



For Immediate Release  
Office of the Press Secretary  
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## Press Gaggle with Scott McClellan

Aboard Air Force One  
En Route Muskegon, Michigan

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10:30 A.M. EDT

MR. McCLELLAN: All right, let me run through the **President's day**. He had his usual briefings this morning. In the Secretary Ridge part of the briefing, he also received an update on Hurricane Ivan. When we land in Muskegon, Michigan, the President will participate on a "Focus on Health with President Bush" event. This is really where he'll participate in a conversation on health care with some participants that are going to be on stage with him. It will include a community health center representative, two beneficiaries of health savings accounts, and a small business owner who supports associated health plans.

And then, following that, we've got the remarks at the Holland, Michigan Victory 2004 rally, and then remarks at a Battle Creek, Michigan Victory 2004 rally before the President goes to overnight in Aurora, Colorado tonight.

Hope everybody had a good weekend. That's all I've got.

Q What about the assault --

Q -- talk -- (inaudible) --

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you can expect he'll talk about some of the contrast on how we approach **health care**. The President will focus on his plan for strengthening health care and making it more affordable and accessible, and it's a philosophy based on a patient-driven system where patients have

more control over their health care. And it stands in stark contrast to his opponent who wants a government-run system, where the government will pick up -- the taxpayers will pick up more of the tab. So I think you can expect he'll talk about some of the contrasts in his remarks.

Q What do you think of Senator Kerry's remarks about **North Korea** in today's New York Times?

MR. McCLELLAN: Do you have a specific question about it?

Q Well, he said it's become a nuclear nightmare because the administration has kept its eye on Iraq instead of North Korea.

MR. McCLELLAN: And Senator Kerry would have us return to the failed Clinton administration policy. That failed policy allowed North Korea to dupe the United States. It would be the wrong approach to go down that road again. We see where that leads. The President has all of North Korea's neighbors actively engaged in a -- six-party talks to achieve a diplomatic solution to North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. The goal is the complete and verifiable end of North Korea's nuclear program -- not a freeze.

Q Scott, on the weapons --

Q -- (inaudible) --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, the 1994 agreed to framework. North Korea did not abide by that framework. They said that they would agree to a freeze on their nuclear weapons programs. And we found that they, in fact, did not freeze their nuclear weapons programs.

Q What have you guys done to make North Korea any less of a threat? Aren't they as much of a threat now as they --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, that failed bilateral approach is the wrong way to go. What we did was the President got all the other nations in the region engaged in sending a clear message to North Korea that it needs to end its -- that it needs to abandon its nuclear ambitions. All five countries in the region are sending a clear message to North Korea, and they're all saying that they want a nuclear-free -- nuclear weapons-free peninsula.

Q Scott, where is that getting you?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we're continuing to make progress through the six-party talks. Those talks are ongoing. We expect that another round of talks will be coming up. And now, for the first time, you have all those nations in the neighborhood actively engaged --

Q Right, but that's not a new concept. The point is, you don't have any tangible progress.

MR. McCLELLAN: -- in a solution -- what this President is doing is confronting all the threats we face.

And there are different strategies for confronting different threats. But we are pursuing a plan that will lead to the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, not a freeze.

Q Besides talk, name one piece of progress that you've made.

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry?

Q Besides talk, name one piece of progress --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we've put forward, now, a dismantlement plan in the last round of talks. We're waiting on North Korea's response to those talks.

Q -- piece of progress --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, what we saw over the last decade, under the 1994 agreed to framework was that North Korea had not abandoned its nuclear weapons ambitions. They were continuing to pursue nuclear weapons. So that policy was a failed approach. That's why the President went to the other nations in the region. China has been very involved in these efforts. China has stepped forward now to say, we want a nuclear weapons-free peninsula. And they've been actively engaged in those talks. So we're continuing to work through those talks and make progress to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons ambition.

Q In four years, have you been able to remove one nuclear weapon from North Korea or reduce the threat at all?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry, what?

Q In four years, have you been able to reduce the threat at all in North Korea? Are they any less dangerous now?

MR. McCLELLAN: It's an issue that this President is leading the way to confront, by bringing all five parties in the region together in the six-party approach.

Q Scott, how do you respond to Senator Kerry's charge that letting the **assault weapons ban** lapse will put more weapons in the hands of terrorists?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, first of all, the President's position is very well-known on the assault weapons ban. I think it's a false attack -- another false attack from Senator Kerry. The issue here really goes to what are we doing to reduce violence committed with guns. And the best way to deter and combat violence committed with guns is to vigorously enforce our laws. And this administration has a strong record of vigorously and strictly enforcing our laws, and stepping up prosecutions of crimes committed with guns. We've seen an increase of 68 percent in prosecutions of crimes committed with guns under this administration.

So we welcome a debate on that issue. Violent crime is at its lowest rate in 30 years under this President. We initiated the project Safe Neighborhoods, a \$1 billion project to hire new state and federal prosecutors to combat violence committed with guns and prosecute offenses. And we also have a variety of grants to states so that states could improve their criminal history records for background checks.

Q Does the President agree with critics that the weapons -- assault weapons ban has been ineffective, hasn't made much of a difference?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, that was one of the reasons it was passed, that you pointed out, was to see if it would be effective about doing that. And that's why I pointed out that the best way to deter violence committed with guns is to vigorously prosecute crimes committed with guns.

Q Is the ban effective, or not?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I don't know that -- I think that's a question that other people are looking at, still.

Q Isn't it kind of disingenuous for the President to say that I'm for the assault weapons ban, but then not spend a nickle of his political capital to fight for it?

MR. McCLELLAN: I disagree. His position has always been well-known, and it's been clear going back to his first campaign for President.

Q That he was for the ban?

MR. McCLELLAN: For a reauthorization of the current ban.

Q Let me follow up on this point. For a guy who goes around the country and says, I say what I mean, and you should take me at my word -- so if he's for the ban, and he doesn't do a thing --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, keep in mind that the Congress is the one that sets the legislative timetable, and Congress has made clear that it's not going to be coming up. I think you've had leaders in Congress state that.

Q But the President didn't work for it to come up. I mean, nobody -- everybody understands how this process works. The President wants tax cuts, he lobbies all over the country --

MR. McCLELLAN: That's why the President has taken strong steps to make sure we are combating violence committed with guns. And that's why we have a strong record --

Q He was happy to let the authorization lapse, wasn't he?

MR. McCLELLAN: Oh, you know that's a ridiculous assertion.

Q Name one thing, one step that the President took to have the assault weapons ban reauthorized?

MR. McCLELLAN: That's why I said, Ron, his position has been very well-known. We've restated that position. It remains unchanged. But he does not set the legislative timetable. Members of Congress set the legislative timetable. And Congress has stated -- congressional leaders have stated that it's not going to come up for a vote.

Q Is there one congressman, one congressional leader who he has called in Congress, and said, please put it on the timetable?

MR. McCLELLAN: Let's debate the real issue here -- and we're proud to debate the record on combating violence committed with guns, because we have a strong record of strictly enforcing our laws and reducing crimes committed with guns, if you look at the record.

Q And the President has a strong record of lobbying very hard for legislation he truly supports. Name one person who he called to lobby on behalf of legislation.

MR. McCLELLAN: -- his position has been made well-known.

Q So there's nothing more he could have done to get the ban extended?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think members of Congress have stated -- congressional leaders have stated that it's not going to be coming up for a vote.

Q Has he ever mentioned it in a speech that you can remember, I mean, as he goes around the country, ever mentioned the assault weapons ban?

MR. McCLELLAN: Certainly we're going to continue to talk about the strong action that he's taken to combat violence committed with guns, Ben. I think that's the -- it goes to the real issue here. You brought up the issue of whether or not this was effective, in terms of the assault weapons ban. That's something that people have continued to debate. But this President has led when it comes to combating violence committed with guns. And so we welcome a discussion of the record.

Q I've heard him bring up lots of legislation he wants passed as he goes around the country. I've never heard him bring up, I want to see the assault weapons ban --

MR. McCLELLAN: No, he's made his position very well-known. So I disagree with that assertion.

Q Can you name one person who he's called on the Hill on behalf of this legislation?

MR. McCLELLAN: Look, members of Congress know his position very well, Ron.

Q So has he made a call to any of them?

MR. McCLELLAN: His position is very well-known, Ron, and members have known his position. And it's been discussed with members, too.

Q In terms of **Iraq**, the violence over the weekend, is there any indication that they might postpone elections, January elections?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think that was addressed yesterday by Secretary Powell and Dr. Rice. Prime Minister Allawi is committed to moving forward to holding elections in January. It's important that we continue -- when we talk about addressing the ongoing security threats, it's important that we not only help the Iraqis move forward by beefing up Iraqi forces and addressing those -- and partnering with them to address those ongoing threats, it's also important that we move forward on the political process because that helps defeat the enemies of freedom who want to derail the transition to democracy. And Prime Minister Allawi has made it very clear that he is determined to meet that timetable. And so we fully expect that that timetable will be met.

Q Tomorrow will the President, when he talks to the **National Guard**, bring up the accusations leveled at him by Democrats on his service?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think, first and foremost, this is an opportunity to go to the -- speak to the National Guard Association and thank all those men and women who serve in our National Guard. They are serving and sacrificing in the war on terrorism, and we're grateful for their sacrifice and we're grateful for what their families are doing.

In terms of a further preview on the speech, I'm not ready to get into that at this point. Maybe we can discuss it later in the day, though.

Q Does the President think that the attacks on him are attacks on the Guard?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, look, I think he's talked about that we should not denigrate those who serve in the National Guard, we should not denigrate their service. He's made that clear. In terms of this whole National Guard issue, we're not doing our own investigation to determine whether or not those documents were fabricated or authentic. I think experts and journalists have continued to look into the issue and have raised a number of questions. And these are serious questions that are being investigated by many news organizations and we look forward to seeing what those results are.

But in terms of going back to this issue, the timing of these old, recycled attacks is not in question. I mean, Democrats and the Kerry campaign are orchestrating these recycled attacks because he is falling behind in the polls. And that's clear. And that's been documented, too.

Q But, Scott, the **Democrats found not responding quickly in August to the swift boat ads hurt them**. Are you afraid the same thing, if you don't respond quickly to the National Guard ads --

MR. McCLELLAN: They're talking about continuing to flail away and engage in baseless attacks. The President is focused on the future and what his agenda is for leading this country forward for the next four years, and he's talking about the highest priorities of winning the war on terrorism and how you lead in the war on terrorism. And they're resorting to old, recycled attacks because they can't talk about their out-of-the-mainstream views.

Q -- so what you're saying, when these attacks are leveled, are those attacks on the people -- the **National Guard**? Are you making that tie?

MR. McCLELLAN: No. I think, Ron, you have to -- it depends on what specific attacks you're talking about. But certainly we should not denigrate the service of those in our National Guard. They are serving and sacrificing for an important cause in the war on terrorism.

Q But in questioning the President's service, is that criticism of people who serve in the Guard?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, that's orchestrated attacks -- recycled attacks by the Democrats, that's what that is.

END 10:44 A.M. EDT

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