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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
December 16, 2004

Press Briefing by Scott McClellan

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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12:48 P.M. EST

MR. McCLELLAN: Good afternoon, everybody. Today marks an important day in our nation's history. Today marks the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge. This is a time to remember and honor the more than 600,000 American soldiers who fought at the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium and Luxembourg . What began as a German surprise attack on December 16, 1944 , became the largest land battle involving U.S. troops in World War II, and ended with an allied victory on January 25, 1945 . We will be issuing a **proclamation** from the President on this later today. The proclamation will urge all Americans to observe the 60th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge.

And with that, I'll be glad to go to your questions.

Q Scott, the Democratic congressional leaders issued a statement today, saying that they're asking the President to come forward with a **Social Security** proposal that does not reduce Social Security funding, harm the middle class or cut guaranteed benefits. Is the President willing to go along with that request?

MR. McCLELLAN: There are no guaranteed benefits right now. That's an empty promise. Younger workers will not have the benefits that they are owed under the current Social Security system. The current Social Security system is unsustainable. That's why it needs to be fixed. The President had a good meeting recently with bipartisan leaders of Congress to talk about the problem and how we may move forward, working together, to solve the problem. And the President has outlined some clear principles. We're going to continue working in the spirit of bipartisanship to solve this problem, so that we don't pass this problem on to future generations. It's a problem that needs to be fixed, and the President is firmly committed to addressing it, as you heard earlier today.

Q I think you know what they mean by guaranteed Social Security benefits. There's an expectation and a promise now that people will receive a certain amount in retirement benefits. Are you saying that the President does not want to commit to not reducing benefits?

MR. McCLELLAN: We want them to realize a greater rate of return on their retirement benefits. That's why the President has proposed a new benefit, called a personal savings account. As I said, today's guaranteed benefits are an empty promise to our younger workers. And the President looks forward to working closely with members of Congress to get this done. It's a high priority. He had a good discussion about it earlier today at the economic conference. And he's going to continue reaching out to those who want to solve this problem and not pass it on.

Q Let me -- one final thing. You said that the President doesn't want to negotiate with himself about --

MR. McCLELLAN: The President said that.

Q He said that, you're right. But how does he negotiate with himself when he hasn't laid down a marker about what the specifics of his plan are? He's laid out some principles, but he hasn't said -- he hasn't filled in the blanks.

MR. McCLELLAN: A couple of things. Let's remember, there was a bipartisan Social Security Commission that the President appointed. It was led by Senator Moynihan. He was someone who was firmly committed to addressing this problem. That bipartisan commission put forward some innovative ideas to solve this problem. The President said that should be a guide for us, moving forward. It's going to be a guide for him, moving forward. He outlined some very clear principles for strengthening Social Security. And he remains committed to moving forward based on those principles, and we look forward to working with Congress to get this done.

Go ahead.

Q How can the President have an **economic conference** without having any labor representation? How is that possible?

MR. McCLELLAN: There was a broad cross section of people at this conference from various --

Q Are there any labor leaders there?

MR. McCLELLAN: -- from various sectors of the economy. We have worked closely with some groups who are committed to building upon the progress we've made to strengthening our economy, and to creating jobs. And the President --

Q Why weren't any labor leaders invited to this conference?

MR. McCLELLAN: Okay, let me move on because you're not letting me respond.

Q Do you have an answer for that?

Q It's a good question.

MR. McCLELLAN: If you want to ask, I'll respond, because she's not letting me respond. But I'll come back to you if you want to let me respond later.

Go ahead.

Q Okay, respond right now.

MR. McCLELLAN: The conference represents a broad cross section of individuals from various sectors of the economy. These individuals put forward a number of good ideas. We welcome those ideas for moving forward on strengthening our economy and creating jobs. As I pointed out earlier this week, these are people that, as a general sense, share our philosophy for a pro-growth, pro-jobs approach to our economy. And they have different ideas about how we move forward on some of the initiatives that the President proposed. And we will continue reaching out to all people from across the economic sector who want to build upon the great progress we've made.

We've created 2.4 million jobs -- more than 2.4 million jobs over the last 15 months. The unemployment rate is below the average of the '70s, '80s, and '90s. It's now at 5.4 percent. But there's more to do. There are certain parts of the country that are still struggling, and that's why the President is committed to getting this done. And that's why this conference helps highlight some of the long-term challenges that our economy faces, and it helps highlight the need to train our workers to fill the high paying, high growth jobs of the 21st century.

Q Do you realize what you've said, and that you have not --

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm going to keep moving. I'll come back to you if I can.

Q You have not touched a major sector of this society in terms of the economy.

MR. McCLELLAN: I'll come back to you if I have more time. Go ahead. This isn't a debate.

Q Back on **Social Security** . You talked about younger workers, and talked about how the President doesn't want to pass problems on to future generations, but you've also said the White House supports borrowing what is likely to be a trillion dollars or more -- as you put it up-front financing.

MR. McCLELLAN: No, I think I said that's one of the things you could look at. Some senators have -- or some members of Congress have put forward a different mix of options for that up-front transition financing. And I said that's something you would look at. But we have not endorsed a specific proposal at this point. That's something we want to work closely with members of Congress on as we move forward.

Q Why isn't borrowing a trillion dollars passing something on to younger workers in the next generation?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, Terry, first of all, when we've talked about the transition financing, you have to keep it at -- keep in mind that right now, the cost of doing nothing is more than \$10 trillion. That's the cost of Social Security's guarantee to America's workers and the cost of permanently fixing it.

So we've talked about moving some of the cost forward for the transition financing and significantly bringing it down. That's what we're committed to doing, is strengthening Social Security and bringing down the overall cost and making it sustainable for younger workers. No one at or near retirement will see any changes. That's a commitment of the President. But we need to strengthen it for younger workers. And the way to do that is to also include personal savings accounts as part of the comprehensive solution that the President is pursuing.

Q But shouldn't those younger workers also know -- shouldn't you tell them honestly that the borrowing is something they're going to have to pay for and it would be --

MR. McCLELLAN: Terry, we're going to continue to talk about this and work closely with members of Congress as we move forward. And we'll be talking about more specifics as we move down the road to get this done. Right now, the President believes it's important that we all understand that we have a real problem here with Social Security. It's a problem that we need to address now so that we don't pass it on. And he has made it very clear that he wants to work in a bipartisan way to get this done. That's why he's listening to what members of Congress have to say about how we move forward on the principles that he outlined.

Q Right now your statement is that Social Security goes insolvent, as you put it, in 38 years.

MR. McCLELLAN: The Social Security trustees state that it goes insolvent in 2042. I think in 2018 is when the cost, the taxes are exceeding -- the benefits are not going to be being paid at the full amount that they're --

Q Ten years ago, the same Social Security trustees said that the system would go insolvent in 35 years. So here we are, 10 years on, and they've actually moved it forward three years. Why is the system in crisis?

MR. McCLELLAN: Because I just pointed out the cost of doing nothing. The cost of doing nothing is significant. That's why we need to solve it now. I think many people look at the system -- we've continued to do tax increases and that hasn't fixed the problem. We continue to go back through this. We did it in the '80s, yet here it comes up again. And that's why we need to move forward now. But let me correct that, on the "2018" is when the system's

tax revenue will exceed the system's -- I'm sorry -- the annual spending on Social Security will exceed the system's tax revenue in 2018.

Q The President said he was going to offer a tough **budget** next year. What does he have in mind?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we're continuing to move forward on the budget. We'll be releasing that next year, early in the session of Congress. The President has worked closely with members of Congress to bring down the rate of growth in non-defense, non-homeland security discretionary spending. That's an important step. We also need to work, as the President talked about today, to address the long-term fiscal challenges. He has a plan to cut the deficit, the short-term deficit in half over the next five years by continuing to exercise spending restraint in the budgets, and continuing to grow the economy so that revenues increase. That's the way to address it.

Now, in terms of the long-term deficits, that's why we need to address issues like Social Security. And as I pointed out last week, I believe, markets will look favorably on a plan that addresses the long-term sustainability of Social Security, and that's important when we're talking about the issue of fixing this problem, which Terry brought up.

Q Why doesn't he propose cuts in the budget?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, he will continue to build upon our record of exercising spending restraint while making sure that we meet our nation's highest priorities. I'm not going to get into discussing any specifics at this point, but we've consistently brought it down over the last four years, and we will continue to do so. I believe the non -- I mean, the discretionary spending for non-homeland and non-defense spending was at some 15 percent before we took office. We brought it down to around 1 percent in the last session, and the President commends Congress for exercising spending restraint, and we need to continue to move forward and address these fiscal challenges that we face, both the short-term deficit and the long-term deficit.

Q So far, in terms of reforming **Social Security**, the President has talked about a nice little bit of sugar-infused icing on the top of the cake here that will allow people some sort of a guarantee when they retire 20, 30 years in the future. But there's a lot of cake underneath there that involves some pretty tough challenges ahead, including how to make -- how to extend the solvency of Social Security, which a lot of experts are saying would have to involve either a tax increase, raising the retirement age, cutting benefits or means testing. Why isn't he addressing any of that at this conference?

MR. McCLELLAN: If we do nothing, John, our younger workers will face massive tax increases or massive benefit cuts. That's under the current system. That's why the President wants to fix it permanently. And he's moving forward with Congress to do that. It's important to talk about the problem that we have, and for all of us to come together and agree on the common problem that we face in Social Security, then we can move forward, working in a bipartisan way, in discussing the way forward. And that's what the President is doing right now.

Q But all he's talking about right now is these personal retirement accounts in the framework of Social Security which, by most experts' estimations, with the exception of I think one plan which may reduce the government's contribution in the future, do nothing to extend the solvency of Social Security and make up for that gap in benefits that will inevitably come. So why isn't -- why isn't he talking about the rest of --

MR. McCLELLAN: There are a number of ideas for addressing the sustainability of Social Security and fixing its long-term sustainability. The President believes personal savings accounts should be a part of that because it will help workers realize a greater rate of return. Right now, you're talking about workers realizing a rate of return on their taxes of less than 1 percent. Under an approach that the President is talking about, where they would be voluntarily allowed to invest a small portion in personal savings accounts, you're talking about realizing a rate of return of 4 percent, 5 percent, or 6 percent on those investments.

Q But all he's talking about is the stuff that's very attractive to young workers to say, I'm going to create a program here that will give you some sort of a guarantee when you retire. But he's not talking about everything underneath, which would involve some pretty tough medicine going forward.

MR. McCLELLAN: We've been successful in moving forward on a number of this nation's highest priorities, from education reform, to Medicare reform, to cutting taxes to get our economy growing. The President believes the approach he is taking now, of talking about the problem and reaching out to members in a bipartisan way to get

this done is the best way to proceed forward. Members of Congress are an important part of us getting this done next year. And that's why the President is reaching out to them, looking for their ideas, too, and we will continue to talk about this as we move forward. I appreciate you wanting us to negotiate here from the podium --

Q I'm not asking you to negotiate. I'm just -- I appreciate all the fine work you've done. I'm just wondering why, in this conference, is he only talking about personal retirement accounts as opposed to all of the other tough measures that taxpayers are --

MR. McCLELLAN: I think there were a lot of ideas that were expressed.

Q -- that the -- that taxpayers are going to have to swallow in the future to really fix the system.

MR. McCLELLAN: Because we're moving forward, working closely with Congress to get this done, and we want to get their input as we move forward.

Go ahead.

Q Scott, small businesses are worried about the economy, and as far as this **White House Economic Conference** is concerned, what can they expect? And how they will benefit from this conference?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry, did you say small business?

Q Small businesses.

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, small business owners -- or small businesses, I should say, are the backbone of our economy. And that's why you had small businesses represented at this conference, when I talked about a broad cross section from the economy. And we need to continue to build upon the steps we've already taken to strengthen our economy and make sure that we are creating an environment where the entrepreneurial spirit of small business owners can thrive. And that's what we will continue to do.

There are a number of ways -- addressing lawsuit reform, as was talked about in the conference yesterday, is one way. Moving forward on addressing the rising cost of health care is something that was discussed -- or is being discussed at this conference. There are a number of areas where we can work so that we encourage job growth in this country. And job growth comes, to a large extent, from the small business sector.

Q Second question --

MR. McCLELLAN: Let me keep moving. Go ahead, Dana.

Q Scott, Senator Susan Collins is now the latest Republican to publicly criticize **Secretary Rumsfeld**. She said that there are increasing concerns about the Secretary's leadership of the war, citing failure to predict the insurgency the way it is, lack of safety equipment, resistance to put more troops in there. What do you think about that?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think that Secretary Rumsfeld continues to do a great job while we're at war. We are a nation at war. We're a nation at war on terrorism. The audio tape that came out earlier this morning reminds us that we are nation at war. We must continue to use all means on all fronts to defeat the terrorists. And Secretary Rumsfeld is an important person in our efforts to prevail in this global struggle of ideologies.

Q Is the President aware of the, what I think can be fairly characterized as growing Republican criticism of his Defense Secretary?

MR. McCLELLAN: We look at the news just like you do. The President believes Secretary Rumsfeld is doing a great job, and that's why he asked him to continue serving during this time of war.

Go ahead, Connie.

Q Thank you. Otherwise, sorry, you have a cold. I hope it's not the flu.

MR. McCLELLAN: Oh, no. I don't think so. Thanks.

Q Two military questions. Is the **\$4 billion fund** figure to strengthen the armor of light vehicles, is that a final figure, and where does that come about --

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you should talk to the Department of Defense. They're the ones who briefed about that, about the money that they're putting to make sure that our troops are getting what they need when they need it.

Q Would it have come about without the publicity in the past week or two?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, the Department of Defense addressed that yesterday.

Q One more on the test --

MR. McCLELLAN: I'll leave it where they did.

Q On the missile test, defense test which failed. Is the President still committed to pouring billions of dollars into that missile defense shield?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President remains firmly committed to moving forward on missile defense, a missile defense system. Missile defense is a high priority because it will help us better protect the American people against a potential limited long-range missile attack. And that's why the President remains firmly committed to moving forward on an effective defense against the threat posed by the proliferation of long-range missiles.

My understanding, from the text you referenced, is that the interceptor missile launch was automatically stopped because of what the military describes as an "unknown anomaly." We have had five successful tests of the eight. It's important that we move forward on this because the President's top responsibility is to do everything he can to protect the American people, and given the threats that we face in this day and age, missile defense is an important deterrent.

Go ahead.

Q Scott, where is the administration as it relates to **Novaripine** on safety and effectiveness of the drug? What's the administration's stand on Novaripine?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think that if you look at the U.S. public health guidelines, they clearly state that a single-dose usage of Novaripine is safe and effective in stopping mother-to-child transmission of HIV, and those are the current public health guidelines.

The government guidelines also make clear that there are potential harmful effects of longer-term use of extended usage of Novaripine. Now, the NIH has asked the Institute of Medicine to do a further analysis of the drug, and that's what's going on right now. But current guidelines state that this can be an effective drug to stop the transmission to children from pregnant mothers, and that's where it stands right now.

Q Scott, have you seen the latest story about the woman who died during the Novaripine study, and the family wasn't told? It somewhat goes back to NIH suppressing the long-term lethal effects of this drug. Do you understand why -- does the White House understand why, know why the NIH decided not to tell the long-term effects or the lethal effects of this drug?

MR. McCLELLAN: First of all, the loss of life is tragic and terrible. And in terms of any specific questions regarding the research study or this particular incident, those are best directed to the National Institute of Health.

Q Do you think it is the right thing to do to send this drug to Africa , as well as let people in this country take the drug for long-term, short-term, or single-dose usage, as you know that people are dying and getting ill from this

drug? Is that the fair thing to do?

MR. McCLELLAN: The single-dose usage is what is in the President's emergency AIDS relief program. And I would point to the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation as someone who supports the safest, most effective regiment of drugs to prevent mother-to-child transmission. The foundation said, and I quote, "There is considerable scientific data demonstrating that this short course Novaripine regimen is safe and effective, and should continue to be used to prevent mother-to-child transmission in settings where more complex regimens are not available."

The President's emergency relief plan is about saving lives. The United States does more than any country in this world to combat AIDS, and the President has made an unprecedented commitment. And we want to make sure that lifesaving medicines are getting to those who need it. And it's important that the proper dosage be followed; and if necessary, that monitoring be used, as well. But the U.S. public health guidelines continue to recommend short course Novaripine therapy as an option for women who enter care late in pregnancy. It's something that's used here in the United States right now.

Q So you don't think the drug use should be halted while the study is going on?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we want to see what the National Institute of Medicine said, but as I just pointed out, the NIH remains confident that when used properly in a single-dosage way, it is an effective and proven way to prevent mother-to-child transmission. We want to continue to do what we can to save lives, and that's what this is all about.

Go ahead, Paula.

Q On the **Social Security** plan, it's my understanding the administration believes that all three approaches taken by the Moynihan Commission fall within the President's Social Security principles.

MR. McCLELLAN: We've said they're consistent with our principles.

Q Right. Well, my question then is, I believe all three approaches -- even though they vary in the amount that would be contributed from payroll taxes do say that because of the higher rate of return that a younger worker might have, the price they would have to pay for that higher return is that their benefits either would be reduced, or they might have to retire at a higher age, but that there would be a reduction of benefits as an offset to the higher rate of return.

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm very well aware of the proposals by the Social Security Commission that the President appointed. The President outlined the principles, and we've said that the proposals by the Social Security Commission are consistent with the principles that we outlined. But the President has not endorsed a specific proposal at this point. Right now, we're talking about two options that we have available. The option of fixing the problem and making sure workers can realize a greater rate of return, or the current system, which right now is an empty promise because the guaranteed benefit is not going to be there for younger workers. So we want workers to realize a greater rate of return and have their full retirement savings available to them when they retire. And we're not going to change anything for those at or near retirement.

Q And also on meeting the deficit-reduction goal over five years, is the reason that the administration believes it can do that under its plan because the budget won't include the cost of the war in Iraq, it won't include possibly transition costs in Social Security if you develop an off-budget mechanism for funding?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, when we have projections, we do take into account what money has been allocated.

Q But it would also include the fact that you don't factor in the cost of the war. You're not factoring in --

MR. McCLELLAN: No, no, it does take into account -- I just said it does take into account the costs that are allocated.

Q But that's --

MR. McCLELLAN: And we update it -- as you know, we update it twice a year.

Q I know, but what costs --

MR. McCLELLAN: Once when we release the budget, and then another time during the mid-session review, and it takes into account the supplementals when they are allocated.

Go ahead.

Q Scott, what is the President's timetable for submitting either a package of principles, or an endorsement of a Social Security package? Are we talking about the first quarter of next year? Are we talking later than that? Give us a sense of what he's trying --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, there's a growing consensus among congressional leaders to move forward quickly on Social Security because they recognize it's such an important priority, and that it needs to be fixed. But we're going to continue talking with congressional leaders about the exact timing. Congress gets to set the legislative timetable. We worked very closely with them on some of our own priorities about when those are set. But we'll continue to discuss that with members of Congress.

Q So you don't have any timetable yet?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm not ready to spell out any specific timetable. We're going to move quickly on it because you already had a Social Security Commission that the President formed -- a bipartisan Social Security Commission, and they looked at a lot of these issues. They put forward some ideas. Members of Congress have some ideas. There are some members that have specific legislation already out there. And so we'll continue talking with them about how we can move forward to get this done and on what timetable.

Q Will it be the first three months of next year?

MR. McCLELLAN: We'll continue talking with members of Congress. I appreciate you wanting to talk with the press about it, but we'll continue talking with congressional leaders to work on that legislative timetable.

Go ahead, Olivier.

Q Scott, ahead of every milestone in **Iraq**, political milestone, whether it's the creation of the interim council to the handover of power, this White House has warned about -- of an escalation of violence by increasingly desperate insurgents, terrorists, dead-enders. And you're warning about that now, with the elections coming up in January. Can you -- can you say whether this is going to be the one that breaks the trend? Will things get better after the elections? Will there be less violence? Or will -- or are we just going to keep seeing this trend line --

MR. McCLELLAN: Let me correct you. I think what we've said is that there would be continued violence as we move forward to help the Iraqi people build a democratic, free, and peaceful future. There are still some remnants of the Saddam Hussein regime, and there are terrorists who have entered the country who are doing everything they can to derail the transition to democracy. They recognize how high the stakes are.

This is a critical part of winning the war on terrorism, and when a free and peaceful Iraq emerges, it will be a significant blow to their ambitions. The elections coming up in January are a step toward a democratic and peaceful Iraq. It's a step that will help us defeat the ambitions of those who want to return to the brutality and oppression of the past. And we are doing everything we can to support the Iraqi people. The international community has been helping in different ways, as well. The Secretary General of the United Nations, who was in town today, talked about how they're on track with their plan to help with those elections. What's important is that we do everything we can to help the Iraqi people hold those elections on the time frame that was spelled out by the Independent Election Commission in Iraq.

Q So you're willing to predict escalating violence up to a point, but not what's going to happen after that point?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I would leave it to our commanders on the ground to give you the best readout of the

current circumstances on the ground and what they anticipate going forward. They had a briefing yesterday; they talked about some of the ways that the enemy has adapted and the need to adapt to meet the enemy -- the way the enemy has changed. And that's what they're continuing to do. Our men and women in uniform are doing an outstanding job and they are up to the challenge and they are helping to train the Iraqi security forces so that, ultimately, they will be the ones providing for their own security from internal and external threats.

We also continue to urge everybody in the neighborhood to act in a way to help address some of the concerns we've expressed about terrorists crossing borders and regime members operating out of certain countries.

Q Scott, on the **Social Security** threat, based on what the President has said at the summit, why shouldn't we, why shouldn't anyone who has heard what he said assume that he has put aside much of the commission's recommendations about the -- on the tough-choice issues?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President just said last week that the commission is a guide for us moving forward. They did important work. And as I pointed out, it was a bipartisan commission of statesmen committed to getting something done. And that's what we need in Congress, as well. There are a number of people who are committed to working with the President and who share his belief that this is a real problem that we need to fix, because the problem gets worse over time. If we don't act, it only gets worse, and that's why we need to act now to stop it from getting worse.

Q But why didn't you even mention maybe one of these other tough choices?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President has talked about the challenges that we face regarding Social Security and the need to move forward together to address it. We're going to continue talking to members of Congress about it. The legislation is not being passed tomorrow. It's a process, and work, and we are going to continue reaching out to members who want to get this done and solve these problems. It's a high priority, and the President is going to move forward in a bipartisan way, reaching out to those who want to reach back and solve it.

Q Scott, can I just follow up on one thing?

MR. McCLELLAN: Go ahead.

Q [Osama bin Laden](#), you've said in the past that the war on terror is larger than just one person, but Osama bin Laden is the central terrorist figure, and he apparently is still out there and is alive and is giving messages that can be heard around the world. How is his ability to do that helping or hurting the hunt for him?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, he is someone who I think has been on the run for quite some time now. He will be brought to justice; we've made that very clear. He is someone we continue to pursue. We've already dismantled or brought to justice some three-quarters of the leadership of al Qaeda. We will continue to pursue him and other al Qaeda leaders as well. We've made significant progress; there's more to do. But this is about a clash of ideologies. It is bigger than any one person, and we will continue this war until we win it.

Q Is it worrisome that he's able to get these messages out still?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I can't talk about specific ones right now at this point, and we always look at those tapes that he puts out and we analyze them to see if there's anything that can help us act on the intelligence in those tapes.

Q Scott, two quick things on the Annan meeting. Did the -- first of all, did the President at all interact when Kofi Annan where he was here? Did he stop by --

MR. McCLELLAN: No, this was a meeting -- this was a meeting with Dr. Rice and they --

Q So he didn't talk --

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes, they talked about a range of issues.

Q And was there any request, either formal or informal, for the U.N. to send more than 25 **election monitors**?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, you heard from me earlier today and you heard from the Secretary General and Secretary Powell earlier today. The United Nations, we've always said, has an important role to play in helping the Iraqi people move forward. The Secretary General said that they are on track on their plan for assisting with the elections in January. He also said that they were looking ahead to next year and ways they can continue to support the Iraqi people. That could include helping with the drafting of a constitution, the help with holding permanent elections. We've said that we are pleased with the action by the United Nations to send more people to Iraq and we continue to encourage them to do more.

Q So, yes or no?

MR. McCLELLAN: I just said that we continue to encourage them to do more.

Q Scott, why is it within -- about a 10-day period the Iraqi government has warned various officials about **Syrian and Iranian** meddling in their affairs? The President said yesterday that it would not be in their best interests to meddle in the internal affairs of Iraq . Can you elaborate on what he meant by "not in their best interests"?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, neighboring countries of Iraq , like Syria and Iran , have a responsibility to act in a constructive manner. Iran and Syria have made commitments and we expect those commitments to be followed. We have expressed our concerns about the cross-border transit of terrorists and money and weapons to support those terrorists. It has been allowed to happen and it needs to stop. The President made that very clear yesterday.

We've been concerned about Syria being a base of operations for some former regime elements that continue to seek to return to the past. We've expressed concerns about terrorists in Iran , as well. And they made an agreement at Sharm el-Sheikh; they are signatories to the communiqué coming out of there saying that they would act in a responsible way, that they would contribute to the stability in Iraq , that they would prevent the transit of terrorists to and from Iraq , and the transit of money and arms to support the terrorists. It also calls on all countries to do more to control their borders. And so we expect those commitments to be followed up on and met.

Thank you.

END 1:18 P.M. EST

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