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Press Briefing by Scott McClellan

The James S. Brady Briefing Room

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12:43 P.M. EST

MR. McCLELLAN: Good afternoon, everybody. I'd like to begin with a **world leader call** readout and then I want to make one statement following that.

The President spoke with Crown Prince Abdallah this morning to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the meeting between President Roosevelt and King Abdallah Aziz, that opened the modern period of U.S.-Saudi relations and our friendship. The President commended the Crown Prince on the successful start last week of municipal elections in Saudi Arabia. He also complimented the Crown Prince on last week's successful counter-terrorism conference in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the two leaders discussed the **murder today** of former Prime Minister Hariri in Beirut.

And with that I would like to go to a statement on today's event in Beirut. The President was "shocked and angered to learn of the terrorist attack in Beirut today that murdered former Prime Minister Hariri and killed and injured several others. Mr. Hariri was a fervent supporter of Lebanese independence and worked tirelessly to rebuild a free, independent and prosperous Lebanon following its brutal civil war and despite its continued foreign occupation. His murder is an attempt to stifle these efforts to build an independent, sovereign Lebanon, free of foreign domination. The people of Lebanon deserve the freedom to choose their leaders free of intimidation, terror and foreign occupation, in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559. The United States will consult with other governments in the region and on the Security Council today, about measures that can be taken to punish those responsible for this terrorist attack, to end the use of violence and intimidation against the Lebanese people, and to restore Lebanon's independence, sovereignty and democracy by freeing it from foreign occupation."

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

Q Scott, that statement seems aimed at **Syria**, if I read it correctly. The group that's claiming responsibility seems

to have some ties with people in Saudi Arabia. Do you believe that this attack was coordinated through Syria?

MR. McCLELLAN: John, we do not know who was responsible for the attack at this point. It's premature to know that. There are some -- there is a group that has claimed responsibility, but that's why we've called for measures to hold those responsible, who committed these acts. And those are matters we'll discuss with others and discuss at the United Nations Security Council.

Q Do you have reason to believe that Syria was somehow behind this?

MR. McCLELLAN: John, again, it's premature to know who was responsible for this attack. But we continue to be concerned about the foreign occupation in Lebanon. We've expressed those concerns. Syria has maintained a military presence there for sometime now, and that is a concern of ours.

Q Scott, the President has been working on this issue for years now, primarily with French President Chirac, frequently. I recall during the readouts of meetings and conversations they've had, Lebanon has often come up.

MR. McCLELLAN: Correct.

Q Is what happened today and the continuing Syrian presence a verdict on the ineffectiveness of the French-U.S. attempt to get Syria out there?

MR. McCLELLAN: Oh, I think we've made very clear what are views are and what our concerns are when it comes to Syria. And we've expressed those views. We've talked with others about those views. We do have a Syria Accountability Act, and we have taken some steps under that, as well, as you are well aware.

Q But I wonder what's -- has the French President's efforts to address this situation failed? Is there something tougher that needs to be done here?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we've been working with the international community, as I pointed out. There's a Security Council resolution that calls for an end to foreign occupation in Lebanon. If you'll recall, Syria has been there for quite some time. It's inconsistent with the '89 accords that were agreed to, and we've continued to express concern about that. We've continued to work with our international partners to persuade and convince Syria that they need to leave Lebanon and let the Lebanese people decide their future.

Q Are you discussing sanctions with the Security Council?

MR. McCLELLAN: Again, we'll consult with the Security Council and with others about how to punish those who are responsible for this act. And we'll discuss with them --

Q What are some options?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, those are discussions that I'll let occur at the Security Council and with other nations before getting into anything further at this point. But, again, what I emphasized there was to punish those who were responsible for this terrorist attack on the former Prime Minister. This is a despicable act, and it took many lives -- or many injured and a number of others. And we condemn it in the strongest possible terms.

Q Sources say that over the past year, the U.S. military has sent unmanned drone aircraft from Iraq over-flying **Iran**. And I wondered, has the Commander-in-Chief ordered or condoned such flights, and if so, what is the specific mission, to check the nuclear program or to check possible troop withdrawals -- I mean, troop concentrations and other areas?

MR. McCLELLAN: First of all, on intelligence matters, I'm not in position to get into confirming or denying matters relating to intelligence. So I'm not going to do that. I think we've made our views very clear when it comes to Iran and its nuclear ambitions. We continue to work closely with our European friends to send a clear message to Iran that it needs to abide by its international obligations, and it needs to live up to the commitments that it made. And that means ending its nuclear weapons program.

Q Thousands of arrests and demonstrations continues in **Nepal**, but it was surprise to many around the globe that Pakistan's Prime Minister is supporting the King's move. Even Pakistan's government came and -- after (inaudible) or in a coup democratically elected government in Pakistan, so where do President stand now in supporting King's move? Or are we calling him --

MR. McCLELLAN: We remain deeply troubled by events in Nepal. The United States has recalled our ambassador there to consult with our ambassador, so that the ambassador has been recalled for a period of at least a week. I think you can talk to the State Department further about some of those details. We continue to urge the government of Nepal to get back on a democratic path to free the political prisoners, to lift the restrictions they've placed on civil liberties. And we encourage a political dialogue moving forward to resolve these matters.

Q And U.S. had no prior knowledge of King's move?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry?

Q U.S. had any prior knowledge of King's move?

MR. McCLELLAN: No.

Q Scott, when **former Secretary of State Kissinger** informed the administration that he had been invited to Moscow by the Russians, did the administration ask him to convey any message either from the President or from Secretary Rice?

MR. McCLELLAN: First of all, he was invited to go to Russia by the Russians. I would leave any discussion about that trip to Dr. Kissinger's office, or to the Russian Embassy for further comments about that. We do stay in close contact with former National Security Advisors. That's something I think we've always done. But I wouldn't get into any of those conversations.

Q Often when a trip like this happens, he will carry a letter, sometimes from the -- you know, the emissary will sometimes carry a letter from the President, sometimes some other communication from elsewhere in the government.

MR. McCLELLAN: There's nothing to report. Obviously, the President looks forward to visiting with President Putin in a matter of just over a week and talking about how we can continue to build upon our strong relationship.

Q The President today called for reauthorization of the **Patriot Act**. I want to know what your specific objections are to Senator Larry Craig's bipartisan reauthorization proposal. Do you have, for example, problems with the restrictions he'd like to increase on roving wiretaps, or on nationwide search warrants, or on the section of the Patriot Act that allows library and bookstore records to be searched? Do you object to any of those?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, what the President -- and I think we've stated our views in statements of administration policy previously -- the President has made clear that the tools provided under the Patriot Act provide our law enforcement officials with the resources they need to track down terrorists and disrupt terrorist plots. It is a vital tool in the war on terrorism. The President made very clear again today that those provisions that we passed should be renewed. And that's why he called on Congress to do that this year.

Q Specifically, each of those tools is vital? The President would veto a reauthorization bill that restricted any of the three I mentioned?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think the President made it very clear that all provisions of the Patriot Act should be renewed by Congress because they are helping us to win the war on terrorism and to protect the American people at home. They're vital tools in the ongoing war on terrorism that we're engaged in. And we believe that the act has worked in a way to provide law enforcement with the tools they need to go after terrorists, while also protecting people's civil liberties.

Q Is there a veto threat out on a reauthorization bill that does not include these tools?

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't know of any veto threat by the President; but he's made it very clear what his views are and what he would like to see passed.

Q Scott, the **Iraq and Afghanistan supplemental**, is that indeed, as you said, going up today? And, if so --

MR. McCLELLAN: Yes.

Q -- can you remind us of why it is necessary to do this as a supplemental, outside the budget process and outside the deficit --

MR. McCLELLAN: Sure. A couple of things. One, we don't know what the cost will be going forward in Iraq and Afghanistan. That, to some extent, depends on -- or to a large extent, depends on circumstances on the ground. Also, when you're looking at the war on terrorism, it's not a cost that I think most people who understand budgeting think should be built into the baseline because it's not going to be considered a permanent ongoing cost, some of those activities. Like I said, it depends on circumstances on the ground.

But the supplemental will address the needs we have in the war on terrorism and make sure that our troops have all the resources they need to complete their mission in Iraq and Afghanistan. It also provides funding to make sure we are doing everything we can to train and equip Iraqi and Afghan forces in those areas. We want to make sure that Iraqi forces are going to be in position to ultimately provide for their own security, so that our troops will be able to return home with honor.

The supplemental will also address important aid that is being provided in the Middle East region to the Palestinians so that they can develop the institutions necessary for democracy to emerge. We want to do everything we can to support the leadership as they move forward to the President's two-state vision. It also will provide much-needed funding to continue our efforts to help those in the Indian Ocean rebuild and -- rebuild their lives and their communities.

Q Tsunami relief is going to be part --

MR. McCLELLAN: Tsunami relief will be part of the supplemental. Yes, supplementals typically will address needs like these war costs, as well as needs for emergency situations, like natural disasters.

Q One other question, if I can, on that. As I understand it, it also includes a new Baghdad embassy. We build new embassies all the time. Again, why does that have to be outside the deficit --

MR. McCLELLAN: The State Department will be talking to you more about some of the specifics relating to the State Department, and I'll let them brief you later today.

Q Scott, you mentioned earlier that you're going to take up with the Security Council at the United Nations the matter of Lebanon. That position right now, **U.N. Ambassador**, is open. You also have a couple of other positions open -- EPA Director and intelligence chief.

MR. McCLELLAN: Are you submitting your name?

Q No. (Laughter.)

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't know that I'd look at it that way, Richard. I mean, obviously, we're working to -- some of those that you mentioned, those are high-priority positions. And we work to make sure that we have the best person for the position to fill that position. And so we are continuing to move forward on all those that you mentioned. And, obviously, we'll have more to say once that announcement is ready to be made by the President.

Q In the case of, like, the U.N., who is handling the U.N. duties right now?

MR. McCLELLAN: We've got representatives up there. Ambassador Danforth did an outstanding job. He built on a lot of the work that Ambassador Negroponte had done, as well. But, obviously, you have others up there that

are representing the United States at the United Nations.

Q Is there one at the ambassador level?

MR. McCLELLAN: They can provide you with that information up at the U.N. But there are people there that continue to represent our needs there and will continue to do so until a permanent replacement is announced. And State Department can probably give you more on that.

Q Scott, has there been any further developments this week regarding the **North Korean** situation? And have you seen any growing alliance or threat to America between North Korea, Iran and some of the terrorist groups?

MR. McCLELLAN: Any threat to?

Q To American interests. Do you see an alliance growing between North Korea, Iran and some of the terrorist groups?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we're addressing both of those matters through diplomatic means. We continue to work with international partners and allies to convince Iran and North Korea that they need to abandon their nuclear ambitions. We've made very clear what our views are.

Is there a specific question you have on North Korea that you mentioned at the top?

Q Since last week, any private concessions from them that they might --

MR. McCLELLAN: We're continuing to consult with our friends in the region. I know that Secretary Rice spoke with the Chinese foreign minister on Saturday to talk about the situation. I know that she's meeting with the South Korean foreign minister today here in Washington, D.C. We're continuing to consult with our allies and partners in the region to talk about the next steps.

But we can -- I think all countries continue to urge North Korea to come back to the six-party talks. That's the way forward to solving this matter. It's a peaceful, diplomatic solution. North Korea must make a strategic decision to dismantle and eliminate its nuclear weapons program. If they take that step, they can realize better relations with the outside world.

Q Is the President considering a quarantine of North Korea?

MR. McCLELLAN: What are you specifically referring to, Terry? What we're pursuing is the six-party talks.

Q Well, I'll tell you what I'm referring to --

Q An economic quarantine.

Q -- an economic quarantine that would cut off all remaining trade with that country and police the waters around it.

MR. McCLELLAN: We will continue to consult with our allies and our partners about how to move forward to address matters, both when it comes to the North Korea nuclear weapons program, and when it comes to North Korea's continued involvement in illegal activities, if that's what you're referring to.

But we have had ongoing efforts for some time to stop North Korea's involvement in illegal activities. And that involves law enforcement matters aimed at stopping counterfeiting and stopping drug trafficking. It also involves export controls. And it involves counter-proliferation efforts. Remember just a couple years ago we started the Proliferation Security Initiative to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction and the spread of missiles and missile technology. And the spread of missiles and missile technology from North Korea has been a concern of ours for some time.

Q Are you reshaping this plan, as The New York Times says you are, to pressure North Korea?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, we remain in close contact with our allies and partners in the region to talk about issues of this. These are issues -- North Korea's involvement in illegal activities are issues that affect a number of countries. And we have an obligation to protect the American people. We have an obligation to help protect our allies. We have an obligation to protect our respective economies. And North Korea cannot be allowed to continue its illegal and illicit activities. We've made that very clear. Those activities only further deepen their isolation. And the way for North Korea to realize better relations with the international community is for North Korea to make a strategic decision to dismantle and eliminate its nuclear weapons program.

And that's the clear message that I think all in the region are sending to North Korea. We have a proposal on the table that addresses the concerns of all parties, and it's the way forward. And we hope North Korea will come back to the six-party talks soon. We continue to consult with our partners in the region about how to move forward.

Q Scott, can I ask you about **Karl Rove** and his new role? Newsweek reports this week that after September 11th, that Karl met several times with the top lobbyist here in Washington for Saudi Arabia, and that Karl Rove has expressed interest in traveling to the Middle East this year, to get more involved in foreign policy. Is that something that he wants to do?

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't know anything about the latter part of your question. In terms of the first part, I think that a number of administration officials have met with the individual you brought up, on a number of occasions.

Q And would that be something, though, that --

MR. McCLELLAN: I wouldn't read anything into it. I certainly wouldn't read into it what Newsweek reported.

Q And would it be something that the Deputy Chief of Staff could travel and do foreign policy trips like that?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, as I mentioned, the responsibilities for the Deputy Chief of Staff are the same as they have been for the previous Deputy Chiefs of Staff. The exception is that those responsibilities are now split among three individuals. And I outlined how those responsibilities were separated out last week. The position of Deputy Chief of Staff and its responsibility has not changed in any other way, with the exception of that. The Deputy Chief of Staffs represent the Chief of Staff in the policy process. And that's what they will continue to do.

Q So he does not want to go -- travel to the Middle East, is what you're saying?

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't know where that's coming from. I haven't heard anything of that kind.

Q Is there concern in the administration that Syria, with its presence in southern Lebanon, and its support of Hezbollah, is in a position where it could, in some way, affect the **Middle East negotiations** between the Israelis and Palestinians, since Hezbollah engages in terrorism along the northern border? Does that pose a danger to that process?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think we've expressed our concerns about Syria and their impact on the region. Those issues do have an impact on the region. And that's why we continue to call on Syria to change its behavior in that regard.

Q I'm talking specifically in regards to Northern Israel and Hezbollah, which is supported and protected by Syria in Southern Lebanon.

MR. McCLELLAN: And we've expressed deep concern about Syria's support for terrorism, including Hezbollah.

Q You talked about sanctions against **Iran** if they don't comply with dismantling their nuclear energy program. Sanctions, in the past, have proven to be a joke -- that they didn't work against Iraq, they're rife with corruption. Under what circumstances or conditions does this administration really believe that Iran would dismantle their nuclear weapons program, despite what we've put forth, the administration has put forth, as threats or conditions

or other ways to get them to come to the table and really --

MR. McCLELLAN: I think a representative of the International Atomic Energy Agency this weekend talked about how Iran, for some 20 years, had concealed their activities. And it's time for Iran to come clean and live up to its international obligations. You can understand why we remain skeptical, because of their past behavior. We'll see how serious they are. We have long believed that it's a matter that needs to be referred to the Security Council -- Secretary Rice talked about that last week -- so the Security Council can talk about -- or consider it and talk about what steps may need to be taken if they don't live up to their international obligations. And we appreciate the efforts of our European friends. We stay in close contact with them. We will continue to do so. I think we've made very clear what our views are, and our views are that Iran needs to abide by its international obligations.

Q Could I -- a follow-up?

MR. McCLELLAN: Sure.

Q This administration is not happy with the leader of the IAEA, and they're not happy right now with Kofi Annan at the U.N. So those two bodies that will be putting pressure on Iran have a credibility problem right now, as well. So where does that leave the United States --

MR. McCLELLAN: We work very closely with both those leaders in a number of different areas. And we will continue to do so. We've spoken to that in the past. In terms of the United Nations, like I said, it's a matter that we have long believed should be referred to the Security Council. But we continue to appreciate the efforts of our European friends to get Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

And in response to your question, John, we've made it very clear that -- we have a Syria Accountability Act; we've taken steps under that. There are additional steps available to us to take if need be.

Q Right, but it just sounds like when you put all of this --

MR. McCLELLAN: I'll come back here. Go ahead.

Q If I could just follow that up --

MR. McCLELLAN: I'll come back. I'll come back. Go ahead.

Q -- it just seems like when you put all this together, as though you've started the clock on them.

MR. McCLELLAN: I'll come back. Go ahead.

Q United States said that Iran, the regime of Iran supported international terrorism, especially Hezbollah -- (inaudible) the close relation of Iran and Syria. Do you agree that there is some kind of -- maybe Iran is doing something with what happened today, with the Prime Minister --

MR. McCLELLAN: We don't know who is responsible for this attack. It's premature to know who is responsible. But those that are responsible need to be punished, they need to be held accountable. And that's the message we're saying today.

Q Concerning the economic activity of **North Korea**, there actually is the argument about economic sanctions to North Korea. How do you suppose the possibility of economic sanctions will cooperate with --

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry, how do I view economic sanctions on North Korea?

Q Yes.

MR. McCLELLAN: In regards to?

Q U.S. economic activities.

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think that what North Korea needs to do is come back to the talks so we can talk about the proposal we put on the table. That's a way for North Korea -- if they make the commitment to end their nuclear weapons program and dismantle it and eliminate it once and for all, then they can start to realize better relations, they can start to realize the energy assistance they need; and certainly we've continued to provide food aid to the people of North Korea that need it, that are starving. But that's the way for North Korea to realize better relations with the outside world.

Q Just a follow-up on our colleague's question on the **United Nations**. Is there a sense that with the oil-for-food scandal, and the scope of it at the United Nations, that sexual abuse scandal in the Congo that has been going on with U.N. peacekeepers there, that there is a credibility crisis --

MR. McCLELLAN: And that's unacceptable and appalling what has happened in the Congo.

Q I'm wondering what the administration's judgment is of the effects of these accumulating scandals, problems, rot in the U.N., on its effectiveness?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, it depends on the actions that are taken to address these matters. The Secretary General has taken some steps to hold people accountable. He has suspended some individuals. The Secretary General has expressed his commitment to the investigation. We want to make sure that that investigation is transparent and open. And that's not the only investigation going on. There's a congressional investigation going on. I think there are other people that are looking at the matters, as well. It's important that those proceed in an open, transparent way, and that people are held accountable, that action is taken to prevent it from recurring.

And certainly, with the case of Congo, there needs to be strong action taken against anyone who is responsible for the kind of atrocious conduct that has taken place there.

Q When I take all of your statements in toto -- Syria Accountability Act, going to the U.N. Security Council to get the people behind today's bombing, what seems to be a very pointed statement aimed towards Syria on the Hariri assassination -- it just sounds like a clock has been started somewhere. Am I right? Am I wrong?

MR. McCLELLAN: John, like I said, we remain concerned about some of the behavior Syria has been involved in, that they continue to be involved in. We've spoken about that before. And there are measures that we have had available to us that we have used. If there are additional steps that need to be taken, they are available to us, as well. We continue to make our views known directly with the Syrian government, as well.

In terms of what happened today in Lebanon, I think I made it very clear in the statement this is an attempt to stifle the efforts of those who want an independent and sovereign Lebanon that is free of foreign occupation, that is free of the involvement of Syria in that country. And that's what our views are.

Q Thank you.

MR. McCLELLAN: Thank you.

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