

## **Press Gaggle by Steve Hadley, Dan Bartlett and Tony Snow**

Aboard Air Force One  
En route São Paulo, Brazil

### PARTICIPANTS

Steve Hadley, National Security Advisor  
Dan Bartlett, Counselor to the President  
Tony Snow, Press Secretary

MR. SNOW: Okay, nothing special on the President's schedule. You understand what it is -- we're flying to Brazil. As you may also know, earlier today House Democrats have come up with a proposal for the supplemental appropriation. It would include a series of benchmarks and timetables. It is apparent, once you look at the details of this proposal that the chief aim of Democratic leaders was to get Democrats happy, rather than the more important goal of providing the funding and flexibility generals need to succeed in their mission in Iraq.

And I'll just leave it at that for a brief opening statement. I don't know if my colleagues want to revise and extend -- anything else, guys?

MR. BARTLETT: Well, if you don't know about the details of this plan is that it appears -- and we don't have specific language, but if you go by their public statements -- is that they have tied specific troop withdrawals, whether the Iraqis fail or whether the Iraqis succeed. It underlines the basic premise that their first goal is to pull all the troops out, regardless of the conditions on the ground, which would be in direct contradiction of the 16 intelligence agencies and the National Intelligence Estimate that said that a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq would be harmful to the security of the country, and obviously harmful to U.S. interests in that country and the region.

For particular details, they said if the benchmarks -- and we haven't seen all the benchmarks, but it's, like, the oil law, it's, like, liberalization, deBaathification law, the \$10 billion, provincial elections -- if those are not met by July 1st of this year and not certified that they've been met, they would have all troops pulled out by the end of this year, 2007. They said if they do meet these benchmarks, they'll give us to October to have a specific withdrawal of all troops by September of 2008.

So what this is, is a political compromise in the Democratic caucus of the House, aimed at bringing comity to their internal politics, not reflective of the conditions on the ground in Iraq. It would unnecessarily handcuff our generals on the ground, and it's safe to say it's a non-starter for the President.

Q What is your all's strategy going to be now?

MR. BARTLETT: Well, the leader of the Republicans in the House, Boehner, Leader Boehner, has already had a press conference declaring their opposition

to this legislation. Obviously, the administration would vehemently oppose and ultimately veto any legislation that looked like what was described today. Again, we don't have all the details, there's a lot of definitional purposes, but what we're seeing here is an artificial, precipitous withdrawal from Iraq based on, unfortunately, politics in Washington, not on conditions on the ground in Baghdad, Iraq.

MR. SNOW: And, again, just to add a little, tiny bit to that. The purpose is to succeed in Iraq so we can make America safer. The purpose of a resolution should not be to get disparate factions of the Democratic Party to be able to agree on a resolution. As Dan has just pointed out, what they're really talking about is internal party politics. What the President is proposing is a way forward that is going to strengthen American security and also make the world a safer place.

Q Does it look like the Democrats have enough support to pass this thing?

MR. BARTLETT: Well, that's up to them to decide whether they have the votes or not. I just think they'll be, you know, a solid number of Republicans who would not want to handcuff our generals on the battlefield in the middle of a decisive security mission. And we'll see whether any Democrats within the caucus give pause to such an approach.

MR. SNOW: There's also a game of charades going on, which is to say we will fully fund the President's supplemental request, then we will order the troops to leave on a date certain. It's an attempt to say that they're supporting the reinforcements. You can't do that by saying we're going to support for a certain period of time and then order folks home.

Q Are you in touch with the Republican leadership?

MR. BARTLETT: Absolutely. We've stayed closely coordinated with the Republican leadership. It's been a -- it has required almost hour-by-hour communication, because the Democrats' position has changed by the hour. But their latest proposal -- and we'll see if it has enough staying power; we don't think it does, because I think it's in direct contradiction to what they American people want, they don't want 535 members of Congress micro-managing our generals on the ground who are trying to fight a war -- but, yes, we are in close coordination.

Q -- yesterday, when the President met with the Democratic leadership?

MR. BARTLETT: Not in this type of detail, no. I think it's safe to say even at that hour they didn't have a final solution.

Q Last night -- or through the night -

MR. SNOW: It must have been. It obviously became known publicly, but it was not a part of the discussion yesterday.

MR. BARTLETT: It's one of the few benefits of the 24-hour news cycle, seven days a week, is you can keep up actually with the position of the Democrats. (Laughter.)

Q Can you describe the situation on the ground in Baghdad, how the surge is going? Are you satisfied with the progress?

MR. HADLEY: I'm sorry, I didn't hear the question.

Q Can you describe the situation on the ground in Baghdad and whether you're satisfied with the progress of the troop deployment there?

MR. HADLEY: Well, I think it's too early to draw particular conclusions. I think the best assessment of the situation on the ground you can get from the briefing that General Petraeus gave here just this morning, you can get a look at the transcript.

I think the important thing to remember is we've talked about some encouraging signs. We're at the early stages of the rollout of the Baghdad security plan. The additional Iraqi forces are nearing the completion of showing up. We still, of course, only have about two of our five brigades in place. So this is early on, it's still getting organized. There are some positive signs. The Iraqis seem to be showing up and stepping up. But I think at this point it's -- you've heard it from General Petraeus, and I think the main thing is just to remember we're in the early stage of this, as the President said many times. Yes, there are some encouraging indications so far, we're at the early stages, and we're going to have some good days and some bad days, and that's the way this is going to unfold.

Q Can I ask you about final U.S. troop numbers going into Baghdad? There seems to be some question about whether 21,500 was an accurate estimate of how many American troops would actually end up on the ground in Baghdad.

MR. HADLEY: It was an accurate estimate of the combat troops that were going into Baghdad. That's what the President talked about. He said that there would be five brigades that would be going into Baghdad. He talked about 22,000-23,000 troops, something like that, the bulk of which would be going into Baghdad. So what he was talking about is combat troops.

Secretary Gates and General Pace, a couple weeks ago, noted that there would be some combat support troops. Any time you send in combat troops, you're going to need, of course, combat support troops. The burden is less because we've got, of course, 140,000-plus folks on the ground. But he did indicate here a couple weeks ago that he thought the increment of additional combat support troops would probably be 10 or 15 percent, and he's talked publicly of a number around 2,400, something like that.

In addition, General Petraeus is on the ground and he's been, of course, told that if there are additional requirements he needs to get the job done, he should come back and indicate what they are. And, again, I think in his press

availability today he indicated that there might be an additional increment for detainee operations and that sort of thing.

So this is not unexpected. It's about the right size of how we're coming in and the fact that, as the General says, he's got a plan, we're executing the plan; as you get into the execution of the plan, you learn a lot, conditions change and you make adjustments, and that's what we're going to be doing. But, you know, again, we're in the early stages at this point.

Q But if it's in the early stages, how long do you give it before you can tell whether it's really working or not? At this point, it seems like these suicide bombers are confounding it by moving north.

MR. HADLEY: I think what you can say at this point is, you know, we're at the input stage -- getting organized, getting commands organized, getting commanders in place, getting troops in place; we're at the input stage. And that seems to be going pretty well. As I said, the Iraqis are showing up and standing up, and we're bringing our own troops in.

There have been some briefings from the theater that have talked about some early signs of positive developments on the security. Again, my answer to you is, it's pretty early, we appreciate those positive signs, but it's pretty early -- there's going to be good days, there are going to be bad days. And, remember, the bad guys are going to try and defeat this thing early, because the longer it goes, the more confidence citizens of Baghdad have that it's working, the harder it's going to be for the bad guys. So if you're them, you're going to try and knock this out early. And that's why I think you're going to see these efforts to have spectacular attacks, with VBIEDs and car bombs and suicide bombs -- heavily al Qaeda, to try and, again, touch off Shia on Sunni violence.

So I think you can expect in the near-term -- and I think you heard this from the President and you heard this from General Casey-- that the bad guys are going to try and derail this thing through violence. And that's why I think people have to let this plan unfold. As we've said, as each months go by, we will know more and we will learn more about how it's doing. But I think it's going to be some months before we're really going to know how this is working.

Q Will you have a good feel for it by June or July?

MR. HADLEY: Conditions on the ground, it depends on so many different things. I think what I would say to you is we're going to be learning more month to month, we're going to have briefings that will be available to the press, to try and give people a sense of how it's going. And we're going to evaluate it in terms of what we see on the ground, in terms of the progress --

Q So no month --

MR. HADLEY: I've answered your question to the best of my ability.

Q What evidence are you seeing that the bad guys are simply leaving Baghdad and regrouping elsewhere?

MR. HADLEY: I did not say that; you said that. I think one of the things we have seen is there are questions -- and you see them in the press -- about what the JAM, the Mahdi army are doing, reports that Sadr is in, and some of the senior leadership may be in Iran; reports that there seems to be a decision by some of the JAM elements, that they're going to go underground for a while. You've seen that in some of the Shia neighborhoods. You saw in the press that our military is moving into Sadr City, which, of course, has been a JAM stronghold.

But, again, one of the reasons I urge people that we're in the early stages is we're getting our leadership, our troops in, our operation underway, and the bad guys are actually making their own calculations, and the Iraqi people are making their own calculations. And I think one of the things that we can say is the anecdotal evidence, that the Iraqi people in Baghdad are glad to see someone coming and trying to bring some security to their neighborhoods. That's a good thing.

MR. BARTLETT: I'd just note that General Petraeus is briefing this morning, and that there are several elements of the enemy that are not going underground, unfortunately -- mainly al Qaeda based in Iraq, are inspired by the VBIED attacks and other spectacular attacks to try to derail the security plan before it has a chance to work. That's been a strategy they've used in the past, in some cases successfully. And we can expect there to be continued type of violence. As General Petraeus briefed this morning, the aim of the security plan is to reduce that significantly. But if somebody is willing to take their own life, and kill innocent men, women and children, it's a very difficult proposition.

MR. HADLEY: One other thing -- I agree with everything Dan said -- not that he needed validation from me -- (laughter) -- the focus in Baghdad, remember, is sectarian violence. And if listened to the President's speech before the American Legion that, of course, is what we're really focused on, because it's that sectarian violence that could destabilize the situation, make the reconciliation among the various groups that has to come more difficult.

So, again, we're working on that sectarian violence. And you can see, then, as Dan said, since that is the focus, if your strategy is al Qaeda, it is to use suicide attacks, VBIEDs directed against coalition and Iraqi forces, but also against Iraqi civilians, to try and encourage and accelerate that sectarian violence, which is really the focus of our end.

Q Is there anything that you could do to nudge Maliki to do something else? What would it be, at this point?

MR. HADLEY: Well, what we need him to do has actually been pretty clear, and we've been pretty clear on it with him and the President has been pretty clear with the American people. One, move forward on the Baghdad security plan, which as I said, Iraqis seem to be showing up and stepping up. We've emphasized the oil law, for example, which, as you know, has been approved

by the cabinet and will be submitted to the Council of Representatives. We are trying to move forward on narrowing and revising and reforming the deBaathification legislation.

So the things that we've asked him to do and that we think would help send a clear message of a desire for reconciliation are the things that we've asked him to do. The President is public about it. And the good news is that Maliki has been public about it, and he's established an agenda. These benchmarks people keep talking about, remember, are largely Iraqi benchmarks that they have set for themselves and that the President has endorsed, because they are the key elements of a national reconciliation among the groups.

Q So you don't think he's dragging his feet on any particular issue at this point?

MR. HADLEY: I think there's a lot of work to do, that needs to be done. And I think, look, we have to recognize it's a challenge, particularly when you say that you want legislatures or parliaments to pass legislation. I mean, that's a difficult thing to do. It's a difficult thing for our Congress to do on a timetable, and our Congress is the most powerful and the most sophisticated legislature in the world. In Iraq, you have a legislature that is new, in the midst of sectarian violence, in the context of a country where Sunni, Shia and Kurds are trying to live together as partners for the first time in their history -- and in some sense, for the first time in the Middle East. This is a tall order.

So one of the problems with these, you know, time lines and due dates for legislative action is, you know, we know and our Congress knows in the heart of hearts how difficult those are to keep if you're the United States Congress. Think about how difficult it is for the Council of Representatives.

What we can ask is the Iraqis to commit to benchmarks, which they have, and make every effort to achieving them and show progress towards that. And that's what the President has called for.

MR. BARTLETT: Yes, I would just say that's why today's announcement is so disappointing, because it has all the hallmarks of a political compromise and none of the coherence of a military and political strategy that would help you win and accomplish your goals in a very important theater of this war. And that's why we feel so strongly that at this time and this juncture in the mission in Iraq, that we don't need to be handcuffing the generals on the ground.

MR. SNOW: Furthermore, it's a kind of impatience that our Founding Fathers would not have been able to meet. The United States has a real commitment and people in that region understand it's a serious commitment to a freedom agenda, to having a democracy succeed in Iraq -- and Dan is absolutely right, you do not hamstring generals, you don't put them in handcuffs -- it's a good day for Dan. (Laughter.) You don't handcuff them. You give them the funding and flexibility they need to get the job done.

Q On the diplomatic front, what are the -- there has been some criticism of the administration for engaging -- for agreeing to engage Iran and Syria in the

regional diplomatic talks. What are the short-term goals for the U.S. in participating in those talks?

MR. HADLEY: I think it's a mischaracterization of what we're doing to say we're engaging Iran and Syria in the context of the regional talks. I would flip it. What we are doing is supporting the Iraqi government in organizing a regional conference of neighbors, of the P5, and, ultimately, when it gets to ministerial levels of the G8 countries, as well.

What is the purpose of that regional? Why does Iraq call it? They are trying to get additional diplomatic support for what the Iraqis are trying to do, to get the neighbors to provide what assistance they can, in terms of alleviating the security situation by using their efforts with some of the parties within Iraq to reconcile with the government, to end the violence. It's an opportunity for us to put pressure on a number of the neighboring countries -- Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE and others -- to do more to help Iraq. And we hope it is an opportunity for those same neighbors to put pressure on Syria and Iran to stop destructive activity and be constructive and to be supportive of bringing security and peace to Iraq.

So that's the purpose. The purpose -- it is about Iraq. It so happens that Syria and Iran are neighbors of Iraq. The Iraqis have invited them to this conference. We have no objection to that. We have participated in these kinds of meetings where Iran and Syria have been present before. Secretary Colin Powell did it in 2004, at the first meeting of the international compact, the U.N.-sponsored activity. We've had subsequent meetings of the international compact where we have been there, along with Iran and the Syrians. This is not about engaging Iran and Syria. It is about getting the countries of the region and the broader international community to support Iraq.

MR. SNOW: Also, just to add one other level of detail. Also, it talks about Afghanistan afterward, also. You had -- I know the Iranians were involved in those talks, as well. So it's important to remind people that this is not unprecedented. The United States has been at multilateral meetings on a number of occasions over the last five or six years, at which one or both of those nations was also present.

MR. HADLEY: I'd just say one other thing. And the other thing, of course, that we will do, I'm sure, in that meeting -- as we have in our public statements -- is send a clear message to Iran that they need to stop activity in Iraq that is putting at risk innocent Iraqis, Iraqi security forces and our men and women in uniform - - and that is training, that is providing equipment by elements in Iraq that are using it against Iraqis, using it against our forces. So we are also in this press conference and other avenues sending that message to Iran: it is time for them to knock this off and play a constructive role. And we hope that the neighbors in this regional conference will send that message to Iran.

Q Just a question about the trip that we're on. Hugo Chavez is going to hold a rally in Argentina. What do you think he's up to here?

MR. HADLEY: I don't know. You can ask him. What the President is about is coming to the region to emphasize that our agenda for the region is the agenda the region has for itself. That is to say, democracy, there is a consensus for that in the region, these are democratic governments. There is increasing openness to free trade. But why democracy and free trade? Because they are the best way to raise people out of poverty and have them have a better life.

So the President is going to be emphasizing that is the focus of our efforts -- democracy, trade -- but also supporting these governments that are making right decisions to fight corruption, to invest in their people by education and health care; and that it is our priority, as a good neighbor with this hemisphere, to work together with them to show that democracy and free markets and a willing and a devotion to the good of your people can take those abstract principles and translate them into a better life for the people of Latin America.

Q Your critics on Capitol Hill are saying that in the 2008 budget support for Latin America actually goes down. How do you justify the message that the President is trying to send, that we're emphasizing these programs that are continuing in Latin America, but not getting much attention when the 2008 budget actually cuts.

MR. HADLEY: There are a lot of different programs, and one of things you need to do is sum them all together. The President has increased the sort of traditional development assistance to Latin America from about \$800 million to, I think it's close to \$1.6 billion. Now, I'm told that in this budget there is some diminution of that amount. The other thing you need to look at, for example, is programs like the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which has already made four grants to Latin American countries. As countries in Latin America become eligible for compacts, those are big dollar items. So you need to look across, in terms of U.S. government assistance.

But the other thing people need to remember is that American engagement with Latin America is much bigger than just what the government says. And the statistics are overwhelming and they dwarf, really, anything anybody else is doing in that region -- remittances, \$45 billion every year sent from men and women working in the United States back home; trade, \$180 billion a year of duty-free trade from Latin America into North America; private -- foreign investment by American companies in Latin America, \$350 billion, resulting in generating directly 2 million jobs. Large numbers of church, faith-based groups, NGOs and others -- private businesses -- that are very active in Latin America, and thousands of people going there, doing things at the local level to help this hemisphere develop in the way they want and that we want them to develop.

So I would ask people when you think about the American assistance to the people of Latin America to look at the full, broad gauge of American engagement, not just what the government does, but what business does, what the NGO does, what trade does, remittances, all the rest. It is a huge project and it is all aimed at helping the people of Latin America realize their aspirations for freedom and a better life.

Q It's pretty likely that Chavez is going to mention the President, he speaks about him very frequently, and in harsh terms. Will we hear the President acknowledge the tour that he's doing, in contrast to this agenda, that he's coming down -- I mean, will the President talk about Chavez at all?

MR. HADLEY: The President is going to do what he's been doing for a long time: talk about a positive agenda, that we want to help; his vision for Latin America, which is the vision of Latin Americans for themselves. And he's going to be focusing on those countries and those leaders that have the right model and the right ideas for a better Latin America. That's what he'll be doing.

Thanks very much.