

Press Gaggle by Scott McClellan

Aboard Air Force One
En Route St. Cloud, Minnesota

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MR. McCLELLAN: All right, a **couple updates** to begin with. The President has continued to receive updates on Hurricane Ivan. We are continuing to receive damage assessments, but the federal government is working closely with state and local authorities on response and recovery efforts and there's close cooperation going on at all levels of the government. The President has signed emergency declarations for three of the states: Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. We expect to be receiving a request from Florida sometime today, and I'm sure we'll move quickly on that, as well. That's the update I have on Hurricane Ivan.

The President had his usual daily intelligence briefing on board the flight here. We've got -- we start with the remarks at a Minnesota Victory 2004 rally in St. Cloud. Then we've got the "Focus on Health with President Bush," in Blaine, Minnesota. There the President will participate in a conversation with a community health care representative, a senior who has a Medicare-approved discount drug card, and a beneficiary of a health savings account.

And then this afternoon, following that, he makes remarks at a Victory 2004 rally in Rochester, Minnesota, before we return back to the White House. And I think that's what I've got.

Q Do you think he'll visit the Hurricane damage from **Ivan**?

MR. McCLELLAN: We're looking into that right now. Obviously, this just occurred -- it just hit, Hurricane Ivan just reached landfall last night. So we haven't made any final decisions, but I do expect there will be some changes to the President's schedule, and we'll try to keep you posted as that is finalized.

Q Scott, the President hasn't taken questions from the press in a number of days now. It seems like an unusually long stretch for him, he usually tries to do a pool spray every few days. Will he be talking to us soon? And why the --

MR. McCLELLAN: It's something we always look at and consider. We always look at opportunities for the President to take questions. We're in the process of looking at some interviews, one that we're finalizing up now. There are a lot of different ways the President takes questions. He tends to take questions on a regular basis. Obviously, we've been through a pretty hectic period, with the Republican National Convention and the post-convention travel period, where he's been talking directly to the American people about his agenda.

But it's something we're always looking at and considering opportunities for him to take questions.

Q It is the longest period since he became President that he hasn't -- hasn't dealt with the pool and the national --

MR. McCLELLAN: He did a lot of interviews prior to the convention. I know he talked to --

Q The question is -- I understand that --

MR. McCLELLAN: -- he did a news conference down at Crawford, as well. No, I hear what you're saying, and that's why I said that we always look at and consider opportunities for the President to take questions.

Q The question simply is, why the change? Why isn't he talking to us?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think I just pointed out that we've been through a very hectic period with the Republican National Convention and the post-convention travel period, where he's been talking directly to the American people about his agenda. Obviously, we're coming into the heat of the campaign and the President is reaching out to the American people to talk to them about his agenda. There are different formats he's doing that in and -- but, certainly, I hear what you're saying, as well and that's something we're always taking a look at and considering.

Q Scott, can you talk a little bit about last night's remarks by **Dan Rather**? He seemed to almost personally challenge the President to answer the questions. And he also urged the media to sort of set aside concerns about whether the documents were forgeries and focus on the President's - - on questions about the President's service. Did he watch it? Did you watch it? What's your reaction?

MR. McCLELLAN: No, he didn't watch it. I did see it. I did see it. Well, CBS has now acknowledged that the crux of their story may have been based on forged documents. And they have determined that they will follow other news organizations and look into the serious questions that have been raised. There continue to be a number of questions raised about these documents. And you've heard what I've said repeatedly, that these are serious questions and they ought to be looked into fully. And a number of media organizations have been doing that. And now CBS has decided to do so, as well.

Q As for the -- Dan Rather's, you know, direct challenge, which we saw in The New York Observer yesterday, the interview in The New York Observer, he said: Answer the questions; with respect, answer the questions.

Was that appropriate for Rather to say and --

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think it's always best for journalists to stick to reporting the facts and not trying to dispense campaign advice. Did you have another question about last night or --

Q No. The only other thing was, you know, he spent a lot of time interviewing this 86-year-old former secretary and seemed to -- while acknowledging the possibility that the documents were forged, he seemed to cling to the essence of the accusations in the documents, even if they were phony. What did you think of that?

MR. McCLELLAN: So now some are looking at feelings and not the facts. You know, we don't have to rely on the feelings of a nice woman who has firmly stated her opposition to the

President. We can look to the facts. And the facts are that the commanding officer at the time has categorically stated that what had been asserted simply was not the case.

Q Scott, on another issue, later today --

MR. McCLELLAN: Hold on, I'll come to you, Joe.

Q Later today in Rochester the President is going to be introduced by **Congressman Gil Gutknecht, who has been a big advocate of re-importing drugs**. And, yet, Congress doesn't seem to have any plans, at least the Republican leadership doesn't seem to have plans to vote on such legislation before the election. What's the President's stance on whether they should?

MR. McCLELLAN: It's what he has said repeatedly. It's actually, as part of the Medicare improvements that were passed, the legislation called on the Department of Health and Human Services to create a task force and look into whether or not this could be done in a safe manner. It's a high priority for the President to make sure that those drugs would be safe. Safety is our first and foremost concern.

And so the task force appointed by HHS is looking into this matter and seeing if there is a way to do this safely. So that's where it stands right now. But we want to make sure that the public health is protected.

Q What about the bill that McCain and Dorgan are offering in the Senate? Is that something that the President could endorse?

MR. McCLELLAN: -- the task force, from the administration standpoint, the task force is looking into these issues. But the President has an obligation to the American people to make sure that we protect their health and not import drugs that we can't verify whether or not they're safe. There have been a lot of examples of problems with drugs that have come in that were not safe and they were not effective.

Joe.

Q Scott, does the President believe that the **National Intelligence Committee assessment of the situation in Iraq** that he received in July was an accurate assessment?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, let's talk about what the role of the CIA is. The role of the CIA is to look at different scenarios. That's what intelligence reports are about. The role of the policy makers is to determine how to address challenges so that we accomplish our mission. So that's -- the National Intelligence Estimate looks at different scenarios for Iraq's future when it comes to their political future and economic future over the course of a year-and-a-half, I believe, in this case.

Q Three fairly dim scenarios, ranging from civil war to delaying -- the most optimistic said that we probably --

MR. McCLELLAN: It talks about the great challenges to Iraq's peaceful and democratic future. And the President has talked about how transition -- the transition to a democracy is hard work. But it is for an important cause. The NIA really states the obvious in what the President has said many times. But it makes clear that it's important to stand with the Iraqi people as they face these challenges. The stakes are very high in Iraq. There is progress being made on the five-point plan that the President outlined for success. There are certain areas where there are ongoing difficulties and security threats. The Prime Minister of Iraq has made it clear that he is determined

to address those situations. They have addressed the situations in Najaf and Kufa, and have made a lot of progress in Samarra, as well.

But the pessimists and the nay-sayers have said that Iraq wouldn't -- the Iraqi people wouldn't be able to agree to a transitional administrative law that established the rule of law and protected people's individual rights. The Iraqi people --

Q The **TAL** no longer exists.

MR. McCLELLAN: Hang on, Joe. I'm talking. The Iraqi people proved them wrong. The Iraqi -- the pessimist nay sayers said that they -- that we would not be able to transfer sovereignty by June 30th. The Iraqi people proved them wrong. And we did it early. The pessimists and nay sayers said that Iraq wouldn't be able to establish an interim representative council at their national conference. And the Iraqi people proved them wrong. And they said -- the pessimists and nay-sayers said that the Iraqi leaders wouldn't be legitimate. Well, they are being proved wrong again. Prime Minister Allawi is going to be standing before the United Nations next week as the representative of the interim government in Iraq.

Q It sure sounds like the President doesn't think much of that report, then.

MR. McCLELLAN: No -- no, actually, I told you, that's what it -- it states the obvious, and it talks about the challenges and the different scenarios that we face. That's what intelligence reports are supposed to do. That's the role of the CIA, to look at those issues. The role of the decision-makers is to make sure that we work to address those challenges so that we accomplish our mission because the mission in Iraq is critical for the world and for the American people.

Q But isn't it disingenuous for the --

Q Scott --

MR. McCLELLAN: I don't think there are any plans about -- I don't think there are any plans to do so.

Q And in the other part -- quick question. Does the President believe that the **TAL** is the rule of -- rule of the land in --

MR. McCLELLAN: That's what the Iraqi people agreed to, that established the rule of law. It is in place.

Q It is right now?

MR. McCLELLAN: That's what they agreed to. Yes, it is in place.

Q But for the President to accuse the press and others for being pessimistic, which he does commonly in his speeches -- referring to The New York Times article from '45, et cetera -- isn't that disingenuous when there's reports from NIA which paint these sort of scenarios?

MR. McCLELLAN: That's why I pointed out that Iraqi leaders and the Iraqi people have proven the pessimists wrong every step of the way. I just pointed to the examples, and I pointed to -- most of the country in Iraq has made significant progress. There are areas where difficulties remain and there are ongoing -- there are ongoing security threats. There are dangers that remain. We made it very clear, and the President has spoken about how it is hard to transition to democracy, particularly in a region that has been very volatile and very dangerous. But the Iraqi

people are determined to build a free and peaceful future. And they're -- they have shown their commitment to realizing a brighter future. We're there to partner with them and help them as they transition to democracy.

Our own democracy took some time to build. It's never easy transitioning to democracy, but particularly in a dangerous region of the world like Iraq.

Q So the President doesn't agree with the outlook?

MR. McCLELLAN: Those are different scenarios. They're different -- they're different scenarios and that's why it's important -- and that's why --

Q -- those scenarios are possible or likely?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, the Iraqi people are proving that those -- those scenarios are wrong by the progress that they are making to build a better future and the coalition is there helping them as they do so.

Okay, thanks.

Q Thank you.

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