeper and Congress, by law, is required to use the CBO estimate. And keep in mind what Secretary Thompson has said in recent testimony, that this legislation was going through many changes, significant changes, all the way up to the very end.

And the CBO is the only real-time scorekeeper throughout that process.

Q Has anyone checked to see if anybody at the White House was involved?

MR. McCLELLAN: Do you have something to bring to my attention on it, Keith?

Q Just his statement, on wondering --

MR. McCLELLAN: There's nothing I'm aware of, so --

Q Do you think it's necessary at this point to check to see if anybody --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, again, he acknowledged that he had no evidence to support his allegation.

Q One other on that, these are administration estimates. Keeping aside the question of whether anybody was threatened with firing, would it be inappropriate for the administration to decide to keep its own estimates to itself? Is there anything inappropriate about that?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, one, again, we've said all along that the CMS actuary was looking at different aspects of legislation, as it was moving through the process. Secretary Thompson testified -- he said back in early February, before Congress, "We should remember that the legislation changed significantly in the final days, and we did not have real-time analysis from our actuaries on the cost of those final changes. We did make conferees and others aware that we expected our final score to be higher." He testified to that before Congress.

Q But what I'm trying to discern is, is the White House or the administration under any obligation to share its own information with Congress?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think -- yes, but I think unfortunately what's happening here is that there are some Democrats who are so wrapped up in using Medicare as a political issue that they are willing to take steps to undermine our efforts to implement these important improvements for our seniors. They are so wrapped up in using it for a political issue that they don't want anybody to get credit for this. We passed historic reforms and improvements to Medicare for our seniors so that they can have the choices and benefits that members of Congress have. This was about allowing seniors to be able to choose the kind of care, modern care that meets their individual needs. And we are focused on moving forward on implementing this legislation.

Q Do you not -- do you not know the answer to my question --

Q What about -- what about the Republicans who are upset?

Q -- or you just don't want to answer it?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, you're getting into hypotheticals and trying to get me to speculate on different things.

Q I'm just saying, general policy, should that information that a Medicare actuary comes up with, are you under an obligation to share that?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I can tell you -- I'll tell you what happened -- I'll tell you -- I'd point back to you what happened. Secretary Thompson pointed it out in testimony. I just read to you from his testimony. So I think what you're asking doesn't reflect what happened. And keep in mind that CBO is the only estimate that matters, and CBO continues to stand by

the \$400 billion.

Q How did --

MR. McCLELLAN: Go ahead, Alex -- go head, Mark. I'm sorry, let me go to Mark, and then I'll get you.

Q One -- just a quick one. How does the IG investigation, or trying to find out whether there's any truth to what he says, how does that undermine the efforts to implement the law?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, there are some Democrats that are --

Q You just said, undermining efforts to implement this law.

MR. McCLELLAN: -- that continue to try to divert attention away from the important efforts that are underway to implement these improvements for our seniors. And let's be honest about that. It's very clear that they've -- time and time again, instead of working with us to implement these improvements, some Democrats are trying to shift attention away from these important improvements because they want to continue to use it as a political issue. They are so concerned about anyone getting credit for this, that our seniors are the ones that are lost in this debate.

Q But, Scott, Secretary Thompson agrees that there should be an investigation.

MR. McCLELLAN: I told Alex, I'd go to him. Alex, go ahead.

Q There's been some reports that --

MR. McCLELLAN: And I said the other day that that's an appropriate step, it's a serious allegation, an appropriate step for him to ask the IG to look into the matter. There appears to be a dispute between the former CMS administrator and the CMS actuary. So the IG at HHS is looking into that matter.

But let's be honest about what's going on here with some Senate -- with some of the Democrats.

Q Scott, there have been some reports that Islamic extremists may be behind some of the unrest in the Balkans. Do you have any information that would -- about any credence to that? And, also, what is the U.S.'s response at this point to the killings that are going on between the people in Kosovo and the Serbs?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, obviously, we continue to monitor the situation very closely. We are working with our allies in NATO to make sure that we have all the resources necessary deployed to address the situation. We certainly believe the Kosovo force is fully up to the task at hand. And we continue to call for an end to all violence and we continue to call on everyone to refrain from further violence.

Q What about the specific allegation that Islamic extremists are --

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't have anything on that.

Q Okay.

Q What about the U.N.? Is the U.N. up to the task, though? What does it say that six years after this war, this province placed under U.N. protection is still far from peaceful, far from reconciled with its own history?

MR. McCLELLAN: That's why we are continuing to work with NATO to

help provide stability in the region. That's where our focus is right now.

Q Is the U.N. falling down here?

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't know -- right now our focus is on the immediate events going on in Kosovo. I'm not going to get into an analysis of all the past history of it.

Q This is about India. Something which was stated by Secretary of State Colin Powell yesterday that has created some confusion. I just wonder if you know, is there any proposal to include India as a major, non-NATO ally? Is there any proposal?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'll look into that. We can try to get back to you; we'll get our NSC office to get back to you on that.

Q Scott, back on the conversation with the Polish President, was that previously scheduled before his comments yesterday?

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes, that's why I said that up front, because I knew you all would ask that question. It was actually scheduled a few days ago, and it was related to the -- you know, talking to him about in the aftermath of the attacks in Spain.

Q And when Dr. Rice said, I think in an interview yesterday, she had talked to the Poles yesterday -- did they also express to her in that conversation that the President was actually referring to Saddam Hussein?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think they have expressed to us exactly what you have seen them put in their statements, as well.

And I need to go to the week ahead -- Jean-Louis, you weren't up

here.

Q Will the President go only to Normandy, or will he travel to Paris the day before?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we'll keep you posted as we get closer on his schedule.

Q Let's go to Paris. (Laughter.)

MR. McCLELLAN: Good question. (Laughter.)

Q Let's go to Paris. (Laughter.)

MR. McCLELLAN: Who wants Paris? Who wants Paris?

Q Not me.

MR. McCLELLAN: Oh, that's -- who doesn't want Paris? (Laughter.) Don't report that. Don't report that. It's a fine place. (Laughter.)

Q Scott, do you know if the French and German ambassadors are going to be here today, and Russians, Canadians?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I believe they'll have representatives from France and Germany here, yes -- and Russia, I believe so, as well.

Q Can we get a list?

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes, we'll get you a list. We're working on getting you a list.

Q But not the ambassadors?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, I don't know who it is. We'll get you the list and you'll have that very shortly here.

Q How long was the conversation?

MR. McCLELLAN: With President Kwasniewski?

Q Yes.

MR. McCLELLAN: Fifteen minutes.

Q Week ahead.

MR. McCLELLAN: On Monday, the President will participate in a photo opportunity with the recipients of the Public Safety Officer Medals of Valor. That will be still coverage in the Oval.

On Tuesday, the President meets with the President of Columbia in the Oval. He will meet with his Cabinet later that day. Then he makes remarks to the NCAA sports champions. I don't know if anyone saw the Texas game last night?

And then on Wednesday, the President will make remarks at the Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony honoring Dr. Dorothy Height. And then he will make remarks to the United States Hispanic

Chamber of Commerce. This is all in Washington. And then he will attend the Radio and Television Correspondents Association Dinner that evening.

On Thursday, the President participates in a conversation on ownership in New Hampshire. Then he will attend a Bush-Cheney 2004 reception in Boston.

And on Friday, the President travels to Albuquerque to make remarks on home ownership before traveling on to Crawford where he will remain until Monday, March 29th.

And the President will see you shortly. Thanks.

END

10:17 A.M. EST