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President Holds Press Conference

Room 450
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[In Focus: National Security](#)
[en Español](#)

10:00 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. I appreciate you're here -- coming here. I'm pleased to announce my decision to nominate Ambassador John Negroponte as Director of National Intelligence. The Director's responsibility is straightforward and demanding. John will make sure that those whose duty it is to defend America have the information we need to make the right decisions. John understands America's global intelligence needs because he spent the better part of his life in our foreign service, and is now serving with distinction in the sensitive post of our nation's first Ambassador to a free Iraq.

John's nomination comes at an historic moment for our intelligence services. In the war against terrorists who target innocent civilians and continue to seek weapons of mass murder, intelligence is our first line of defense. If we're going to stop the terrorists before they strike, we must ensure that our intelligence agencies work as a single, unified enterprise. And that's why I supported, and Congress passed, reform legislation creating the job of Director of National Intelligence.

As DNI, John will lead a unified intelligence community, and will serve as the principle advisor to the President on intelligence matters. He will have the authority to order the collection of new intelligence, to ensure the sharing of information among agencies, and to establish common standards for the intelligence community's personnel. It will be John's responsibility to determine the annual budgets for all national intelligence agencies and offices and to direct how these funds are spent. Vesting these authorities in a single official who reports directly to me will make our intelligence efforts better coordinated, more efficient, and more effective.

The Director of the CIA will report to John. The CIA will retain its core of responsibilities for collecting human intelligence, analyzing intelligence from all sources, and supporting American interests abroad at the direction of the President.

The law establishing John's position preserves the existing chain of command and leaves all our intelligence agencies, organizations and offices in their current departments. Our military commanders will continue to have quick access to the intelligence they need to achieve victory on the battlefield. And the new structure will help ensure greater information- sharing among federal departments and agencies and also with appropriate state and local authorities.

John brings a unique set of skills to these challenges. Over the course of a long career, John Negroponte has served his nation in eight countries spanning three continents. He's held important leadership posts at both the State Department and the White House. As my representative to the United Nations, John defended our interests vigorously and spoke eloquently about America's intention to spread freedom and peace throughout the world.

And his service in Iraq during these past few historic months has



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President's Remarks

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given him something that will prove an incalculable advantage for an intelligence chief: an unvarnished and up-close look at a deadly enemy.

Today I'm pleased, as well, to announce that joining John as his Deputy will be Lt. General Michael Hayden. As a career Air Force intelligence officer, General Hayden now serves as Director of the National Security Agency, America's largest intelligence service, and Chief of the Central Security Service. In these critical roles, Mike has already demonstrated an ability to adapt our intelligence services to meet the new threats of a new century.

I appreciate the willingness of these men to take on these tough new assignments in an extraordinary moment in our nation's history. I'd like to thank the thousands of men and women already serving in our intelligence services. These are people who go to work each day to keep Americans safe. We live in a dangerous world, and oftentimes, they take great risk to their own lives. These men and women are going to be pleased to have leaders such as Ambassador John Negroponte and General Mike Hayden.

John, I want to thank you for being here today. Congratulations. Godspeed.

AMBASSADOR NEGROPONTE: Thank you, sir.

Thank you, Mr. President. I'm honored that you would select me to be the first Director of National Intelligence.

Providing timely and objective national intelligence to you, the Congress, the departments and agencies, and to our uniformed military services is a critical national task -- critical to our international posture, critical to the prevention of international terrorism, and critical to our homeland security. Equally important will be the reform of the intelligence community in ways designed to best meet the intelligence needs of the 21st century.

If confirmed, I look forward to support you, Mr. President, in working to the best of my ability towards achievement of these objectives, so vital to the protection of our country. I appreciate your confidence in choosing me for what will no doubt be the most challenging assignment I have undertaken in more than 40 years of government service.

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: I'll be glad to take some questions. Jennifer.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Can you tell us if you believe that Syria is linked to the assassination of Mr. Hariri? And further, how far are you willing to go to expel Syria from Lebanon and stop its involvement in Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: First, we support the international investigation that is -- will be going on to determine the killers of Mr. Hariri. We've recalled our ambassador, which indicates that the relationship is not moving forward, that Syria is out of step with the progress being made in a greater Middle East, that democracy is on the move. And this is a country that isn't moving with the democratic movement.

And we've talked clearly to Syria about, one, making sure that their territory is not used by former Iraqi Baathists to spread havoc and kill innocent lives. We expect them to find and turn over former regime -- Saddam regime supporters, send them back to Iraq. We've made it very clear from the beginning of my administration that Syria should not use its territory to support international terrorist groups. We expect them to adhere to 1559 -- U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the removal of troops from Lebanon. And we expect them to help free and fair elections to take place in Lebanon.

These are very reasonable requests, the requests all aimed at making the world more peaceful. I look forward to working with our European friends on my upcoming trip to talk about how we can work together to convince the Syrians to make rational decisions.



Q Thank you, Mr. President. The Europeans want more support from the U.S. in their negotiations with Iran. Would the U.S. consider joining these talks?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first, a couple of points. One, we are a party to the talks -- or a party to the process, as a result of being a member of the IAEA. In other words, we're on the IAEA board, one of some 30-odd nations. So we've been very much involved with working with the Iranians and the world to achieve a goal that we share with the Europeans, and that is for Iran not to develop a nuclear weapon.

I look forward to, again, on this trip, to discussing strategies, ways forward with the Europeans to make sure we continue to speak with one voice, and that is, Iran should not have a nuclear weapon, and how to work together to make sure they don't.

Wendell.

Q Mr. President, in your answer to Jennifer's question, I heard several reasons for recalling the Ambassador from Syria, but not an indication of whether you believe Syria bears some responsibility for the assassination.

THE PRESIDENT: I can't tell you that. I don't know yet, because the investigation is ongoing. And so I'm going to withhold judgment until we find out what the facts are. Hopefully by the time I get overseas, we'll have a clearer understanding of who killed Mr. Hariri, and it will be an opportune time to talk with our friends, to determine what to do about it.

But it's important that this investigation go on in a thoughtful way, and I'm convinced it will. We supported the international --

Q Would you like it to be an international investigation, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, we support the -- we support the international investigation.

Yes, John.



Q Mr. President, I recall a conversation a small group of us with a very senior administration official about a year ago, and in that conversation, the subject of Iran and Israel came up. And I'm just wondering, what's your level of concern that if Iran does go down the road to building a nuclear weapon, that Israel will attack Iran to try to prevent that from happening?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, of course the -- well, first of all, Iran has made it clear they -- that they don't like Israel, to put it bluntly. And the Israelis are concerned about whether or not Iran develops a nuclear weapon, as are we, as should everybody.

And so the objective is to solve this issue diplomatically, is to work with friends, like we're doing with France, Europe, and -- I mean, France, Germany, and Great Britain, to continue making it clear to the Iranians that developing a nuclear weapon will be unacceptable.

But clearly, if I was the leader of Israel, and I listened to some of the statements by the Iranian ayatollahs about -- that regarded my security of my country, I'd be concerned about Iran having a nuclear weapon, as well. And in that Israel is our ally, and in that we've made a very strong commitment to support Israel, we will support Israel if -- if there's a -- if their security is threatened.

Q Do you believe there's a real possibility Israel could attack?

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, I -- John, I think that there's a -- the need for us to work together to convince the Iranians not to develop a nuclear weapon. And we will work with Europeans and the Israelis to develop a strategy and a plan that is effective. And that's one of the reasons I'm going to Europe.

Let's see here. I've got to make sure I go to the TV people. Norah.

Q Mr. President, you've made clear that Social Security reform is your top legislative priority. The top Republican leader in the House has said you cannot jam change down people's throats. And in your interviews with the regional newspapers, you made very clear that you would not rule out raising the cap on payroll taxes. If you were to do that, why would that not be seen as going back on your pledge not to raise taxes?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I -- a couple of questions there. One, I agree, you can't cram an issue down people's throats. As a matter of fact, the best way to get this issue addressed in the halls of Congress is for the American people to say, why don't we come together and do something. And so the first priority of mine is to convince the people we have a problem. And I'm going to do that a lot. As a matter of fact, I enjoy traveling the country, and I hope you do, too, because I'm going to be doing a lot of it. I fully understand, Norah, that nothing will happen if the members of Congress don't believe there's a problem that needs to be solved. And so you'll see a lot of travel.

And the problem is plain to me: You've got baby boomers getting ready to retire -- they've been promised greater benefits than the current generation, they're living longer, and there's fewer people paying into the system. And the system goes negative starting in 2018 and continues to do so. There's the problem. Nothing will happen, I repeat, unless the Congress thinks there's a problem.

Once the Congress -- once the people say to Congress, there's a problem, fix it, then I have a duty to say to members of Congress, bring forth your ideas. And I clarified a variety of ideas that people should be encouraged to bring forth, without political retribution. It used to be, in the past, people would step and say, well, here's an interesting idea, and then they would take that idea and clobber the person politically.

What I'm saying to members of Congress is that we have a problem -- come together and let's fix it, and bring your ideas forward, and I'm willing to discuss them with you. And so that's why I said what I said, and will continue to say it. And it's not -- I've got some ideas of my own. Obviously, I think personal accounts are an important part of the mix and want to continue working with members of Congress to understand the wisdom of why personal accounts makes sense for the long-term, to be a part of a long-term solution for Social Security.

John.

Q Sir, thank you. Regarding the Director of National Intelligence, in this town power is often measured in a couple of ways, by who controls the money and how close that person is to the President, sometimes physically. So let me ask you about that. You said that Mr. Negroponte will determine the budgets for all intelligence agencies. A lot of people feel the Pentagon is going to fight that, that the Pentagon wants to control its intelligence money. Would you address that? And also, where is Mr. Negroponte going to work? Will he be in the White House complex, close to you? Will he give you your intelligence briefings every day?

THE PRESIDENT: I think your assessment is right; people that can control the money, people who have got access to the President generally have a lot of influence. And that's why John Negroponte is going to have a lot of influence. He will set the budgets.

Listen, this is going to take a while to get a new culture in place, a different way of approaching the budget process. That's why I selected John. He's a diplomat. He understands the -- and he's an experienced person; he understands the power centers in Washington. He's been a consumer of intelligence in the past, and so he's got a good feel for how to move this process forward in a way that addresses the different interests.

Now, as to where his office is, I don't know. It's not going to be in the White House. Remember the early debate about, should this man be a -- or person -- be a member of the Cabinet. I said, no, I didn't think so. I thought it was very important for the DNI to be apart from the White House. Nevertheless, he will have access on a daily basis in that he'll be my primary briefer. In other words, when the intelligence briefings start in the morning, John will be there. And John and I will work to determine how much exposure the CIA will have in the Oval Office. I would hope more rather than less. The relationship between John and the CIA Director is going to be a vital relationship; the relationship between the CIA and the White House is a vital relationship.

John and I both know that change can be unsettling, and so, therefore, I'm sure there's some people out there wondering right now what this means for their jobs and the influence of a particular agency into the White House.

And the answer is, everybody will be given fair access, and everybody's ideas will be given a chance to make it to John's office. And if he thinks it's appropriate I see it, I'll see it. And if he thinks it's a waste of my time, I won't see it. And obviously -- therefore, the conclusion is, I trust his judgment. And I'm looking forward to working with him. It's going to be an interesting opportunity.

Yes, John.

Q Will you back him if he goes up against Don Rumsfeld, Rumsfeld wants a certain amount of money for his intelligence budget and Negroponte says, I don't think so?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think it necessarily works -- I know that's how the press sometimes likes to play discussions inside the White House -- X versus Y, and butting of heads and sharp elbows. Generally, it works a little more civilly than that. People make their case, there's a discussion, but ultimately John will make the decisions on the budget.

"Backing" means it's kind of zero-sum; that's not the way our team works. It's not a zero-sum attitude in the White House, it is -- people have strong opinions, by the way, around here, which is, I would hope you'd want your President to have people around who have got strong opinions, people who are willing to stand up for what they believe, people who say, here's what I think is right and it may not be what so-and-so thinks is right; then the question is, do I have the capacity to pick the right answer, to be able to make a decision. I think people have seen that I'm capable of making decisions. And one reason why I feel comfortable making them is because I get good advice. And John is going to be a great advisor.

Suzanne.

Q A top European Union official said that Dr. Rice's trip, Secretary Rice's trip to Europe was very positive. He described it as "romance blossoms once two are determined to get married." (Laughter.) He also said that he did not expect that there would be any kind of substantive differences in U.S. policy on your own trip to Europe, but he hoped that it would help increase the sense of trust between the United States and European allies. What do you have to offer or say to European allies to help restore that trust, particularly the trust in U.S. intelligence?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, you know, my first goal is to remind both Americans and Europeans that the transatlantic relationship is very important for our mutual security and for peace, and that we have differences sometimes, but we don't differ on values, that we share this great love and respect for freedom.

September the 11th was an interesting phenomenon in terms of our relations. For some in Europe, it was just a passing terrible moment. And for us, it was a change of -- it caused us to change our foreign policy -- in other words, a permanent part of our foreign policy. And that -- those differences, at times, frankly, caused us to talk past each other. And I recognize that, and I want to make sure the Europeans understand I know that, and that as we move beyond the differences of the past, that we can work a lot together to achieve big objectives.

There's also a concern in Europe, I suspect, that the only thing I care about is our national security. And, clearly, since we have been attacked -- I fear there's a terrorist group out there thinking about us again, or would like to -- that national security is at the top of my agenda. That's what you'd expect from the President of the United States. But we also care deeply about hunger and disease. And I look forward to working with the Europeans on hunger and disease.

We care about the climate. Obviously, the Kyoto Protocol had been a problem in the past. They thought the treaty made sense; I didn't. And neither did the United States Senate when it rejected the -- rejected the Kyoto concept, 95 to nothing. And so there's an opportunity now to work together to talk about new technologies that will help us both achieve a common objective, which is a better environment for generations to come. And the methanes to markets project is an interesting opportunity. I spoke to my friend Tony Blair the other day, and I reminded him that here at home, we're spending billions on clean coal technology where we could have -- it's conceivable and hopeful we'll have a zero-emissions coal plan, which will be not only good for the United States, but it would be good for the world. This isn't a question on environment, but I was hoping somebody would ask it. I asked myself.

Anyway, let me -- so I'm looking forward -- (laughter) --thank you, Dickerson -- I'm looking forward to discussing issues that not only relate to our security, that not only relate to how we work together to spread freedom, how we

continue to embrace the values we believe in, but also how we deal with hunger and disease and environmental concerns.

Let's see, have I gone through all the TV personalities yet?

Q Yes. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Herman.

Q Mr. President, good morning.

THE PRESIDENT: A face made for radio, I might add.

Q Thank you. My mother appreciates it. (Laughter.) You offer a long list of things you expect Syrian leaders to do. What are the consequences if they don't do those things?

THE PRESIDENT: The idea is to continue to work with the world to remind Syria it's not in their interest to be isolated.

Mark.

Q Mr. President, if I could go back to Social Security.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure.

Q You spoke about your desire to have a plan that includes private retirement accounts. Chairman Greenspan yesterday, although supportive of those accounts, expressed two concerns: that he was worried about rushing something into print, if you will, and also about the borrowing, the transition costs that would be required, trillions. He was especially worried about the latter. What is your response to that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I presume the reason he was talking about Social Security at all is because he understands that we've got about \$11 trillion of debt owed to future generations of Americans. Therefore, we've got to do something about it now. And the longer we wait, the more difficult the solution becomes.

The -- you asked about the transition cost, and what was the other?

Q And that he wanted to do it slowly.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, slowly. Well, as you might remember in my State of the Union, when I expressed my desire that Congress ought to think about personal accounts, I did say they ought to be phased in.

And so -- and that's part of the transition cost issue. And we look forward to working with Congress to come up with ways to make sure that the personal accounts, if Congress so chooses, and I hope they do, can be financed. And that's part of the issue. And that's part of the -- part of the dialogue that is going to be needed once Congress understands we have a problem.

Let me repeat what I said before -- and I fully understand this -- that this idea is going nowhere if the Congress does not believe there is a problem. Why should somebody take the hard path if they don't believe there's a problem? And so I'm going to spend a lot of time reminding people there is a problem.

Once the people figure out there's a problem -- and I think they're beginning to understand that -- then the question to ask to those of us who have been elected is, what are you going to do about it? And that's an important question. And when people start answering that question, I have said, bring your ideas forward. We welcome any idea -- except running up the payroll tax rate, which I've been consistent on. And so bring them up. And I look forward to hearing their ideas.

And part of the ideas is going to be to, one, understand the benefits of personal accounts, as well as how to pay for the transition costs. We've started that process, Mark, by talking about a phase-in program. And one of the reasons we do is because we -- we wanted to indicate to the Congress we understand there's an issue. We want to work with you on it.

Let's see here, let's see here, John.

Q Sir, can you talk a little bit --

THE PRESIDENT: If you don't raise your hand, does that mean you don't have a question?

Q Not necessarily, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, good, because you didn't raise your hand.

Q Could you talk a little bit about how you would like to see the landscape of the Middle East change over the next year? Can you talk about the specific changes you'd like to see across the region?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. You know, a year is a really short period of time when it comes to working on -- working with nations to encourage democracy. So there's not a kind of a universal answer. But let me try -- let me try to answer it this way, because it's not -- in other words, you can't apply the same standard for every country as they move toward democracy, I guess, is what I'm saying. In other words, there's kind of not a blanket answer.

I'll give you kind of a general thought. I would like to see the following things happen: we make progress on the development of a Palestinian state, so there can be peace with Israel. And notice I put it that way: There needs to be progress for democracy to take -- firmly take hold in the Palestinian Territory. It is my belief that that -- when that happens, that we've got a very good chance for peace. That's why I said in my State of the Union, it's within reach. What's in reach is to work with leadership that appears committed to fighting terror to develop the institutions necessary for democracy.

That's why the conference Tony Blair has called is an important conference. It's a conference that we'll be working with the world, with countries from around the world to say, how can we help you develop a democracy. And so I'd like to see that move forward.

Obviously, I'd like to see the Iraqi government continue to make the progress it is making toward providing its own security, as well as begin the process of writing the constitution. We will continue to work with the international community to make it clear that some of the behavior in the Middle East is unacceptable. The development of a nuclear weapon is unacceptable. Harboring terrorists, or providing safe haven for terrorists is unacceptable. And so there's a lot of progress that can be made.

I was pleased to see that Saudi had municipal elections. And I think Crown Prince Abdallah's vision of moving toward reform is coming to be. Every speech I've given on democracy is -- I fully recognize that democracy will advance at a pace that may be different from our own expectations and obviously reflect the cultures of the countries in which democracy is moving. But there's progress being made, and so it's kind of hard to have a summary because there's different countries, different places. But if I try to come up with one, I'd like to see more advance toward a free and -- free and democratic states.

What's interesting -- and surely hasn't crept into your writing or reporting -- but for a while there was a period that people said, it's an impossible mission to have freedom take hold; I mean, what was he doing, how can he possibly think that these people can possibly accept democracy? I don't know if you remember that period of reporting or not. I vaguely do. And then look what's happening. And that's why I can say, John, that I'd like to see more progress because progress is being made. Afghanistan elections were a remarkable achievement in the march of history.

The elections that John was involved in Iraq, and was -- it must have been fantastic to be there. It was -- to think of the millions who defied the terrorists. And you remember the reporting that went on -- first of all, democracy may not be the kind of system that people agree to in Iraq, it's kind of a foreign concept to them, and coupled with

the fact there's a lot of terrorists there who are getting ready to blow anybody up who goes and votes. And yet, millions -- I think it's over eight million now, I think, we've calculated -- went to the polls.

And what's interesting to me in Iraq is to see the posturing that's going on, kind of the positioning. It's not exactly like the Social Security debate, but it's posturing, it's politics. People are jockeying for position. And I say it's not like the Social Security debate because their, obviously, democracy isn't as advanced as ours. But nevertheless, there's -- people are making moves here and there. And you hear about the conferences and the discussions. To me, that's healthy. It's inspiring to see a fledgling democracy begin to take -- take wing right here in the 21st century in a part of the world where people didn't think there could be progress. I think there can be progress, and we'll continue to work that progress.

Part of my reason I'm going to Europe is to share my sense of optimism and enthusiasm about what's taking place and remind people that that's -- that those values of human rights, human dignity, and freedom are the core of our very being as nations. And it's going to be a great experience to go there.

Let's see, Hillman.

Q Yes --

THE PRESIDENT: I had to call on Hillman, because -- to balance the thing here with the competing Texas newspapers.

Q Yes, Mr. President, have you, by any chance, received any sort of interim or preliminary report from the Robb Commission that's investigating intelligence failures? And did you seek the Commission's counsel on the scope of the duties for the new Intelligence Director?

THE PRESIDENT: I haven't -- that's -- no, I have not had an interim report. Maybe the national security people have -- or not. Hadley said he hasn't either. We have -- our people have gone to talk to the Robb-Silberman Commission when asked. But I've got great confidence in both those leaders to bring forth a very solid report. And so we haven't been involved in the process other than when asked to share opinion.

Q When might they report back?

THE PRESIDENT: Don't know -- don't know yet. Do we have any idea?

MR. HADLEY: Sometime next month.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, Hadley said, "Try to work me in the press conference," and I did. (Laughter.) Congratulations. Sometimes [sic] next month, he said.

It's an important report. And it's a relevant question today because of the announcement of Ambassador Negroonte. He will take, and I will take, the findings of the Robb-Silberman Commission very seriously. And I look forward to their conclusions, and look forward to working with the leaders and the Commission members to not only deal with the conclusions, but to address whatever conclusions they have in concrete action. And I appreciate the work.

But in terms -- no, and then I did not consult with either person and/or members as to whether or not -- the nature of the pick. I did it independently from the Commission.

Yes, sir. Mark.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. If, as you say, the development of nuclear weapons is unacceptable, and if the administration's concern for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, which proved out to be unfounded, drove an invasion to seek regime change, how concerned should Americans and, for that matter, the world be that the true identification of weapons in Iran or North Korea might not lead to the same sort of attack?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first, Iran is different from Iraq -- very different. The international community was convinced that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction -- not just the United States, but the international community -- and had passed some 16 resolutions. In other words, diplomacy had -- they tried diplomacy over and over and over and over again. John was at the United Nations during this period. And finally, the world, in 1441 -- U.N. Resolution 1441 -- said, disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. This was not a declaration by the United States of America, it was a declaration by the United Nations Security Council -- and a 15-to-nothing vote, as I recall. And we took that resolution very seriously.

As you know, the Iranian issue hasn't even gone up to the Security Council yet. And so there's more diplomacy, in my judgment, to be done. And we'll work very closely with our European friends and other nations. As I mentioned before, we're an active member of the IAEA board, which will give us an opportunity to continue -- to continue to say to the Iranians, you've got to be transparent with your program and adhere to -- adhere to protocols that you have signed.

Remember, this all started when they -- we found them enriching uranium in an undeclared fashion. And it happened because somebody told on them. There was an Iranian group that brought forth the information and it was clear that they were enriching. And yet, they hadn't told anybody, which leads you to wonder, why they hadn't told anybody. And so you can understand our suspicions.

And we'll work with nations. And in terms of Korea, North Korea, again, it's not Iraq. It's a different situation. But I'm -- I remember being with Jiang Zemin in Crawford, and as a result of that meeting, we issued a joint declaration that said that the Korean Peninsula should be nuclear weapons-free. Since then I've -- that policy has been confirmed by President Hu Jintao. And the other day the leader of North Korea declared they had a nuclear weapon, which, obviously, means that if he is -- if he's correct, that the peninsula is not nuclear weapons-free. So now is the time for us to work with friends and allies who have agreed to be a part of the process to determine what we're jointly going to do about it. And that's where we are in the process right now.

Thank you all very much for your attention and questions. Appreciate it.

END 10:37 A.M. EST

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