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LIST OF SPEAKERS

WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY SCOTT MCCLELLAN

HOMELAND SECURITY SECRETARY MICHAEL CHERTOFF

FEDERAL GULF COAST RECOVERY DIRECTOR DON POWELL

NEW ORLEANS MAYOR RAY NAGIN (D)

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS COMMANDER GEN. CARL STROCK

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MCCLELLAN:

Good afternoon, everyone.

Happy holidays. Look forward to seeing everybody this evening at the White House holiday party for the press.

We just concluded a meeting in the Oval Office with the president.

I'm joined today by Secretary Chertoff; our federal coordinator for the hurricane reconstruction and rebuilding, Don Powell; Mayor Nagin; and General Strock of the Corps of Engineers. And what I'd like to do is let them start off.

They have an important announcement to make. And then they'll take some questions on the levee system that you all will have, and then we'll let them go, and I'll come back up here and talk to you about some other important issues of the day as well.

And so with that, I'm going to turn it over to Secretary Chertoff.

CHERTOFF:

Good afternoon, everybody. Not a day goes by that we don't think about what's going on in New Orleans and what we can do to promote the process of reconstruction and recovery for the people who have been afflicted all over the Gulf Coast.

We continue to do everything we can to help communities get back on their feet and people reclaim their lives, and let me just give you a little bit of statistical background before I turn it over to Chairman Powell for I think what will be a very important announcement.

FEMA has, to date, provided rental assistance to more than 650,000 families, and we are now working to bridge into longer-term assistance programs. We're going to be extending hotel stays at least past January 7th.

The long-term goal here is to get people into sustainable, long-term housing so they can reclaim their lives, get their kids in school, get jobs, and position themselves to regain their economic and personal prosperity.

We've removed 55 million cubic yards of debris, which is a critical precondition to rebuilding. We've approved \$392 million in community disaster loan assistance, which is important to let municipal and parish and county governments get up and running, and \$205 million in unemployment insurance.

In total, the federal government has now provided approximately \$5.2 billion in direct assistance to victims of Katrina and Rita. So that's a lot of material assistance, but, of course, one of the greatest forms of assistance we can provide people is hope, hope that they can get back to the Gulf Coast and hope that they can get back on with their lives.

The president believes deeply in New Orleans and is deeply committed to its future. We understand that the people of New Orleans need to be assured that they're going to be safe when they get back home, that their city has an infrastructure that is capable of sustaining a possible storm next season or in the seasons afterward.

And one of the most important decisions we can take, therefore, is one that will help us accelerate the rebirth of this great American city on the levies of the Mississippi and the Gulf Coast.

Chairman Powell has been working very hard to be able to bring you an important announcement today. I'm going to turn it over to him and let him speak.

POWELL:

Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Good afternoon. When I first visited with the president about this assignment, it became very clear to me of his commitment to build the Gulf Coast area. Uttermost in his mind was the safety and security of the people and their livelihood. It became very clear to me.

Upon visiting the area, I visited with educators, businesspeople, elected officials. And that, too, became very clear to me about their specific issues. Their issues were safety of the people in the area, which related to the levies. So thus everything focused on the levies, jobs, housing, business moving back into the area. When will the levies be rebuilt, and how will they be rebuilt?

And as you know, the president has committed \$1.6 billion to do the following with a target date of completion by June the first of next year. First is to repair the breaches, the breaches that occurred as a result of Katrina. Second is to correct the design and construction flaws within the system. Third is to bring the levy height to pre-authorized height area pre-Katrina. That's very important.

That work is being done as we speak. Today the president is requesting another \$1.5 billion to do the following. One is to armor the levy system with concrete and stone, very important as it relates to breach of the levy system. Two, close three interior canals. Close three interior canals. Third

is to provide state-of-the-art pumping systems so that the water will flow out of the canals into the lake.

The president's commitment to rebuild the Gulf Coast will be satisfied as it relates to the safety and security of the people with these two important initiatives that I've just described. It's important that people feel safe and move back into the area. It's important that business create jobs in that particular area. The levy system is vital to that process.

The levy system will be better and stronger than it ever has been in the history of New Orleans, better and stronger than it ever has been in the history of New Orleans. If a hurricane such as Katrina ever visited New Orleans again, I'm convinced that the work that the corps would be doing as I've described will prevent any catastrophic <flooding>. There will be some <flooding>, but no catastrophic <flooding> that has occurred.

The levy system will be better and safer than it has ever been before. And with me today is Mayor Nagin who will be inviting businesses to come back. Jobs will be created, and the folks will feel safe.

Mayor?

NAGIN:

This is a great day to be in Washington, D.C.

Let me, first of all, thank the president for honoring his commitment to help to rebuild New Orleans and to rebuild the Gulf Coast better than it was.

To Secretary Chertoff for his continuing support and pushes of FEMA when we need it, I want to say thank you to him.

And to my new friend, Chairman Powell. I call him the young man. Every time I see him, he's got incredible energy. And he has stayed on message and stayed on point and stayed focused.

You know, I've been up here in D.C. at least once a week since the event, with the exception of the first two weeks after the storm. I've had a pretty clear message. We need levies. We need protection. We need housing support. And we need tax incentives to encourage businesses and residents back into the area.

The president has heard that call. Congress has moved from a state of having a little bit of Katrina fatigue to now moving very quickly to address these three priorities. Chairman Powell has taken on the levy challenge and has pushed it through to where we are today.

So my message to America is that we thank you for helping New Orleans and the region to get back up off its feet. We pledge to you that we will spend every dollar that you give to us in a wise and efficient manner. And I want to say to all New Orleanians, to all businesses, it's time for you to come home. It's time for you to come back to the Big Easy.

We now have the commitment and the funding for hurricane protection at a level that we have never had before. These levees will be as high as 17 feet

in some areas. We've never had that. These levees will be fortified with rock and concrete. We've never had that before. This system will have a pumping stations -- or pumping stations that are near the lake and that have the backup systems that we only dreamed about. This commitment, this action today says come home to New Orleans.

Now the Big Easy is not very easy right now. So when you come back to New Orleans, come back ready to work. Come back ready to rebuild and to help us to make the Big Easy the great international city that it once was.

I want to once again thank the president, the secretary and the chairman and Congress because I see an opportunity for us to not only get the funding for the levee systems before Congress recesses, but also funding -- much needed funding for housing, whether it be CDBG money or the congressional bill that Congressman Baker has, and then the GO Zone Act -- The Gulf Opportunity Act, passed the House last week while we were here. And it looks as though it will have an opportunity to pass the Senate. So we will have the Holy Trinity of recovery -- levees, housing, and incentives. And I think you.

(UNKNOWN)

I think we'll take a few questions and if you just direct the person you want to answer, we'll go.

QUESTION:

Chairman Powell, if you will, is the federal government committed to rebuilding levees that will sustain a Category 5 hurricane? And if not, why not?

POWELL:

The federal government is committed to building the best levee system known in the world. I think it's -- and I will perhaps ask the general to come in and assist me with some of the scientific issues as it relates to Category 5's, 4 and 3's and 2's.

First of all, putting it in my language, I always say tell me what a Category 3 and Category 2 and Category 4 may be. And as you know, that relates to the weather forecasters talking about the wind speed coming into shore. It's more complex than that. It also relates to barometric pressure and it relates to the storm surge as the engineers describe that for me.

I'm convinced that what we're doing here today -- if there is another Katrina that hits New Orleans that we would not see the catastrophic results that we saw during Katrina. As I mentioned, there will be some <flooding>, but it will be manageable-type <flooding>. I relate it to what I call the grandchild test. When I was talking to the engineers, I have four grandchildren that are very important to me -- terribly important to me. And I asked the engineers, I said, with what you're going to do as you've described to me, would it be safe for the four most precious people in the world to me, to move to New Orleans. Each of them said with a quick yes, yes, yes, they will be safe.

Very frankly, that's the test more than I when I think about 2, 3 and 4,

because I think it is a complex issue when you're talking about Level 3, Level 4 or Level 5 because the distinction is about describing the storm, but protection. Protection is more important to me than describing a Level 3 or 4.

QUESTION:

Can you explain, then, are you abandoning the -- against the measurement system -- a Category 5? Or are you saying that you are committed to protecting against a Category 5 hurricane?

STROCK:

I'm not sure we're abandoning anything. I think what we're saying is that we're going to do whatever is necessary to make sure that we have stronger and we have better levee systems than we had. And that's what we're going to do. This will be the best levee system that New Orleans has ever had -- ever had. There has been lots of storms go through New Orleans.

QUESTION:

So that standard, essentially, would apply for a Category 5 hurricane?

STROCK:

I don't think that we can design a system that will compete with Mother Nature. I'm not sure that there is a system that would prohibit any storm coming in there because I'm not sure what Mother Nature may do.

But again, if a Katrina-like storm hit, which is the worst that we have ever known in New Orleans, with what we're doing here today, you would not have the devastation.

QUESTION:

As you know, when Katrina came ashore up in the New Orleans area, it was sort of borderline three, four. We were on the clean side of the hurricane, not the dirty side.

With the number of Category 5's that have been forming in the last few years, are you confident that this levee system will be rebuilt to the level that it could sustain -- I mean, Chairman Powell talks about sustaining another Katrina, but there could be a bigger one out there.

NAGIN:

Well, you know, Katrina is the standard. I mean, the 1965 Hurricane Betsy was the standard, and we built to that standard. Now, today, Katrina is the standard, and this design, this build, will meet that standard.

It's also my appreciation that there's \$4.6 billion in the reauthorization as well as another \$8 million for next year to study systems for higher protection. And I feel comfortable that those studies will take place and that currently there's no science to go higher than what they're doing today.

QUESTION:

Mayor Nagin, you said that the commitment is there, but what about the structures? I mean, there is literally nothing in the Ninth Ward, nothing in Lakeview, and when you -- they're telling people to come back, what are they going to come back to right now?

NAGIN:

Well, you know, there's certain sections of the city that obviously were totally devastated, and you're talking about Lakeview and the lower Ninth Ward. Those areas are going to take a little longer for us to come up with the proper design and support.

But I think every other area of the city is at a point now where people can come back, and within a relatively short period of time they can start the rebuild process. Some individuals in New Orleans East and in the lower Ninth Ward and around the 17th Street Canal may have to purchase some property in another section of the city until we figure this out.

So the entire city is not going to come back simultaneously, but hopefully it will be done in phases, and then at the end of the day our entire city will be rebuilt.

QUESTION:

Which (inaudible) canals and how do you think that that's going to affect the area?

NAGIN:

Which what?

QUESTION:

Canals will you close off?

NAGIN:

I'll let the general take care of that.

STROCK:

The 17th, Orleans and London Canal.

QUESTION:

How is that going to help the whole structure?

STROCK:

I'm sorry?

QUESTION:

How is that going to help the whole structure, the levee structure, by

doing that?

(UNKNOWN)

Let me emphasize one thing that the mayor emphasized a moment ago, that -- spoke to -- is that there is a study that will be conducted, hopefully in a relatively short period of time, that will either call for enhancing the levee systems or saying they're OK. And I think it's important that there is something in excess of \$4 million that's been allocated to conduct that study.

Also, I failed to mention that there is \$250 million being spent on restoration of the wetlands. This whole issue of hurricane protection involves more than just the levees. It involves the entire -- hurricane protection would be wetlands, canals, pumping stations, levees, et cetera.

QUESTION:

(OFF-MIKE)

(UNKNOWN)

About \$250 million is dedicated for wetlands restoration and protection. Yes, sir.

The reason those are so important is that if we can prevent the waters from surging into those canals, then we can reduce a lot of the stresses on that part of the levee system.

By closing those gates, the hurricane will come in contact with several hundred feet of shoreline as opposed to several thousand feet, which we have exposed within the canal walls. We elected to put <flood> walls in those canals and not gates originally because the city was concerned about rainfall which occurs during a hurricane event and the ability to evacuate that water from the city.

So rather than put gates from the beginning, we put those <flood> walls in. And clearly, they're not the right answer. So what we need to do is put the gates back in.

QUESTION:

Can you talk about how long the second phase takes and armoring these levees and building sometimes, as you said, 17-foot- high walls, and what happens in the mean time. What's the level of safety if there's another Katrina next year?

CHERTOFF:

We're committed to putting it back to its design configuration by hurricane season next year. As the mayor said, it varies depending on where you are.

QUESTION:

Even the second stage, this...

CHERTOFF:

Well, the second stage, what we'll do is a temporary thing for the second. For example, one of the elements of the second stage is the closure of those canals with a permanent solution.

We have temporary solutions which we installed in the aftermath of Katrina across the face of the bridges that cross those canals, so we will have the protection afforded by a permanent solution, but it won't be as effective or as permanent as what we are going to get to eventually. Two years is what we're looking at to accomplish the program that Mr. Powell laid out for you.

QUESTION:

How would any of this help in the 9th Ward? Are you planning to close MRGO, or have you made any decision about that?

CHERTOFF:

The decision on MRGO, the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, has not been made yet. The decision that has been made on MRGO is we will not dredge it for deep draft traffic. We will leave it as it is so it can handle shallow draft traffic. But that will be part of the study that the chairman referred to for the ultimate protection that we need to seek for the city. So that'll be part of that study.

And the other things that I think you mentioned, the inner harbor where we had <flooding> on the lower 9th Ward, that's where most of the catastrophic <flooding> occurred. We have changed the design of the <flood> walls in there. And we will incorporate the findings of our performance evaluation team into enhancing the designs in there. So we're confident that in a Katrina-like event the inner harbor levy system and <flood walls would not fail in the future.

QUESTION:

Major General, did you ever study the idea of Holland- style sea gates to block off Lake Pontchartrain in the event of a hurricane?

STROCK:

The study in 1965, the original proposal, had a system of barriers at the two outlets of Lake Pontchartrain as one of the most effective ways to take the storm surge off because it got in the lake. The challenge with Lake Pontchartrain is that when the water gets in there, it's rather like a bathtub. It builds up, and you get surge that stays high. And that is what caused the collapse of the levies.

That surge takes a long time to drain out through these narrow outlets. So a way to help enhance the system would be to put barriers at the mouth of Lake Pontchartrain. And that will be studied as part of the study that Chairman Powell mentioned.

QUESTION:

Mr. Secretary, as far as protecting the homeland is concerned, you are doing a good job. As we approach the new year and the holidays, what message do you have for Americans, and where do we stand as far as living in fear or in the fear of attack?

CHERTOFF:

Well, I don't think there's any doubt that we are safer now than we ever have been, although we are going to continue to work to make ourselves safer still. I think the message is always consistent. We cannot be complacent. I know the Patriot Act is up for a vote now in the Senate. It's very important to get that passed. I mean, that gave us some critical tools and some common sense tools that we've put to good use. So we want to get that done.

But we also want people to go about their daily lives. I mean, we do have professionals working very hard every day to keep us safe. When people do see something that is suspicious, we ask them to report it to the appropriate authorities. But again, we have to find a way to live with this threat, which is going to be with us for a long time, in a way that doesn't sacrifice our liberty and prosperity but continues to maintain a level of alertness and awareness. And I think we're doing that, and we're going to continue to do that.

Thanks.

MCCLELLAN:

Good afternoon. I want to begin with a couple of things.

As we were talking about threats from natural disasters, I want to talk about helping protect Americans from threats of terrorism. And that is what's taking place in Iraq today. It's a historic day for the people of Iraq, the Middle East and the world. It's a historic day for the advance of freedom and for our own safety and security.

The Iraqi people are showing through their courage and determination that all people from all backgrounds want to live in freedom. We're encouraged by what appears to be a large turnout across Iraq. The Sunni participation appears to be large. There is indication - the indications are that that's a significant amount of progress since the elections last January.

More and more people are participating in the political process. The courage and determination of the Iraqi people is an inspiration for all those who are seeking greater freedom, particularly those in the broader Middle East.

The Iraqi people have time and time again defied the terrorists. And they are defying the terrorists again today. The terrorists cannot prevent democracy from taking root in the center of the Middle East. We are not going to let them have a place to create a safe haven from which they can plan and plot attacks against the American people and the civilized world. A free Iraq will be a devastating blow to their ambitions and their strategy for spreading their hateful ideology.

The election process is one important step. Now the process will move

forward on the formation of a national government. And that will take some time, as the president talked about yesterday, but we will continue to stand with the Iraqi people and help them as they put that government in place. And we will work with them to move as quickly as possible to help make that happen.

As you're aware, it takes a two-thirds vote of the assembly to choose the presidency council, and that's why I just wanted to set the expectations that it will take some time. There are challenges ahead. There will be tough days ahead. There's much to be done.

But we stand with the Iraqi people on this historic day and we congratulate them on meeting another important milestone in their history.

Secondly, I just want to mention that this afternoon the president will be meeting with some out-of-country Iraqi voters, and he will be talking about the elections here shortly.

I also expect him to talk about another important priority. We have talked about how Iraq is central to winning and prevailing in the war on terrorism. The Patriot Act is critical to helping us prevent attacks from happening here at home.

And the House moved forward with a strong bipartisan vote and approved strongly legislation that reauthorizes all provisions within the Patriot Act. All but two of those are made permanent. This is what the conference committee worked out, and they came to a good piece of legislation.

This provides our law enforcement with vital tools to prevent attacks from happening. Law enforcement intelligence personnel under the Patriot Act have been able to break up terrorist cells in places like New York, and Oregon, and Virginia, and California, and Texas, and Ohio. It's vital that these tools be reauthorized and be reauthorized now.

As the president has said, the provisions of this act expire at the end of the month, but the terrorist threats will not expire at the end of this month, and so we urge Congress before they go home to get this done and to pass this legislation, and I expect the president will talk more about it soon.

QUESTION:

Scott, does the White House have an agreement with Senator McCain on legislative language to ban torture in the interrogation of terrorists?

MCCLELLAN:

Well, first of all, let me just correct one thing. Torture is already banned. It's banned in our laws. It's banned in international treaty obligations. And the president's made it clear that we do not condone torture, nor do we engage in torture. And if people cross that line, they are held accountable, as people have seen.

And second of all, in terms of the discussions with Senator McCain, we've been having very good discussions with Senator McCain. We will be having more to say, I expect, soon. I don't have any announcement to make at this point.

I would not be the one to make the announcement. But we will keep you posted as we move forward.

We've been working very closely with Senator McCain, his staff and others in Congress to make sure that we have a legal framework in place to address the detentions and interrogations while making sure that we still are able to have the tools necessary to prevent attacks from happening in the first place.

And so these are difficult issues, as we talk about the different kind of war we're engaged in. But we've had good discussions with Senator McCain. I expect we'll be saying more soon, and we'll keep you posted on that.

QUESTION:  
(OFF-MIKE) reports that there is an agreement?

MCCLELLAN:  
As I said, I expect we'll have more to say soon, but these discussions have been going on not just with Senator McCain but other members of Congress, too, and we want to let those discussions come to a conclusion, and then I suspect we'll have more to say at that point.

QUESTION:  
Would that be the president who has -- who is the "we"?

MCCLELLAN:  
I'll keep you posted on it. We'll let you know.

QUESTION:  
Scott, a question about some Pentagon activity. We reported that the Pentagon is now reviewing a database of activities of antiwar protesters in the country, antiwar activists, and in some cases the Pentagon, according to our reporting, has listed even peaceful antiwar protests as being a threat to national security.

Do you think this is appropriate for the Pentagon to be doing this?

MCCLELLAN:  
Well, first of all, I'm aware of the reporting. I've been looking into this issue. I don't have additional information. We've been in some meetings with the president regarding the levee system, so I don't have additional information at this point. I don't know all the facts.

The Pentagon, they said publicly, is looking into these issues and working to address them. So at this point I'd like to let them talk more about it.

QUESTION:

Does this raise any concerns for the president...

MCCLELLAN:

Well, again, I don't know the facts. I think this is talking to some matters that may well be classified, and so I would encourage you to talk to the Department of Defense further about it.

QUESTION:

But you can't -- is there a reason why Americans can't be told why this kind of information-gathering...

MCCLELLAN:

Well, I think the Pentagon has been talking about it and they will talk more about it. But as I said, I've been looking into this. I just don't have all the facts.

QUESTION:

Is it an area of concern for the White House?

MCCLELLAN:

I'd like to get the facts before I speak further about it.

QUESTION:

Scott, the president told Brit Hume that he thought that Tom DeLay is not guilty, even though the prosecution is obviously ongoing.

What does the president feel about Scooter Libby? Does he feel that Scooter Libby is...

MCCLELLAN:

Well, a couple of things. First of all, the president was asked a question and he responded to that question in the interview yesterday and made very clear what his views were.

We don't typically tend to get into discussing legal matters of that nature. But in this instance, the president chose to respond to it.

Our policy regarding the Fitzgerald investigation, an ongoing legal proceeding, is well known and it remains unchanged. So I am just not going to have anything further to say.

We've had a policy in place for a long time regarding the Fitzgerald investigation.

QUESTION:

(OFF-MIKE) that apply to the same type of prosecution (inaudible)?

MCCLELLAN:

I just told you we had a policy in place regarding this investigation. And you've heard me say before that we're not going to talk about it further while it's ongoing.

QUESTION:

It's prejudging the Fitzgerald investigation, isn't it, prejudging the Texas investigation regarding Congressman DeLay?

MCCLELLAN:

Again, I think I've answered your question.

QUESTION:

Can I follow up on that? Is the president at all concerned that his opinion on this being expressed publicly could influence a potential juror pool, influence public opinion on this in an improper way?

MCCLELLAN:

Yes, I think (inaudible) just responding to a question that was asked about Congressman DeLay, about Leader DeLay. And in terms of the issue that he brings up, I think that we've had a policy in place going back to 2003, and that's White House policy.

QUESTION:

But that policy has been based in part -- in the leak investigation and in other things -- on the idea that it is simply wrong for a president to prejudge a criminal matter, particularly when it's under indictment or trial stage.

Why would he...

MCCLELLAN:

Well, and that's one regard -- it's an ongoing investigation regarding possible administration officials. So I think there are some differences here.

QUESTION:

But there are lots of times when you don't comment on any sort of...

MCCLELLAN:

There are also legal matters that we have commented on as well. And certainly there's legal matters, when it comes to Saddam Hussein.

QUESTION:

Why doesn't the president stay consistent?

MCCLELLAN:

No, we've put a policy in place regarding this investigation.

QUESTION:

Exactly. You have a policy for some investigations and not others when it's a political ally who you need to get work done?

MCCLELLAN:

Well, call it presidential prerogative. He responded to that question, but the White House established a policy...

QUESTION:

Does that raise questions about his credibility, that he's going to weigh in on some matters and not others -- and we're just supposed to sit back and wait for him to decide what he wants to comment on?

MCCLELLAN:

Well, Congressman DeLay's matter is an ongoing legal proceeding.

QUESTION:

As is the Fitzgerald investigation.

MCCLELLAN:

The Fitzgerald investigation, no, it's an ongoing...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION:

... ad nauseum.

MCCLELLAN:

... investigation as well.

QUESTION:

How can you say that there's differences between the two and we're supposed to buy that? There's no differences. The president decided to weigh in on one and not the other.

MCCLELLAN:

There are differences.

QUESTION:

Are Republicans supposed to accept the fact that he's got no comment on the conduct of senior officials of the White House, but when it's a political ally over on the Hill who's got to help him get work done, then they're happy

to try to influence that legal proceeding.

MCCLELLAN:

No, not at all. You can get all dramatic about it, but you know what our policy is.

QUESTION:

I do have a question about White House ethics guidelines.

MCCLELLAN:

I think the American people understand.

QUESTION:

No, they don't. And the only thing that's dramatic is the inconsistency of the policy and you trying to defend it.

MCCLELLAN:

No, the policy has been in place since 2003.

QUESTION:

I have a question about White House ethics guidelines, which (inaudible) the Fitzgerald investigation. I'm not talking about the criminal sense.

Last week, Robert Novak in a public speech said that reporters should be asking the president who the anonymous source is because he believes he knows.

And my question is was: It ethical to change the grounds of dismissal from anyone involved in the disclosure of classified information to anyone convicted in the disclosure of classified information.

And if the president did not take action privately, is it ethical for him not to have done anything?

MCCLELLAN:

As I've indicated, our policy hasn't changed on this matter.

QUESTION:

Scott, on Iraq -- how will today's elections affect U.S. policy on troop withdrawals going forward?

MCCLELLAN:

I'm sorry?

QUESTION:

How will they affect elections?

MCCLELLAN:

Well, this is a sign of real progress. Once again, the Iraqi people are meeting an important political milestone. Our strategy is based on winning in Iraq. And we are making important progress.

There are still challenges and difficulties ahead, as the president indicated. The terrorists are not going away after this election. The terrorists recognize how high the stakes are in Iraq. They recognize that a free Iraq will be a devastating blow to their ambitions. And that's why it's so important that we succeed in Iraq, and we are winning and we will win.

The president is confident of the outcome because he's confident of our men and women in uniform, and he's confident of the power of freedom to overcome tyranny. It does every time, and it will in this instance. But in terms of the troop levels, as the Pentagon has already indicated, they increased the troop levels ahead of these elections anticipating that there would be a lot of violence because we know that the terrorists and Saddam loyalists want to try to derail the transition to democracy.

QUESTION:

(OFF-MIKE)

MCCLELLAN:

No, no, I'm coming to that. The elections are coming to a conclusion or they may have already concluded by now in Iraq. The results will take some time to come in and, as I said, the formation of a government.

I think you can expect going forward that the terrorists will continue to try to spread fear and chaos and violence because that's all they can do. They can't beat us. They will be defeated. They can only shake our will, but they are not going to.

We are going to complete the mission and we are going to win and the terrorists will be defeated and the Iraqi people are defeating them every time they go back to the polls to choose their freedom, to live in freedom.

And in terms of troop presence, as I was indicating, the Pentagon has already indicated that the numbers that went up will go back down to the level it was prior to the led up to the elections. And then going forward from that, there will continue to be conditions on base withdrawal.

As conditions permit, then we will look to our commanders and our commanders will make recommendations and they'll be the ones who make those decisions, not politicians here in Washington. We shouldn't be putting artificial timetables on this. We should be meeting our objectives and accomplishing victory, and the president spelled out very clear what victory is.

Victory is making sure that Iraq is no longer threatened by terrorists and Saddam loyalists who seek to derail their transition to democracy. Victory is accomplished by making sure that the Iraqi forces are able to defend their own people from external and internal threats. And victory is

accomplished by making sure that Iraq won't be a safe haven from which the terrorists can plan and plot attacks.

QUESTION:

A corollary question then, how big a step is this in Iraq's ability to defend itself? Is this considered by the administration...

MCCLELLAN:

Well, what we have is an integrated strategy amongst all three tracks -- the political, security and economic tracks. Progress is being made on each of those fronts. And as you make progress on one, it helps on the others. As the Iraqi people defy the terrorists and go to the polls and choose their leaders, they are defying the terrorists and helping to defeat the terrorists. And so, I think that that's the way you want to look at it.

QUESTION:

Scott, on the torture issue, has the president's thinking changed at all by the fact that a veto-proof majority in both houses of the Congresses seems to disagree with that?

MCCLELLAN:

Well, first of all, again, we'll have more to say on this issue later, but I think that the issue here has always been some of the legal sides of this and what framework do we have in place. Remember, Senators Graham and Kyl and Levin also put forward an important amendment as well.

And so, you have to look at it in that context, and how does this fit together in a legal framework to help us address these issues relating to detainees and interrogations, while also helping us be able to have the tools we need to prevent attacks from happening. We're talking about dealing with dangerous and any combatants who are picked up on the battlefield.

But we've had a policy in place, a policy that prohibits this kind of activity in terms of cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment. The secretary talked about that. I talked about it previously. And the president has made it clear that we do not torture and he does not condone torture. We abide by our laws and our international obligations.

What this issue goes to is the legal side of it and what is in the law. And so, I think you're essentially talking about what is already policy, being put into law.

QUESTION:

But there was a clear difference between what Vice President Cheney has been pushing for -- what the administration has been pushing for and what Congress supports in this case.

MCCLELLAN:

Well, I think people will have more to say on it soon -- to talk about it and you'll have more understanding of what some of these issues relate to.

All right. Thank you.

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