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Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. FLEISCHER: Good afternoon. Let me fill you in on the President's day. The President began this morning with a phone call to President Putin of Russia. They discussed the situation in Iraq. They underscored the importance of bilateral cooperation, despite the disagreements the United States and Russia have over the situation in Iraq. And President Putin reiterated to President Bush his invitation to visit St. Petersburg at the end of May.

President Bush also this morning called to congratulate Hu Jintao on becoming China's President. President Bush and President Hu agreed on the importance of good U.S.-China relations for the advancement of bilateral interests and international peace and stability. The Presidents shared views on Iraq and North Korea. President Bush expressed appreciation for Beijing's efforts to help resolve the North Korean issue peacefully. President Bush also reiterated his administration's commitment to a one China policy.

The President then had his intelligence briefing, FBI briefing, had additional meetings, and has no public events on his schedule today. I'm happy to take your questions.

Q Can we get your reaction to some of the comments that were coming from the Hill? Senator Daschle saying that he's "saddened that this President failed so miserably at diplomacy that we are now forced to war."

MR. FLEISCHER: Of course, members of Congress, including Senator Daschle, are well within their rights to express their opinions. If you take a look at what Senator Daschle has said about the inevitability of using force in 1998, and if you take a look at what Senator Daschle said about the importance of raising the rhetoric to a higher level and not politicizing the rhetoric, I find his statement to be inconsistent. But perhaps he has a better explanation.

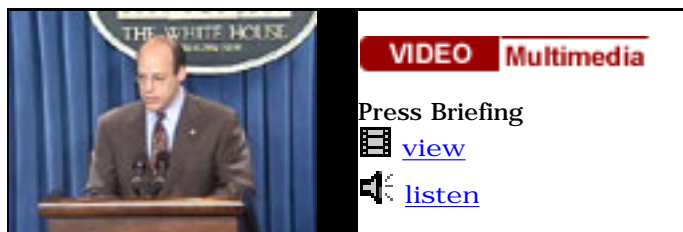
Q But do you believe he is politicizing this, that no one has a right at this time to criticize the President?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I just said the opposite. It is within the rights of every member of Congress to say what they think, to express their opinions. He certainly is well within his rights to express his opinions. It just strikes me as inconsistent with previous things he has said.

Q Can I also ask you about something Senator John McCain said on the floor this morning, that he would not support any tax cuts or spending increases not related to improving the nation's defenses? The President hasn't yet talked about cost at all with the American people. Again, we're standing on the brink and he is still proposing a massive tax cut. At what point is he going to explain to people what this is going to cost the country in terms of the economy?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, Congress is just beginning the whole process of reviewing the budget. And all of this will become a part of that in the event that it does lead to hostilities; the administration would send up a supplemental appropriation bill to the Congress. And so Congress will then have at its disposal all the relevant facts and figures to make the determinations for their budget issues as the year proceeds.

In all cases, the President, as he has stressed repeatedly, is focused on, and urges Congress to continue to focus on, domestic needs, whether there is war, or whether there is peace. And



those domestic needs include providing economic growth so that if there is war, when the war is over, our military has jobs to come home to. And a part of that is passing the economic package.

Q President Putin condemned the military action in Iraq and spoke of it to possibly hurting relations. At the same time, the Russian parliament pulled down a vote on the nuclear arms treaty, China is condemning the President's march to war. Did either one of these divisions come up in his conversations? Did he try to explain why he's doing what he's doing?

MR. FLEISCHER: The two openly acknowledged that they don't see eye-to-eye on whether or not force should be used to disarm Saddam Hussein. They agree about threats in the region, but it's no secret that they don't see eye-to-eye on whether the use of force is a required remedy to make Saddam Hussein disarm. But the two of them in the phone call did stress to each other the importance of maintaining good U.S.-Russia relations, and the both expressed confidence that it would, indeed, happen.

Q Is Russia one of the countries the President was referring to when he said, these countries share our belief about the threat with Iraq, but they don't share our resolve?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President didn't specifically define who he was referring to, so I wouldn't define it for him.

Q When the President speaks to the nation at the beginning of hostilities, will he then, for the first time, talk about what he expects the conflict to cost in terms of lives and in terms of dollars?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm just not going to be in the business of predicting future presidential remarks. If and when it gets to that point, the President would indicate something himself. I wouldn't predict every circumstance.

Q Don't you think that the President will want to give the American public some indication? All we get is --

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not saying he wouldn't. I'm just saying it's not my place today to do it for him.

Q All we get is a vague thing about a supplemental. People who were here from Congress yesterday said that they estimated it would be \$80 billion to \$90 billion. But there's not a word out of here, no word from the President.

MR. FLEISCHER: There was no discussion in the meetings with members of Congress yesterday -- none -- about the level of a supplemental.

Q What about American lives? We don't hear about that yet either.

MR. FLEISCHER: Again, the President has said that he hopes that this can be done peacefully. If there are lives lost, he believes the American people understand the risks, the sacrifices that people are prepared to make if it is necessary to use force to disarm Saddam Hussein. I think people understand that. This has been a very serious run-up to what may become war. And the American people have heard and understand the reality and the gravity of the situation. And I think they understand that.

Q Is there any doubt that there's going to be war?

Q I pick up on that -- what you said. Does it bother the President that most of the world is against this war, and half of America? And I have a follow-up.

MR. FLEISCHER: Helen, this is an issue where you and I will never agree when you state your premise about what the people think.

Q This isn't you and I. This is a very legitimate question.

Q There's a new poll showing --

MR. FLEISCHER: Helen, I think there's a lot of public polling that you can see out there. The recent poll from your neighbor to the right, ABC News showed that 79 percent of the American people think that Saddam Hussein is a threat to the United States. I've heard you say on many occasions most Americans don't think he's a threat to the United States.

Q I didn't say -- is said the war.

MR. FLEISCHER: So I understand your strong opinions clearly. I'm not sure the American people agree with you.

Q That's a very personal attack. I said the war. Are they in favor of --

MR. FLEISCHER: I thought it was an accurate observation.

Q Are you saying 79 percent of the American people are for this war?

MR. FLEISCHER: What I just said to you is that according to that ABC poll, 79 percent of the American people think that Saddam Hussein is a threat to the United States.

Q That wasn't what I asked you.

MR. FLEISCHER: In terms of support for a war, again, talking about the public polls, I saw one this morning in USA Today that put that figure at 66 percent, if I recall.

Q And one other question, which is, can the President present any show-and-tell evidence of ties to al Qaeda with Saddam, and also a nuclear potential immediately or imminently?

MR. FLEISCHER: You heard what Secretary Powell talked about when he went to the United Nations and has reiterated on a regular basis since then, as well as others in the administration, about the presence in Baghdad of al Qaeda operatives, about the involvement of al Qaeda trained in Iraq involved in the assassination of AID worker Foley in Jordan. So this has been something that has been discussed very publicly.

Q Why is the -- the CIA and FBI have never said that, backed that up.

MR. FLEISCHER: Don't think it would have been said if it hadn't been supported by them.

Q Will U.S. troops enter Iraq, no matter what, at this point? In other words, even if Saddam Hussein, in some off chance, takes this ultimatum, leaves the country with his sons, will U.S. troops, nevertheless, enter Iraq?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President addressed that last night. And the President made clear that Saddam Hussein had 48 hours to leave, beginning at 8:00 p.m. Eastern time last night. The President also made plain to the American people that if Saddam were to leave, the American forces, coalition forces would still enter Iraq, hopefully this time peacefully, because Iraqi military would not be under orders to attack or fire back. And that way Iraq could be disarmed from possession of weapons of mass destruction.

Q So the bottom line is, Americans are going to occupy Iraq, no matter what, at this point?

MR. FLEISCHER: The bottom line is, a coalition of the willing will disarm Saddam Hussein's Iraq, no matter what.

Q And up in the north, will the United States allow Turkish troops to push deeper into Iraq than they are positioned now along the buffer zone along the border?

MR. FLEISCHER: Our position on this, and this has been made clear to the government of Turkey, is that no outside forces other than those under coalition command should enter Iraq.

Q And then, finally, on the Daschle thing, are you saying that because Senator Daschle criticized the President's diplomacy, that's inconsistent with the principle of not politicizing the war, and that, therefore, from that podium speaking on behalf of the Commander-in-Chief during wartime, that shouldn't be done?

MR. FLEISCHER: Speaking from this podium, I received a question about statements made by a member of Congress, and as I said, every member of Congress is entitled to state what they think, no matter what they think. That is their right, and they are entitled to it, and will always will be entitled to it. I merely point out you can compare this statement with previous statements made and draw on your own inferences about whether those statements are consistent, or not. I say, when you look at what he's previously said, his statements are not consistent.

Q But you don't want to discourage dissent in this country at all?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's every person's right to dissent, and nothing has been suggested here that would ever say that people don't have that right. I have not said that here.

Q Ari, can you give us a little more on the expulsion of people with ties to Iraqi intelligence that the President eluded to last night, or discuss how many might be involved? Were their specific activity they were believed involved in?

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't have the specific numbers. You may want to talk to the FBI or the State Department about that. But we have worked with allied nations about the potential threats that Iraqi so-called diplomats might present because of concerns that they're not diplomats, they actually are working intelligence fields. And the United States is taking actions within our rights. Other nations have taken similar actions. I believe the first nation to take such an action, if you recall, was several weeks ago when the Philippines threw out an Iraqi -- a high-ranking Iraqi diplomat after a terrorist attack in the Philippines where evidence was right away traced back to the Iraqi embassy.

Q So were there people in the United States who have been expelled as part of this?

MR. FLEISCHER: There were, and the State Department has the details on that. If I recall, this was made public. It was officials up in New York.

Q And secondly, are there any signs North Korea is using this current crisis or situation to accelerate it's nuclear program further, restarting the plutonium plant --

MR. FLEISCHER: North Korea has, since the late '90s, engaged in a program to develop it's nuclear weapons, contrary to all the agreements that they entered into in a bilateral agreement with the United States. It didn't take anything in Iraq for North Korea to violate it's word and produce nuclear weapons. North Korea has continued it's attempts to manufacture more nuclear weapons. But we continue to monitor the situation with North Korea. I can't say that I can report to you they've accelerated.

Q Ari, just to follow up on something in the gaggle this morning. Saddam Hussein has defied the ultimatum, and the Pentagon officials said last night that the President's statement -- speech was worded so that if Saddam Hussein did defy the ultimatum, there was the option of starting military force at any time before the 48 hours is up. Would you agree with that? Is that how you see it, if military action could now start at any time because Saddam Hussein has defied the ultimatum and said he's not leaving?

MR. FLEISCHER: Let me make two points: One, Saddam Hussein has led Iraq to many mistakes in the past, principally by developing weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein, if he doesn't leave the country, will make his final mistake. The President continues to hope he will.

On the question of timing, anything involving timing I will refer to the Pentagon. As a matter of White House procedure, as you're very familiar with -- I've explained this to many people individually, I've said it collectively in the off-the-camera session this morning -- the same policy that was in effect in 1991 will be in effect at the White House this year, and that is all operational details, including questions of timing, et cetera, will be matters for the Pentagon to talk about.

Q So you're leaving it open? You're not ruling it out.

MR. FLEISCHER: I leave it for the Pentagon to discuss. I remind you of the President's words in his speech was, "a time of our choosing". That's how the President expressed it. He also talked about 48 hours for Saddam Hussein to leave the country to avoid military conflict.

Q If Saddam Hussein goes into exile, will the U.S. seek to have him prosecuted for war crimes?

MR. FLEISCHER: That would be a question for the international community to consider. We hope that that will become an option that can be considered.

Q And Secretary Powell said today that there is roughly 30 countries in the coalition of the willing. That leaves roughly 160 United Nations members in the coalition of the unwilling. Why is that?

MR. FLEISCHER: First of all, that's, I don't think, a fair characterization of other nations to say that they're in a coalition of the unwilling. Not every nation has the ability to contribute. Not every nation is in an area that is geographically advantageous concerning military operations or overflight or basing. So I think it depends significantly on the ability of these nations to contribute to a coalition. But I don't think you can accurately say that.

If you were to take a look at -- by that standard, then you would be able to make the same conclusions about many previous wars, including the first Persian Gulf War, say that the world was against it by that standard.

Q So does the United States have most of the members it wants, or all of the members it wants?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think it's fair to say that the United States, as the President said, would act with a rather robust and significant size coalition of the willing, by any measurement.

Q Ari, to follow up on Elizabeth's question, is it still the administration's position that Saddam Hussein has until Wednesday 8:00 p.m., evening Eastern Standard Time to leave his country? And is there are any indications that that window will be open up until that point?

MR. FLEISCHER: I can only repeat to you what the President said, and that is, Saddam Hussein has 48 hours, and he made those remarks at 8:00 p.m. last night, to leave the country to avoid military conflict.

Q How will you validate or confirm whether or not he has actually done so? Who are you talking with?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think that it is not a matter of any doubt; if Saddam Hussein were to leave the country, I think everybody would know, and everybody would know rather quickly.

Q And your reaction to the French Ambassador's statement to CNN this morning. He was saying that if Saddam Hussein were to use chemical and biological weapons, this would change the situation completely and immediately for the French government, suggesting that the French military could assist the U.S.-led coalition. Is this a sign, perhaps, of a change in point of view?

MR. FLEISCHER: One, I thought it was a notable statement. Two, let us hope it never has to come to pass.

Q Ari, when you say notable statement, do you mean we'd welcome their hope?

MR. FLEISCHER: I just note that is a notable statement for France to say such a thing.

Q But I didn't hear you say, and we'd love to have them help us.

MR. FLEISCHER: I also said, let us hope that never comes to pass, because it is premised on our troops being hit with chemical or biological weapons.

Q But you'd accept their help?

MR. FLEISCHER: I just said it's a notable statement. I have not had an opportunity to have it fully studied by the United States government.

Q Ari, more generally, we have not seen the President in any kind of informal setting for a while now, other than with the dogs yesterday. Could you describe for us the President's mood, what he may be doing to keep focused, and the general White House mood?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I was with the President before he made the speech last night and afterwards. And I think the President is very, very focused. The President, having worked on this issue for such a considerable period of time, pursued the diplomacy with the diligence and the importance that the diplomacy deserved, believes now and is comfortable now with the fact that the moment of truth has come.

And the President believes in his heart that to preserve peace around the world, Saddam Hussein must be disarmed. And he is comfortable with the action that is pending, and is confident that it will achieve its goal. He is, I think, rather serious these days about that, focused and determined to achieve that mission, and he's comfortable with it.

Q Ari, what is the number of countries that you believe are willing to participate in a coalition of the willing? Is it 30? And how do you define participation in the coalition?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we have all along said, in terms of actual, active combat, there would be very, very few countries. In terms of providing the necessary means of basing or overflight, which, after all, is how combat would ensue -- you can't have combat if you don't have supplies, you can't have combat if you don't have overflight -- it will be a rather large number. And Secretary Powell has discussed that today.

Q And 30 is the number that --

MR. FLEISCHER: That's the number the Secretary said.

Q And the number that the White House obviously believes is accurate?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct, that's the number.

Q There were remarks this morning from Mr. Aldouri, as well, at the United Nations, in which he said that if there is a war, how could you have a safe place in the war, and if you're the invader, how can you ask for a safe place for you. What does the administration make of that?

MR. FLEISCHER: Say that statement again.

Q He says, if you are the invader, if you are the invader, how can you ask for a safe place for you.

MR. FLEISCHER: Who does "you" apply to?

Q The United States.

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not sure I really understand what the point is, other than, the only way I can -- I interpret that statement to be, if the United States uses military force, the President is, of course, very comfortable and confident that we will be successful in achieving our objectives. I make no prediction about the length of time. I've seen many people say that this could be relatively quick. We make no such assumptions. But the President is confident in the outcome.

Q One other thing, if I may. When the President speaks next, do you anticipate that it would be before any hostilities? Would it be at the end of this 48-hour period? What should we expect now?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not going to speculate about that. We will, of course, keep you advised, and if we have something, we'll share it.

Q Back on the coalition of the willing. The fact that there are so few countries that are actually going to put their soldiers, their troops on the line in military action, is that by design, or because the U.S. could not attract more players to that part of the action?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I'm not going to get into any of these details until it is revealed and you have the information in front of you about what countries are doing exactly what, and then I think you'll be able to make more informed judgments about it. The fact of the matter is, the overwhelming amount of combat will be provided by a relatively small number of countries. And that is sufficient to accomplish the mission. And other nations are free to contribute as they see fit.

Q But was that by design?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think it's a reflection of the diplomacy; I think it's a reflection of the ability of different nations to contribute; and I think it's also a reflection of how much is needed to accomplish the mission.

Q I'm sorry, could I -- is the President today trying to grow the coalition of the willing? Can you tell us a little bit about really what is he doing today? This morning you said he's going over war plans. But is he also trying to get more nations to come on board and participate?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think there could be some movement to the various degrees. The Secretary also talked about nations that are contributing, but don't want to be publicly named. And so, back to Jim's question, there could be room for some imprecision on the exact number as different nations see fit. But I think that the parameters of it are basically set.

And the President, as I indicated, spent his day on the phone calls with some of the foreign leaders. In meetings, he has domestic meetings today, as well. He's meeting with other members of his Cabinet. And so he's pursuing a variety of items today.

Q What are the topics -- what are the domestic topics that he might discuss today?

MR. FLEISCHER: He has, since the very beginning of the administration, since January 20th, 2001, had periodic meetings with Cabinet secretaries. He's had more frequent meetings, of course, with Secretary Powell, Secretary Rumsfeld. But he has periodic meetings with the Cabinet secretaries. And those meetings have been taking place for the last couple -- well, for the last week or so, and will continue to take place. Those are private meetings with individual members of the Cabinet to go through all the items on their agenda and to talk to him about their top issues.

So there are those meetings. And there are also domestic policy briefings about legislation pending on the Hill and upcoming congressional action on domestic matters.

Q Is that the tax bill? Is he going to talk about -- is he having meetings on the tax bill today?

MR. FLEISCHER: These are private domestic policy briefings. We don't indicate the topics of his private briefings.

Q Two questions. One on the 48-hour deadline. Is it the President's policy that regardless of what statements have come out of Iraq today, that Saddam has the full 48 hours to think it over, perhaps change his mind and exercise the option the President offered?

MR. FLEISCHER: The statement spoke for itself. I'm not going to say anything different from the statement. The statement spoke for itself. Saddam knows what he needs to do.

Q Your answer to Suzanne's question suggested that that's the case, that the President would give him the full 48 hours to perhaps change his mind and rethink the matter. Is that correct?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm not going to change what the President said. The President said he has 48 hours to depart to avoid military conflict.

Q It stands -- so it's 48 hours.

MR. FLEISCHER: It stands.

Q Regarding Senator Daschle's comments, what in your view is precisely the inconsistency between Senator Daschle's statement last year that we shouldn't politicize this, and his statement yesterday that the President had failed diplomatically? What's the inconsistency?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I would refer you -- and I made this about several statements when I said inconsistency -- I would refer you to statements made on February 12, 1998, in the Congressional Record; statements made on February 5, 1998, as reported in The Chicago Tribune -- that all deals with the inevitability of the use of force against Saddam Hussein -- as well as statement on September 25, 2002, in the Congressional Record about not politicizing the rhetoric and rising to a higher level.

Q Well, I understand that what you're saying is inconsistent between the first statement you read and what he said yesterday. But are you saying that there's an inconsistency between the second and what he said yesterday, politicizing the rhetoric?

MR. FLEISCHER: I said it's inconsistent.

Q In what way is what he said yesterday politicizing the rhetoric?

MR. FLEISCHER: Because I don't find it consistent.

Q How so?

Q How -- the question is how?

MR. FLEISCHER: Larry.

Q Ari, the President today is obviously reaching out to President Putin to try to put differences behind them. Is he making any similar type effort with France and Germany?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, as you know, Secretary Powell spoke with Foreign Minister Fischer and Foreign Minister de Villepin yesterday morning. And we'll keep you filled in on the President's conversations and calls. At the end of the day, this is always important and the President will note this, that we are allies, that we share common values, and that we work together on many issues. I have not been shy about saying to everybody here, even in the thick of a disagreement with France, that France has been a good partner in the war against terrorism. They have shared information. They have been helpful in the war against terrorism. On this issue, they see it very much the opposite and the President regrets that.

Q Ari, back on the supplemental. What is the likely that there will be Israeli aid also in that package? And just for a point of clarification, you're saying that we should expect the supplemental to go up to the Hill after the war has begun, is that correct?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct on the second part. I'm not going to speculate about what may or may not be in. At the appropriate time --

Q -- I assume, possible?

MR. FLEISCHER: Israel is a longtime ally and partner of the United States. We have strategic interests with Israel. And I'm not going to speculate beyond that.

Q On the orange alert, as you know, Ari, we had a pro-war protester down on the mall for almost 24 hours. He disrupted two rush-hour travel sequences. My question is, are you -- is the White House confident that Washington does have adequate escape plans if there is a reason to get out of town?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well I'm -- I really don't see the connection between the incident on the Mall and escape plans.

Q With traffic blocked --

Q You weren't on 95. (Laughter.)

Q That's right. A major artery between Virginia and Washington was blocked during two key rush-hour periods by a single person. So the connection I'm trying to make is, if we have -- thank God this was a disruption of commerce, but if we have a threat to human life, are you convinced that based on what --

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the President believes that every step has been taken, is being taken, and continues to be taken to constantly improve on all efforts to provide for homeland security. Clearly, depending on the type of incident, the type of terrorist attack, if there were one to be involved, judgments would be made about what plans to put into place and

what actions to take. I can't speak about every hypothetical and I can't speak about all instances involving traffic. But clearly, the nation has improved its efforts since September 11th.

And I think, suffice it to say, as we enter into what may be a considerable period of time in dealing with terrorism, improvements will constantly be made, will always be looked at, and this is an endeavor that will go on.

Q You mentioned that the President was going over some domestic policy issues this afternoon, some meetings and so forth. One of those is the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Can you tell us, what are the plans -- the administration's plans for that if and when war begins? How much released, when, timing?

MR. FLEISCHER: The policy on the Strategic Petroleum Reserve is that the Reserve will be released in the event of an emergency such as a severe disruption of supply. So, at this moment, it's impossible to anticipate, predict whether or not there would be a severe disruption of supply. Those determinations will be made by the experts based on the circumstances on the ground in terms of what supply conditions look like.

Q Who would make that decision?

MR. FLEISCHER: It's a combination of people led by the Department of Energy in consultation with others.

Q Forgive my skepticism. Did I just hear you say the President continues to hope Saddam Hussein will accept his ultimatum?

MR. FLEISCHER: Of course, he hopes.

Q Are you saying the President is hoping and believes he will?

MR. FLEISCHER: I didn't say the President believed he will, but, of course, he continues to hope. The President continues to hope, and he knows that the chances are slim, that Saddam Hussein will leave. But, of course, I think everybody hopes that this can be done peacefully. It may not. The President has said that the mission would be to disarm Saddam Hussein. And that's what has brought the world to this point because Saddam Hussein has not disarmed.

Q He is certainly proceeding on the assumption that this is not going to happen?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's a safe assumption. That's correct.

Q Ari, two quick questions, I hope you have seen the interview.

MR. FLEISCHER: I did, you gave me a copy of it. (Laughter.)

Q My question is --

MR. FLEISCHER: Not that I'm not a subscriber, but you did drop a copy on my desk.

Q My question is that since President has given an option of choice to Saddam Hussein to leave the country by tomorrow night, that means we are not interested to capturing him? And

how about the crimes he has committed against his own people, so we will never know about them, and he will never be brought to justice.

MR. FLEISCHER: The President has said that he hopes Saddam Hussein will leave, and he's given him that period of time in which to do so. The President also talked about war crimes and not following orders. That was a very important message, and a message that was shared with the people of Iraq. If it goes to war, we hope that will have some effect.

Q Second question, presidential -- any advice that for a small investor or for a small businessman, or for somebody like me? I'm traveling to South Asia next month; what would be the advice from the President?

MR. FLEISCHER: On your investments?

Q No, for the people here, the stock market, or the businessman or a traveler?

MR. FLEISCHER: I have no advice to offer investors. That's not my place. That's not my job.

Q Ari, can you give us any tick-tock on the formulation of the President's speech yesterday? Especially any deliberations about whether to include a firm deadline of 48 hours?

MR. FLEISCHER: Yesterday I got repeated phone calls from press saying they heard there was no deadline in there, and it had always been in there. Obviously, somebody who may not have wanted it in there was talking to the press and saying, there isn't. So I can't explain that. But in the drafts -- early drafts that I saw, it was in there and it remained in there.

Q Somewhat unrelated -- the NCAA is talking about delaying its playoffs. I realize you don't set the schedule of sporting events, but can you tell us in a broader sense how much Americans can expect to get on with their normal lives, as we brace for war?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the President hopes that people will continue with their normal lives. And that's one of the reasons that the Department of Homeland Security was created and the alert codes were created. The alert codes have a series of actions that are taken as the alert rises or falls. And these are determined by the basis of the threat, any specific information. And Secretary Ridge addressed similar issues today.

Part of the planning is if the event people come to the conclusion that events have to be cancelled, that would be made known. That has not been made known by the Department of Homeland Security. That's not a recommendation they have made. But the Department of Homeland Security will work with all organizations across the country as they talk about what steps to take. That's one of the reasons they're there, is to do outreach, particularly for major events.

Q Does the President have, or is intending to, or Dr. Rice, any plans to talk to Israel in a diplomatic way about the issue of non-response if they're hit; not coming into the war, if we go to war?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we have, and we will continue to consult with Israel. Of course, Israel has the right to defend itself. And we will continue to consult with Israel as they exercise their rights.

Q Ari, how long does the President think the American people should expect this conflict to last? Is it days, not weeks? Weeks, not months? How long should the American people be prepared to support this conflict?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, certainly, the hope is that it would be short; the hope is it won't be long. But I am not prepared to make any predictions about that. I'm not in a position where I can give you any type of certainty about it. I think people have to prepare for the fact that it may not be short. It's just impossible to state, and I'm not going to go beyond it and put any type of time frame on it.

Q I have a question, and then may I yield to my senior correspondent? (Laughter.) My

question is, Israel Prime Minister Sharon has said that, unlike 12 years ago, if Israel should be attacked by Iraqi scuds or by Iraq in some other form, that Israel will retaliate. And there are some international experts who feel that's quite precarious, that it could escalate any war in the Middle East, bringing in other Arab nations. Has the President decided, or has he tried to contact Sharon to dissuade him from retaliating --

MR. FLEISCHER: That's the question I just got asked, and the answer is the same. We have consulted and we will continue to consult with Israel.

Q But beyond consulting, I mean, has he specifically asked Sharon not to retaliate if attacked?

MR. FLEISCHER: As I've indicated, we will continue to consult with Israel. Israel has a right to defend itself, and we will consult with them as they exercise their rights.

Q Ari, without mentioning any names of anybody on the Hill, I'd like to know if you could define what politicizing the debate, politicizing the rhetoric over this, what constitutes that in the eyes of the White House? Is criticism considered politicizing?

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't think there's anything surprising in what I said. There was a strong statement made by a member of Congress who was within his rights to say whatever he would like to say. And I pointed out what I view as inconsistencies.

Q Inconsistencies, Daschle aside, what constitutes politicizing the debate that's going to unfold about what's going to unfold in military activity?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the public will judge that. I think that's the right of the public to make those judgments. My position, it's my place to say everybody has a right to say whatever is on their mind. People have a right to criticize, people have a right to praise, people have a right to oppose, people have the right to support. I can point out inconsistencies, and then others can explain, or others can come to their own judgments. I've said what I intend to say on it.

Q Mr. Fleischer, your forces are using, unlimited, the Greek air space, the Greek port, the Greek sea, the Greek base on the island of Crete and a number of other facilities for your war against Saddam Hussein. The permission was granted by the Simitis government without prior approval of the Greek parliament. My question is, are you in a position to protect the security and the territorial integrity of Greece under these circumstances, since there is a real threat now with your presence for terrorist attack, as it was expressed yesterday by President to the world message/

MR. FLEISCHER: Greece, of course, is an ally of the United States. And I don't deal with hypotheticals but, of course, Greece is an ally, entitled to rights as an ally of the United States. And I'd just leave it at that. I'm not aware of a threat.

Q I know you said you respect the free speech of members of Congress, but during the duration of any hostilities of any war, would you expect them to limit some of their criticism?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think these are judgments that constituencies need to make. Every member of Congress represents a constituency and they have to make their own judgments about what to say and leave it to their constituents to judge.

Q But some Democrats have said that they would tone down the rhetoric during the actual duration of the war, so that the troops don't feel that they're not being supported. Would that be encouraging to you?

MR. FLEISCHER: All I can say is, on this topic, there are obviously deep splits within the Democratic Party. And there are a number of Democrats who support the President; there are a number of Democrats who don't and won't. They are both within their rights. The Republican Party is rather unified on this measure; the Democrat Party is not. And that's a reflection of the reality of the two parties.

Q Ari, on Saturday, the Associated Press, Reuters and the Washington Times all reported that on Friday in Baghdad's mother of all battle's mosque, Chief Imam Abdel-Razzaq, in his sermon

which was broadcast on Iraqi government television, said this, "It is the duty of Muslims today, Iraqi and others, to threaten American interests, wherever they are, to set them on fire, and sink their ships. This is jihad in the name of God. Oh God, make Bush and Blair drown." And my question is, what repudiation or disassociation of this has the White House heard from any of the world's other imams or mosques in this alleged religion of peace?

MR. FLEISCHER: Actually, Lester, I saw an interesting interview on television just the other day where a leading imam who was based in Kuwait did make statements repudiating such language. And so I think your statement paints a very broad brush about Muslim leaders around the world, who indeed represent a religion of peace. The President knows that Muslims -- Islam is a religion of peace.

Q With the United Nations human rights now headed by Libya, and the disarmament to be headed by Iraq, why does the President believe we should continue spending millions of dollars to belong to such an organization?

MR. FLEISCHER: Actually, you are half right. Your statement about Libya is correct. According to the United Nations protocols, they are on human rights. And Iraq, I'm not sure what the reason was, but Iraq was not provided the honor of chairing that group. The United Nations had second considerations about their normal procedures. Had their normal procedures been followed, indeed, under United Nations rules, Iraq would have been the chairman of the Commission on Disarmament, if you can believe it.

Q Two questions. Could you be more specific about what the President intends to do to repair the breach with other nations that occurred during the U.N. debate?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think that, number one, the President is focused on achieving the objective of disarming Saddam Hussein, which is indeed the stated objective of all nations on the Security Council in the 15-0 resolution. The fact that some nations decided not to enforce the resolution is an unfortunate matter. But the President, working with a coalition, will enforce the resolution.

And as I indicated earlier, the President has had conversations with other leaders. I think the other leaders look forward to having conversations with the President. They recognize that they have taken steps and taken stands that have caused friction in the alliance. But as I indicated also, at the end of the day, we remain an alliance of shared values. And I think that will endure.

Q My second question is, should the American public be prepared for a long military campaign in Iraq?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, certainly, we hope not. But I think the American public has to be prepared for all eventualities. We cannot rule out what the duration would be, long or short.

Q Every other war has been accompanied by fiscal austerity of some sort, often including tax increases. What's different about this war and this situation?

MR. FLEISCHER: One, the most important thing, war or no war, is for the economy to grow. And if the President's judgment is that the best way to help the economy to grow is to stimulate the economy by providing tax relief -- which is, interestingly, a notion that many people have endorsed -- tax relief. There is some debate about how much tax relief. But the debate to have tax relief is over. Many people endorse tax relief. So the President is going to continue to focus on creating jobs for the American people, stimulating the economy. And that's why he feels so strongly that Congress needs to pass his plan.

And the plan is, indeed, moving in the Congress. We expect budget action on the floor of the House this week, and the Ways and Means Committee will shortly mark it up. So it's actually moving and moving nicely. We'll see what the exact action is in the Senate, as well. But it is already moving.

Q I want to follow up on the question about the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. In 1991, President Bush, if I'm not mistaken, actually released oil from the Petroleum Reserve as a

preemptive way to make sure that supplies were stabilized. I just want to make sure you're saying that won't happen this time.

MR. FLEISCHER: One, I don't remember the history of it, so I don't know if what you said is accurate; I'm sure you're right, I don't remember that. But, two, it's just as I said; this is a decision that is made on the basis of supply, whether or not there is a severe disruption of supply. The President's stated policy has always been that in event of a severe disruption of supply, it's appropriate to release oil from the SPRO.

What has happened on the last couple of months is, if you recall, the President last year made the decision to actually fill up the SPRO -- Strategic Petroleum Reserve -- to its capacity, which previously had not been done. As a result, there have been a series of actions taken in the market to increase the rate of filling up the SPRO. In the last several months, the mandatory deposits to be put into the SPRO were relaxed, creating more supply onto the market, which meant the SPRO did not increase at as fast a rate as previously anticipated. It continued to increase, but not by the same rate. So that's a step, that's an action that's already been taken to increase supply into the market. Beyond that, I'm not going to speculate. That will be a matter of whether or not there is a severe disruption.

Q Would it be fair to say that an assessment has been made about the current supply and the decision, in terms of what the President will say whenever he addresses the nation, is tied into that assessment?

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't know that I could say that, Alexis. You may want to address that directly to the Department of Energy to see what they would tell you on that.

Q Just for clarification, Mike Allen's question, he asked if Saddam were to go into exile, would we prosecute him, or try to prosecute him for war crimes -- you said the international community would have to decide, but we'd like to. Is that accurate?

MR. FLEISCHER: No --

Q Meaning what is the incentive for him to leave?

MR. FLEISCHER: I said it's a decision for the international community. I think that's exactly how I left it.

Q No, you said, we hope that's an option.

MR. FLEISCHER: I see. Thank you for the clarification. My saying on, we hope it's an option, means we hope he leaves the country, which is something you've heard me say many times before. Thank you for the clarification.

Q Okay. One more thing. Your problem -- I hate to beat dead horse, but with Daschle's comments, is that --

MR. FLEISCHER: That's no way to refer to him. (Laughter.)

Q You keep saying that he's being inconsistent. And you're raising comments that he made in 1998. I mean, we can go to statements the President made during the campaign that he was going to pursue a humble foreign policy, that he was opposed to nation building --

MR. FLEISCHER: And you have done all that.

Q Well, and charge him with inconsistency. What's wrong with Daschle's --

MR. FLEISCHER: And you regularly do.

Q -- making a different statement --

MR. FLEISCHER: I accept the premise of your statement that that is --

Q -- years later, especially when he's criticizing the President's handling of the diplomacy with

the U.N. and not generally?

MR. FLEISCHER: I have no disagreement with the premise of your question that that's what you do when you find elected officials, and I would, in the case of the President, explain it. But in the case of what you're saying on how reporters hold elected officials to account for their previous statements, I'm sure that you'll do that in this case, as well.

Q Some of the petroleum -- the big oil companies are concerned that if you don't release the -- if you don't have any release from the Petroleum Reserve early, it will be too late. If you wait for a supply disruption, then to move that out and then have it refined, it doesn't get into the system fast enough to ease the problem. So is that part of the calculation? It is one reason why they did release it as a preemptive action 10 years or 12 years ago --

MR. FLEISCHER: You know, I can't speak for the actions that were taken 10 or 12 years ago. What I can speak to is the fact that there has been a conscience decision made over the last couple months to increase supply on the market as a result of those decisions made to not fill it up at the same fast rate. Beyond that, the stated policy is, and I can't tell you anything different from that, that it would be released in the event of a severe disruption. But there are other people who have some thoughts about that. Whether that's the appropriate course or not certainly is an issue, but that's something you need to talk to the Department of Energy about.

Q Ari, I think you mentioned earlier that the United States would be dealing with terrorism for a considerable period of time. My question is, is the terror alert level likely to remain at this raised status now for the duration of any war? Can you see a circumstance --

MR. FLEISCHER: I think that's a question you need to address to the Department of Homeland Security. It will -- they make their assessment based on threats. And in the information that Secretary Ridge shared today, he talked about the threats basically coming twofold: One is the situation with Iraq, and two is al Qaeda and their ongoing threat, particularly in the context of hostilities with Iraq. Beyond that, I think any fluctuations, changes up or down, the Department of Homeland Security will be your proper place.

Q Thank you.

MR. FLEISCHER: Thank you.

END 1:05 P.M. EST

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