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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
April 25, 2008

Press Gaggle by Tony Snow

Aboard Air Force One
En route Washington, D.C.

12:15 P.M. EDT

MR. SNOW: Hello, all, let's gaggle. All right, first on the President's day, let's see -- aboard Air Force One, since we've lifted off, there have been two head-of-state calls, one to President Antonio Sacca of El Salvador, and also Peru's President-elect, Alan Garcia. The Salvadoran call, primarily about immigration. On Peru, they talked first about congratulations on winning the election, the President passed them on; talked about defending and extending democracy in the region; and also working together on issues of free trade.

Coming up today on the President's schedule: When we land he'll be meeting with bicameral Republican congressional leadership. That's a sort of standard, regular meeting on a broad range of issues. There will be a swearing in for Dirk Kempthorne as Secretary of the Interior. And then, as you know, about five different codels went to Iraq during the break. There will be a meeting with members of both Houses and both parties about Iraq.

And I believe that's everything on today's public schedule. Questions.

Q Tony, how does the President analyze the results of the 50th congressional district in California?

MR. SNOW: Well, he's happy that Brian Bilbray won. Look, it was a close and tight race all along. But it's also interesting to note that in a case like this, everybody was trying to look for a bellwether. I think a lot of critics were hoping that this would be a kind of bellwether so that they could say that the Republican Party and the presidency were in peril. And they clearly -- their hopes were clearly frustrated.

Q So not a bellwether, then?

MR. SNOW: No, it was a tight race. It was a race that in many ways was governed by a series of local issues and it was a tough race for Republicans. Here you had Duke Cunningham having to leave Congress; and you had Brian Bilbray, whose activities as a lobbyist had been brought up as a campaign issue; and having missed votes while traveling had been an issue. That's a tough election.

And, furthermore, one of the things we've noticed in looking at polling in recent weeks is that people who stick with the President on immigration, on the issue, that tends to be attractive over the long run when people hear about comprehensive reform. Representative Bilbray didn't support that -- nevertheless, we congratulate him on his victory. It was a tough race.

Q Is it true that the United States has agreed to allow Iran to have uranium conversion?

MR. SNOW: No. I would walk you back a little bit. Maybe the most important point to make about what has gone on is, number one, this is not a U.S.-Iran negotiation, period. It's still a multilateral world community with Iran. Number two, the precondition of suspending uranium enrichment-related and reprocessing activities -- that is still an absolute condition, and it is agreed upon by the United States, by the P5 plus one, by the IAEA. Everybody has agreed on that condition.

Again, Iran has to do that to get to the table to be able to discuss incentives and disincentives. I know that a lot of characterizations have been made in the press by people who may have indirect or, in some cases, incomplete knowledge of what was offered. But we're not going to go into the details; we've said that before and I'll say it again. But I will reiterate the fundamental point, which is that the precondition of putting an end to all -- suspending all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, that is still the precondition and it's agreed upon by all parties who have gone to talk with the government in Tehran.

Q So the answer is "no"?

MR. SNOW: The question was -- again, nothing happens -- I am not going to negotiate from here. We are not going to talk about specifics in the negotiation. And, furthermore, I'm just not going to get into any -- it was a general question that got a specific answer. I'm not going to talk about specific proffers.

Q Is it on the table that down the road, that if they come back to the table that they would be allowed to --

MR. SNOW: Again, I'm not going into specific proffers; we're just not going to do that.

Q Well, you said that our reporting is wrong.

MR. SNOW: Here's what you're supposed to take: There is no change in the administration position. There has been the insinuation that somehow there was a step back from the notion that Iran had to suspend. There is no change in that position on the part of the negotiating countries. So that's what I meant by that answer.

Q But you're not commenting on the reporting that the U.S. would contribute to uranium enrichment or --

MR. SNOW: Again, what I'm telling you is a lot of stuff has been put in play by people who may not have full knowledge of what was actually in the document. I will steer you back to my fundamental point, which is, Iran must suspend uranium enrichment-related and reprocessing activities -- you probably can say this by memory now. They have to do that to get to the table, period. That has not changed.

Q Did the President have any reaction to the reports yesterday about all those servicemen who had their records

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Mohamed Elreppesen (appendix)

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apparently compromised in that matter?

MR. SNOW: Well, I didn't talk about it -- I didn't talk to him about it, but I think -- you may recall that what happened is we got this report, and Chairman -- I mean, Secretary Nicholson -- I know, it's different jobs, at least I didn't say "Ambassador" -- Secretary Nicholson said they had to go back and they had to match between a database at the Veterans Administration and the hard drive, and said that there may be further clarifications of what's going on.

At this point, we continue to encourage people who may have concerns to contact the website or the phone number -- and, unfortunately, I don't have them on me right now, but the VA has been leaning forward, so anybody who has concerns about the possible compromise of any information ought to contact the VA numbers, and they can walk them through. So far there has been no evidence of any identity theft, but we obviously remain concerned about the story.

Q What about the report out of the European watchdog group that 20-some-odd countries participated or allowed the rendition flights? And can you give us any reaction to that?

Q We can't hear the question.

MR. SNOW: He's asking about the rendition story. Several points to make on rendition. Number one, rendition is something that has been practiced by nations for a very long time. Carlos the Jackal, you may recall, by rendition ended up in a French jail. Nations have to work together on intelligence matters. It's also very important to stress that the United States does not condone torture, does not practice torture. Torture is illegal and we acknowledge and follow all international laws.

Furthermore, we will not agree to send anybody to a nation or place that practices torture. So when it comes to the rendition things, those are the important pieces to remember. It's also important to remember again that international cooperation in the war on terror is essential for winning, and rendition is not something that began with this administration, and it's certainly going to be practiced, I'm sure, in the future.

Q There are reports saying that there was human rights violations --

MR. SNOW: I am not going to respond to a report.

Q Is the President aware of a soldier, I believe, in California, who is going to become today the first person to refuse publicly his assignment to Iraq? And does the President have a position on whether he should be excused?

MR. SNOW: No, I don't. For that I'd refer you back to the Pentagon for comment on it.

Q The Senate just rejected the constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. Leaders in the House say they still plan to take it up. Does the President think that's a good use of their time, when it's clear they don't have the votes in Congress to get it passed?

MR. SNOW: Well, I'd leave that to members of the House to decide. Again, Nedra, as you know, it's possible for members of Congress to take up a whole lot of issues at once -- in fact, it's their job. And this is an issue on which, I dare say, many members want to express themselves. I'm not going to tell them what to put on their legislative calendar.

Q Does the President have any reaction to the failure?

MR. SNOW: Well, he understands that this is an issue that people are going to want to think about. And he believes strongly that marriage is between a man and a woman. There is one more vote in the Senate than there was last time around. His issue he will continue to support.

Q Is he disappointed?

MR. SNOW: You know, I don't want to characterize state of mind on it. There will be a statement out later, and we'll see if there's any expression of his emotional condition.

Q He lobbied for this, or spoke out in support of it yesterday and over the weekend. So a cause that he championed has lost -- so does he --

MR. SNOW: It's fair enough, Jessica. The President understands that on an issue like this, it tends to evolve in response to things that are going on around the country. He has spoken repeatedly on the fact that nationwide, in a number of states, voters in a number of states and legislatures have defined marriage as being between a man and a woman, only to have courts overturn it. And he said that he wishes it hadn't come to this, that judicial activism is a concern. This is an issue that will play out over time, and the defeat does not mean that he's despondent or that he gives up on it. He knows that this is a long fight.

Q Tony, now that the Iranians have been presented the incentives package, are you at liberty to describe the package, the contents?

MR. SNOW: No.

Q Getting back to immigration. Are there things in the immigration bill that would prevent the President from signing it? Has he laid out what sort of the "black area" would be?

MR. SNOW: The President doesn't negotiate against himself. What he really wants to do is work with members of both Houses of Congress. As he pointed out today, a year ago, everybody was saying, put it off, don't do it, it's too hot. Now you've had the House and Senate both adopt legislation with regard to immigration. And the President is making it very clear, I think, that he wants a comprehensive bill, or new set of bills, if necessary -- comprehensive immigration reform. And that is going to continue to be his position.

I think it's also important to note that as the President gets out and talks about this, people begin to understand his position better. They get to see it. We had -- today, he had the opportunity to speak with people who had come here and become citizens, who had started businesses. He had an opportunity to sit in on a classroom, and some of you were in there. And this helps dramatize what's going on. Today he was dramatizing not only importance, but how it happens that you do assimilation.

He's going to sign an executive order when he returns that is going to mobilize federal departments and agencies to figure out ways to make it easier for people who want to become American citizens, and who are pursuing a legal path -- that is whatever path has been so defined; I'm not going to try to get into prejudging the legislation -- make it easier for people to assimilate by learning the language, learning the culture, learning history, learning civics, and being able to integrate into American society and take full advantage of what the President described, the old phrase, the American Dream.

So that's what he's doing. He's not going to get into the process of saying, this is what I demand. The President is not making demands right now. What he's trying to do is to lead, to lay out principles. And one of the points he's been

Monahed V. Jappesen (appendix),
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making the last two days is that there is not a lot of disagreement on the principles he's been talking about. So he's hoping that members of both Houses are going to be able to work together to go ahead and accomplish the chore of having a comprehensive immigration package.

Q There seems to be substantial disagreement on the idea of the pathway to citizenship and legalization that the President outlined. Do you see any hopes for some kind of compromise there?

MR. SNOW: That's not what -- again, you're asking me to try to engage in negotiations. I'm not going to do it. The President has made it pretty clear what he wants.

And again, I think what happens, too, is as people begin to see his position, I think it has some effect --that politicians and citizens will be taking note. They'll be getting a fuller understanding of where he stands and what he wants. And that always has an impact, when the President takes that kind of a stand.

Q At the top, you said that when he gets back he's meeting with members of the House and Senate?

MR. SNOW: There are two meetings. There's a bicameral meeting with Republican leaders, and then there's a bipartisan meeting with people who have just come back from Iraq. There were five different codels that were over in Iraq.

Q The topic is going to be Iraq, then, or --

MR. SNOW: No, no, no. The first meeting -- he meets fairly regularly with the bipartisan leadership, and they'll talk about a whole bunch of stuff. I'm sure immigration and taxes and all that stuff will come up. The second one is specifically about Iraq.

Q Do you know the times on those?

MR. SNOW: Yes. I think -- let's see, the Republican meeting is at 1:55 p.m., and the Iraq meeting is at 3:25 p.m.

Q Yesterday when the President was asked about Somalia, he said that when he gets back, he's going to strategize with Secretary Rice. Is there any plan for a meeting on Somalia, in particular?

MR. SNOW: I don't think there's a specific meeting. When the President meets with Secretary Rice -- or, for the matter, with Secretary Rumsfeld -- they tend to talk about a lot of stuff. And, obviously, with Secretary Rice, you're not going to have a meeting just on Somalia -- you've got Iran, you've got Iraq, you've got a lot of things. But it certainly will come up. And I don't know if they're going to be talking by phone. Secretary Rice comes over a lot. I don't have any specific guidance, but I'm sure it's going to come up quite soon.

Q -- on Maliki, and the President's confidence in their government, how it's evolving, and the violence in Iraq?

MR. SNOW: Well, once again, we are looking forward to the Prime Minister being able to get in place his interior and defense ministries. That's obviously an important step.

Q He's not troubled by the delay?

MR. SNOW: He understands that when you're doing government formation, especially in a brand new parliamentary system, it's a complicated chore.

Q Is the President planning to meet with Secretary Rice --

MR. SNOW: I don't -- like I said, I don't know. There's nothing on the calendar that I have. But they meet frequently and they talk frequently. There's nothing on today's calendar.

Q All right, thank you.

MR. SNOW: All right, thanks.

END 12:30 P.M. EDT

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Mohamed V. Jeppesen (appendix),