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**Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 12/21/2010**

**James S. Brady Press Briefing Room**

11:15 A.M. EST

MR. GIBBS: Mr. Feller.

Q Thanks, Robert. A few topics, please. On the President's meeting with the Hispanic Caucus that's going on now, I assume --

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Can you give us a bit of detail about what the mission of that meeting is and whether -- well, I'll stop there.

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think we'll have a readout from the meeting when it concludes. Obviously I think both the President and the congressional Hispanic caucus wanted to talk about a series of issues including how to move forward on a disappointing end to this session as it relates to the DREAM Act and what can be done in the next session.

Q Do you think that there is executive action that the President can take since that legislation fell short?

MR. GIBBS: Executive action to implement --

Q Specifically as it relates to what the DREAM Act was intended to do.

MR. GIBBS: I'd have to check with counsel on that. I'm not entirely sure that executive action is -- my understanding is executive action cannot replace the legislation.

Q Okay. And is he confident broadly that there's a willingness at all to take on a more comprehensive approach to immigration in the new year?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, as I said yesterday, Ben, it is the only way that we're going to solve many of the vexing problems around immigration. And the only way to do that is for the federal government to debate and to enact comprehensive immigration reform. It can't be done with 50 states enacting a series of their own immigration laws, as we saw in the court's decision around Arizona.

Q On "don't ask, don't tell," we talked yesterday about the big questions that are still out there about implementation, mainly when this law is really going to take effect. Do you expect the President to talk at all about that tomorrow?

MR. GIBBS: As the Secretary of Defense said, as soon as the law -- as soon as the repeal of the law is signed tomorrow morning, he will stand up an implementation working group that will be chaired by Dr. Clifford Stanley, who is our Under Secretary for Defense for Personnel and Readiness, and that starts that process.

Q So, I mean, do you expect the President to -- how do you expect him to frame this tomorrow, to get into that type of discussion? Or will he be talking more about the history-making nature of this?

MR. GIBBS: Oh, I think he'll talk more broadly about the nature of this and about why he thought, as many in Congress did, that it was important that this law be repealed.

Q And finally, a lot of us are wondering about the schedule this week. Any update?

MR. GIBBS: You and a certain man who sits in the Oval Office. Again, tell me when Congress ends and I can give you a pretty good guess on when the President goes home, but not -- I don't expect it until then.

Q Press conference?

MR. GIBBS: Nothing new on that.

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Q Thanks, Robert. On the foreign policy side, on North Korea, has North Korea, in fact, offered to allow U.N. nuclear inspectors back into the country?

MR. GIBBS: I have no update on what North Korea has offered. I think North Korea has a pretty good sense of what they need to do to live up to their obligations. And certainly, I think the world waits for them to do so.

Q Staying with North Korea, the President has written to four senators to thank them for their support of ratifying START. And in that letter, he referenced talks with the Russian Federation in the last two days about U.S. concerns with North Korea. Could you talk about those -- can you tell us about those talks, and were they anything to do with missile defense?

MR. GIBBS: I'm not going to get into any more specifics than are in the letter on that.

Q And one last thing. On Belarus, Belarus has jailed 600 protestors. Does the United States have any way of influencing Belarus?

MR. GIBBS: Alister, what I would point you to is the President's statement on the election and on the violence and on our belief that it must stop.

Jake.

Q First of all, it appears as though you have the votes to ratify START, and I was wondering -- it didn't necessarily appear that way days, if not weeks ago -- weeks if not days ago. What made the difference?

MR. GIBBS: I think in all honesty I think people have had an opportunity to focus on what's in the treaty. I think they've had an opportunity to focus on those that are supporting the treaty and listen to Chairman Mullen, Secretary Gates, Jim Baker, George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, and others make I think a very compelling case, along with the President and the Vice President, for why this enhances our security; why it does nothing to impact or inhibit our ability to defend ourselves in any way, as Senator Isakson said in a statement released just a few moments ago, announcing his support for ratification of this treaty.

I think people understand that it is -- our reductions in these are legacies of many Presidents, including former President Ronald Reagan. And it makes our world safer. It provides, as we've talked about in here, an inspection regime with the Russians. It doesn't inhibit our ability to protect ourselves using missile defense and promotes our security and stability in the world.

Q We're approaching the end of the year and it looks as though the President may be departing for Hawaii soon. Do you have any hints as to staff changes that might happen that you have been putting off until the end of the year?

MR. GIBBS: No. I don't expect you'll hear a lot before the end of the year.

Q And then lastly, as you know, there is a group of unemployed who have -- who call themselves the 99ers --

MR. GIBBS: Sure.

Q -- these are individuals who have been -- whose unemployment insurance has run out. They were not included in the deal, the tax deal that the President signed with Mr. McConnell and the Republicans and others. Is there anything that the President can do for them?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think the best thing that we can do as a country is get a fragile economy more stable and one that creates more jobs. I think that's why I think -- economists said that they would reorient their growth estimates based on the agreement that the President signed. And obviously the best thing we can do for them is to create an environment where businesses are hiring.

Look, we have -- you heard me say on a number of occasions that one of the great benefits of the agreement was taking the politics out of unemployment insurance. We have -- it's been a contentious battle just to get unemployment insurance to continue up to 99 weeks. It's not in any way been easy. And this takes the politics out of that throughout 2011 and hopefully we can continue to focus on getting the economy moving again and providing those guys with a helping hand with a job.

Q If I could just ask a quick question about net neutrality. The FCC has this proposal. Does the President support a plan that, according to critics, would allow a carrier such as Verizon or any other carrier to block users from using a service that competes with a service they offer? For instance, if Verizon doesn't offer Google --

MR. GIBBS: Jake, let me do this. I know the FCC as an independent agency is voting on this and the President will have a statement at the conclusion of that vote on their proposal.

Dan.

Q Just to follow on one of Jake's questions, you have talked about how START has been reviewed and debated now for so many months. So what was it that came up to the table now that sort of crystallized it for some of these senators who were still on the fence, if so much information was already out there for so long?

MR. GIBBS: As I said yesterday, if people had questions about our commitment to modernizing our nuclear arsenal, if people had questions about the impact of this treaty -- the answer to that impact is none -- on missile defense, then we were happy to have anybody, everybody -- anybody and everybody provide that answer. Secretary Gates, Admiral Mullen, General Cartwright, a whole host of foreign policy heavies from both political parties I think have weighed in on why this is important for our national security. And that's why I think you see now that we have been for a while and certainly are confident today that this is a treaty that will pass the Senate.

Q So it was less about providing more information and more about sort of just big names endorsing this?

MR. GIBBS: No, I think whenever you have somebody like Jim Baker or George Shultz or Henry Kissinger talking to senators on Capitol Hill about what they see is a benefit of the treaty I think that helps the treaty. But I think -- again, I think it's a combination of -- look, we understand that there has to be an orderly process by which a treaty is negotiated, considered, debated and ultimately voted on.

I think that has happened in this case. Senators have gotten the information that they've needed. And I think it's -- we're pretty confident that more than two-thirds of them will vote to ratify something that's tremendously important for our national security.

Q On health care, top Republicans -- Senator McConnell and also Mr. Boehner -- have talked about next year pushing the repeal of the health care bill. And I'm wondering what's going on here at the White House in terms of preparing for that prospect -- I mean, what you think about this threat they keep making time and time again.

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think that Senator McConnell and Congressman Boehner are going to have to answer questions from the American people about the benefits like ensuring that children aren't precluded from purchasing -- their families aren't precluded from purchasing health insurance because of a preexisting condition.

I think there's genuine benefits that the law provided to Americans that they're going to have to talk about what happens when you put insurance companies rather than families in charge of medical decisions. I think those are decisions and messages that those two leaders and others in their caucus are going to have to figure out the answer to.

Q So will the White House be waging some sort of message campaign to counter that?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think you can assume that we continue to believe that the passage of the bill was a very important thing for the American people, for, as I just mentioned, millions of families whose children no longer have to -- they no longer have to lay awake at night wondering if their children can be covered by health insurance because they have a preexisting condition. That's been wiped away.

And if Republicans want to reinstitute insurance companies making those decisions on behalf of parents, that's an argument that they can try to make. I don't think it will be a very successful one.

Yes, sir.

Q Imminent release of the Census data raises the question of reapportionment, and given the size of Republican victories in many states, are you concerned that the Republicans will gerrymander the districts for even greater advantage in 2012?

MR. GIBBS: I don't. I think that the -- look, and as you mentioned, I have not seen the full release of the data. I think that comes between --

Q At 11:00 a.m. --

MR. GIBBS: -- I was going to say 11:15 a.m., but maybe you've got a better time. I think that -- I don't see why there's any reason why in a number of these places both parties can't be equally competitive and I don't think it will have a huge practical impact.

Q Well, if Republicans have a large advantage in state legislatures, it may not be so competitive.

MR. GIBBS: Well, I --

Q We know that they do in a number of them. You've noticed that.

MR. GIBBS: I have seen the map, but I also think that you've got -- look, you've got Southwestern and Southeastern states that have been purple in many elections, and that means the people in them make up their individual decisions based on who the candidates are and what the election is.

Q Yes, but if the districts are redrawn, there may be fewer of the people who make the countervailing decision, make it a redder district.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, well, you can't make a redder -- you can't take a group of people and make all of them red if they're purple. They can't --

Q No, but if you can carve out some of the ones --

MR. GIBBS: I understand. But if you put all those in one place, it makes them less likely to be red in the other places. It's a math thing.

Q Magenta.

MR. GIBBS: Aubergine.

Q That was also my question. You don't expect a Texas kind of --

Q Isn't that eggplant?

MR. GIBBS: It's the color of eggplant. I'm trying to build off of magenta. We're vamping for time. (Laughter.) Go ahead, Wendell. (Laughter.)

Q Given the Republican gains in November and the experience in Texas, aided by Mr. DeLay --

MR. GIBBS: Yes, how did that work out for him? (Laughter.)

Q Well, it did work out for --

Q They got five seats.

Q It did work out for Republicans.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, and he has an interesting viewpoint on each of those five seats. I'm not sure that's worked out so well for Mr. DeLay.

Q But it worked out for Republicans. And then is the Justice Department going to be looking at this? Will the government look at these new boundaries?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I think the full data will come out. I don't -- I would point you to the Justice Department.

Go ahead.

Q I'd like to get you on the record -- the report about U.S. military and/or NATO allied forces staging ground raids inside Pakistan --

MR. GIBBS: I think the best thing to do is to quote ISAF. And let me read their release from last night, if I can find it in my stack. "There's absolutely no truth to the reporting in The New York Times that U.S. forces are planning to conduct ground operations into Pakistan. ISAF and U.S. forces, along with their Afghan partners, have developed a

strong working relationship with the Pakistan military to address shared security issues. The coordination recognizes the sovereignty of Afghanistan and Pakistan to pursue insurgents and terrorists operating in their respective border areas."

Q There was another report about a plan to poison food with contaminants like ricin. How real is that threat? Is it a credible threat? And what steps, if any, are being taken to head it off?

MR. GIBBS: Mike, I would say that while not giving in to commenting on specific intelligence, or what might be specific planning, we take -- our counterterrorism and Homeland Security officials take every credible threat very seriously.

As you know, there's significant planning for a coordination to prevent unconventional attacks using chemical, biological or radiological weapons. And we will continue to remain vigilant to ensure that we're doing all that we can to prevent it.

Q And finally, yesterday, an environmental group came out with a report that Washington, D.C. was among localities with contaminated water -- hexavalent chromium. Is there any concern here in the White House that water is contaminated in Washington? Not only -- I mean, aside from the city at large, here in this complex?

MR. GIBBS: Not that I'm aware of -- not that I'm aware of in here. I would point you to EPA for a response on the specifics to the report.

Jonathan.

Q As you know, Sarah Palin, Mitt Romney, some of the other perhaps 2012 Republican contenders, came out against START, New START; they came out against the tax deal, and these things look like they were going to be passed with significant --

MR. GIBBS: Well, some of them --

Q -- yes, right -- with significant Republican support. What do you make of the split that might be happening between the run for 2012 and what's going on in Washington? And where do you think that's going to take the GOP into next year?

MR. GIBBS: Look, I think there will be great pressure on those in Washington as those outside of Washington ramp up their rhetoric around 2012. But I think if people believe that the message from the election in 2012 is to seek less cooperation, more gridlock and greater partisanship, I think that is taking the very -- that is taking the wrong message from the last election.

What people want is -- and I think you've seen public polling that what people are looking for is parties that will fight for their values, but can work together to find common ground, to compromise, and to get something done that moves the economy forward and benefits the American people.

I think that's what -- I think that's what people asked for in this election, and I think in many ways over the past couple weeks, that's provided a good formula to get things done in this town.

I think -- again, I think there will be great pressure to do otherwise as people begin running for President. But I will say this. I think that there will be plenty of time with which to conduct a presidential election in the fall of 2012. But I think what the American people are looking for in this town are people not to focus on their own political futures, but focus on the future of the American people.

Q And along those lines, the CR does not have any money for implementing the health care plan.

MR. GIBBS: Right.

Q It does not have any increases for the SEC or the CFTC to implement the Wall Street reform.

MR. GIBBS: Right.

Q How are you going to get that money?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I would just say, Jonathan, that, look, anytime you have a short-term measure to fund the yearlong capacity of government, it creates complications. That's why I said late last week that a short-term continuing resolution was something that was far less than ideal in providing the needed certainty, but that over the course of the next several months, Jack Lew and our budget office will work with Congress to ensure the necessary funding for critical government operations.

Mr. Knoller.

Q Robert, on the '99ers, are they just out of luck that benefits don't extend to them?

MR. GIBBS: Well, Mark, I think as you know the Recovery Act extended benefits beyond where they had previous been up to 99 weeks. The last extension -- and I forget if it's from 72 or 76 to 99 weeks -- but those are dependent upon the unemployment rates in those states.

We have fought for extending, as you know, in the Recovery Act, extending that up to 99 weeks and continuing that

full benefit through next year. Again, I think the best thing that we can do is to help -- and I think the agreement does that -- to help create an environment for economic growth and economic progress and putting people back to work. I think that is first and foremost our commitment to them.

Q Why is the signing tomorrow at Interior?

MR. GIBBS: A host of reasons. First and foremost, holiday tours here make it very difficult to close the East Room. The Interior Department -- not knowing the exact schedule, the Interior Department provided a location that was easy to get to and I think the space is big enough for a signing of this size.

Q Thanks.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, ma'am.

Q Are there plans for the President to meet with Governor Richardson when he returns from North Korea?

MR. GIBBS: Governor Richardson is on a private trip and there are no plans that I'm aware of.

Q And just following up on Alister's question, what does the administration make of the offers North Korea has made to Bill Richardson?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I think -- we have throughout many months and even many years, dating back to different administrations, seen the words and the rhetoric of the North Koreans fail to live up to any of their actions or their obligations. So, speeches and rhetoric aside, the obligations that they must undertake as part of a respected member of the international community -- they're aware of what they need to do. And commitments to do so are not what we're interested in. We're interested in them living up to those obligations.

Q So is there any indication that we're closer to the restart of six-party party talks?

MR. GIBBS: Six-party talks will be restarted again when the North Koreans display a willingness to change their behavior. We don't -- we're not going to get a table in a room and talk -- have six-party talks just for the feel-good notion of having six-party talks. When and if the North Koreans are ever serious about living up to their obligations, then we can think about restarting six-party talks. But the belligerent actions that the North Koreans have demonstrated over the past many weeks I don't think provide anybody the confidence that they're even remotely ready to resume in a responsible way those talks.

And when they are, then the world will be ready to do what's necessary. But right now the action must come not from their words, but from their deeds.

Q And just one other thing. Any update on who the President is reaching out to on START, which senators he's talked with?

MR. GIBBS: For their reasons and for -- we continue to -- I will continue to tell you the President has made calls, but not get into who.

Q The State Department released a list of senators that Secretary Clinton called, but you're taking a different approach?

MR. GIBBS: Indeed.

Q The Whistleblower Protection Act could come up for a vote today or tomorrow in the House. It's already passed the Senate. Is this on a list of things the President would like to accomplish during the lame duck?

MR. GIBBS: Let me get some guidance from legislative affairs. My sense is, yes, but I would need to just get a little final guidance from them.

Q Also any further guidance on the 9/11 first responders bill and likelihood that it will pass?

MR. GIBBS: Well, a question not for me or any Democrat on Capitol Hill, but for Republicans. Again, I'd remind people that this was -- 58 Democratic senators voted for this legislation; 42 Republican senators voted against this legislation. The only way to get to 60 is to add two of them.

Q Has the President made any calls on this bill?

MR. GIBBS: Well, the President came out in August in support of this bill. We released a statement before the House voted in August in support of this bill. We released a statement in December before the Senate voted on this bill.

Ari, it's not up -- we've got all the Democrats. We've got --

Q But you're saying he's calling senators to lobby them on START -- he's not calling senators to lobby them on this?

MR. GIBBS: Ari, I don't -- I think Mitch McConnell and Republicans ought to pick up the phone and talk to each other about this. Every Democrat is for this bill. Fifty-eight Democratic senators out of 58 Democratic senators support this bill. There's no Democratic senator and no Democrat on Capitol Hill that's standing in the way of this

becoming law. There are 42 Republicans that are.

Q People are talking about it as a measure of Jon Stewart's political clout. Any thoughts on that?

MR. GIBBS: I think if there's the ability for that to sort of break through in our political environment, I think there's a good chance that he can help do that. I think he has put the awareness around this legislation -- he's put that awareness into what you guys cover each day, and I think that's good.

I hope he can convince two Republicans to support taking care of those that took care of so many on that awful day in our history. It seems at the end of a long year, around the holiday season, a pretty awful thing to play politics about. But that's a decision that 42 Republican senators are going to have to make.

Q Far fewer federal judges have been confirmed in your first two years than the first years of President Clinton or President Bush. Can you talk about that? Do you all blame that purely on the Senate Republicans? Or do you think -- or is the President going to make a bigger push on that?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I'd like to get the numbers and take a look at the final -- look, I think we have had -- I think there's been quite a bit of problem in getting judges considered on a timely basis with a minority in the Senate. But that's been true for virtually every personnel position that we've had up.

I mean, you have judges that go through the judiciary committee unanimously and languish, waiting for unanimous consent to come up before the Senate for hundreds of days. Again, when, Ari calls the Republicans to ask them about the 9/11 bill, you should hop on the line and ask them about that.

Q One more. In Secretary Clinton acknowledging who she's talked to among the senators, and the President -- you all not willing to release that, are you acknowledging that she might be more popular among Republicans than the President is, and therefore --

MR. GIBBS: How so?

Q Because she's -- because of the list being released of who -- is it an acknowledgement that maybe Bob Corker doesn't want to be known his vote could change depending on whether Obama calls him or not, is my question --

MR. GIBBS: I'm having a hard time seeing that connection of that bridge. But --

Q Can you tell us how many calls?

MR. GIBBS: A lot.

Q A number?

MR. GIBBS: Let me just say before I take Sheryl's question, that inexplicably the transcript said that I called you "Jill" yesterday, which I don't have any idea why I would have said that. But that's what the tape and the transcript said, and I apologize.

Q Well, thank you, George. (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: You're welcome. She told me she was going to say that, so that was a little -- I'm the setup guy for Linda's joke today -- I mean Sheryl's joke today. (Laughter.)

Go ahead. I don't have any idea how Jill even popped out -- but go ahead.

Q We have talked about bipartisanship here today -- or sort of the new bipartisanship that we seem to be seeing in Washington on the tax deal, on "don't ask, don't tell," you got eight Republicans, and now it just seems that on START you'll get some breaking away from the party leadership. And I'm wondering if the President has given any thought to what accounts for this, and especially his own role. You might say that he has always said he was willing to work with them and they're now just coming over and agreeing to do so, but I'm wondering if he's thought about any changes in his own behavior that might account for this.

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think a couple things on that, Sheryl. I think that obviously the President, as I said -- when I say what I think the American people wanted after that election was two parties to work together, that's exactly what the President took from that election. And I think there's no doubt that -- I think the President would

admit that he spent more time reaching out to Republicans recently than in previous times. And he admitted as much to the Republicans when they were here.

I also happen to think that Republicans understand probably more than they have in any other period also in the President's tenure that they are soon to inherit a great responsibility for the act of governing, and I think that's kicked in a bit earlier than the formal passing of the gavel in the House.

Again, I think the message you have to take from what happened in November is that people want Washington to put aside the games that it normally plays and get things done. I think that what has been accomplished over the past few weeks demonstrates certainly that that's possible.

Q And just to follow on Perry's question, I think the point he was trying to make and what I would ask is, is the fact that the White House is not revealing who the President is calling an indication that while Republican senators might not mind it being known that they spoke to Hillary Clinton, they might not want it to be known that they spoke to President Obama on this and that his comments might have swayed their views?

MR. GIBBS: You'd have to ask them.

Q But is it a concern of yours that --

MR. GIBBS: Not at all. We want to see the START treaty ratified.

Yes, ma'am.

Q What is President Obama's relation to South Korea military fire exercise in Yeonpyeong Island and the territory against North Korea? And also, will the United States continue to support South Korea?

MR. GIBBS: South Korea is one of our most important allies in the region and throughout the world. We are fully supportive of their actions and will continue to work hand in hand with them to counter the belligerent actions of the North in order to provide security not just to the people of the Republic of Korea but to provide stability throughout the region and throughout the world.

Goyal.

Q Thank you, Robert. Two questions. One, as far as presidential visit was concerned, to India, across the street Mr. Ron Somers -- where President addressed a group in Mumbai, U.S.-India Business Council, he is thanking the President and the team, as far as addressing his group and business -- as far as U.S.-India business is concerned. Now, my question is, where do we go from there? Because presidential statement, also announcement in the parliament about U.N. Security Council seat for India. Is the President going to take an active role to expand --

MR. GIBBS: Well, Goyal, I think around the announcement of our support for India's membership, we discussed and talked about the fact that there is a reform process that's underway at the United Nations. But our belief was that India was and should be an important part of that body. And we will continue to support that. And as the U.N. considers that reform, I'm sure that they'll take into account what the President and other nations have said.

Q Overall, where do we stand as far as U.S.-India relations are concerned under President Obama?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think as you heard the President discuss on the trip to India, that the hallmark of our country's relationship with India is not one that -- or I should say, to frame it in a positive -- is one that is important to this country not because of one particular President or one particular party. President Clinton obviously made a historic trip to India. President Bush, in the civilian nuclear deal, was an important step in our bilateral relationship. And the President's trip recently in November was another building block on an important relationship in the world.

Q And second, if I may. As far as WikiLeaks is --

MR. GIBBS: Actually a third.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. GIBBS: Let me go on to Josh for a second.

Josh.

Q Robert, can you tell us what kinds of things the White House has been doing to try to get the Guantanamo trials and transfer ban language stripped out of the CR or the defense bill? Has the President been making any calls --

MR. GIBBS: Let me check and see if the President -- what's the President's involvement on that. I know that the Attorney General has sent letters. I don't know what else he's done. I'd point you to DOJ. But I can check on what the President has done.

Q The White House and the whole administration has been sort of wrapped around the axle on the issue of the 9/11 trial for almost a year now. Wouldn't it be relief to have a measure like this passed and therefore not have to make a decision about where to send those defendants and simply have the decision made for you, basically?

MR. GIBBS: No, I think we're going to make a decision on what's in the best interest of this country and what's also constitutional.

Yes.

Q Thank you, Robert. Two brief questions on START. Admiral Mullen, of course, put out a very strong statement about it yesterday. And you mentioned General Hoss Cartwright's briefings and his comments on it. Do either Admiral Mullen or General Cartwright actually make calls or talk to senators themselves?

MR. GIBBS: I believe both of them have. DOD probably has better eyes into that, but it's my impression that both of them have spoken with senators, either individuals or as a group, in order -- again, I think what we've looked at, for both of those individuals as those that can provide a perspective -- a military perspective on the treaty writ large and any language that they have questions about in the treaty, and I think they've done so.

Q My other question is -- just a follow-up from yesterday. I asked you whether the U.S. would continue to operate within the parameters of START.

MR. GIBBS: John, what I should have said yesterday was that it's a question that I'd consider answering when and if that happened.

Ben, do you have --

Q Just to follow on that. Since we've been in here, we've moved an alert saying nine Republicans now say they will back the START treaty, virtually assuring ratification. Can I get your reaction to that? And is this now a done deal, as you see it?

MR. GIBBS: Again, look, I am -- we remain extremely confident that this is a treaty that the Senate will believe is in the best interest of our national security in reducing nuclear tensions and in providing an important inspection regime on the Russian arsenal. And because of all those reasons, we think the Senate will pass and ratify the START treaty in the next day or so.

Margaret.

Q Thank you. So we were talking earlier about bipartisanship and what the voters wanted after November. But one thing that struck me about the way the President has used the lame duck is that he's looked to Republicans to make the case for him to other Republicans a lot. In "don't ask, don't tell," Bob Gates was the guy making the case. In New START, it was a lot of former Republican secretaries of state or what have you making the case. And I'm wondering, is this the model that you think you'll turn more toward in -- next year on other issues? What might those issues be, immigration, whatever? And does he have a feeling -- is it his sense that there's more pragmatism in Republicans outside of Congress than there is in Republicans inside of Congress these days?

MR. GIBBS: Look, on the second one, I think that's somewhat -- some of that would depend I think largely on what group of others you're talking about. I do think that -- look, I think, to answer your first question, I think when you sort of peel away the political rhetoric and the political back-and-forth, you find that there are, on a host of issues, important things that we all can agree on.

I think one of the issues that you'll see some bipartisan work on and some agreement on in the future is education reform and education reauthorization. It's been that -- I, quite frankly, think that the work that's gone on at the Department of Education in education reform over the past two years probably hasn't gotten a lot of publicity largely because there's bipartisan agreement on education reform, on the steps that states are taking to change the way we educate our children. And I think that's just one example of an issue that, in the next Congress, there's a really good opportunity and a really good chance for Democrats and Republicans to work together.

Q Do you see him looking more to Republican governors, since there are now so many more of them, to make the case for him on some policy initiatives? That's something we didn't see that much of this time around.

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think if you look at the Recovery Act, certainly Governor Douglas and Governor Crist were important endorsements for, or validators for, the President's approach.

Look, I think the President is going to make a series of decisions that -- of policies that he thinks are in the best interest of the American people, and try to put together and find a coalition of likeminded individuals on either side of the political spectrum that agree. I think that's what he's done over the past few weeks, and I think that's what he'll look to continue to do next year.

Q Can I try another one real quick?

MR. GIBBS: Sure.

Q A couple days ago I'd asked you if you had to sum up what the lessons or sort of political takeaway from the lame duck was, what it would be, and you said, "Ask me in 72 hours."

MR. GIBBS: Has it been 72 hours?

Q It's close, and I think we've reached cloture --

MR. GIBBS: I think that -- I don't know that I'd change a little bit of what I just said. I think that the American people want to see this town able to break out of the political games that it's become known for, to find solutions that are in the best interest of the people and to go about making those solutions a reality; not to play more partisan games, not to have more gridlock, not to see us focused, as I said earlier, on the next election, but on the future that's in front of us.

Stephen.

Q How seriously is the administration taking this report released today in the Senate on the Lockerbie bombing? And does it concur with the findings that the Blair/Brown government pressured the Scots to release --

MR. GIBBS: Stephen, let me get some -- I have not seen the report before coming out here. But let me have Mike get some information on that.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Robert, on foreign policy, what was the reaction of President when he got the letter from Prime Minister of Turkey who mentioned about serious concern on Armenian resolution in Congress? Has the President talked with any congressional leader, calling Nancy Pelosi to oppose this one? Or if the Armenian resolution passes in Congress, do you have any concern future relationship with Turkey?

MR. GIBBS: Well, obviously our relationship -- our bilateral relationship with Turkey is enormously important. I do not know that the President -- I do not believe that the President has made any calls specifically on this, and I think his views on this are known.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you, Robert. You mentioned education reform. Can you take us inside any other specifics early next year, any other priorities that are going to come up first on the docket?

MR. GIBBS: No, I'm going to let the State of the Union take some care of that as we get closer to that.

Bill.

Q Robert, just following on Margaret's question a little bit, the President set certain priorities for the lame duck. In the last couple of weeks, we've seen the tax deal concluded, "don't ask, don't tell" signed tomorrow, the food safety legislation. Republicans have put a release on 19 of your judicial appointments. You're now going to get the START treaty. I think everybody would have to say that's a pretty good performance. Is the President going to take a victory lap?

MR. GIBBS: The President, like me, is extremely superstitious. And I think it is important to continue to work toward getting those things done, and I anticipate the President will have an occasion to speak about his two years and what we've accomplished in the last few weeks.

Q At a press conference on Thursday?

MR. GIBBS: But I will wait to see the manifestation of the end of that superstition at its appropriate time.

Q One would presume that would be before he gets on a plane to join his family.

MR. GIBBS: Unless there's -- unless you guys are all getting on the plane. (Laughter.)

Q Thanks, Robert.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, sir.

Q Question -- Prime Minister Netanyahu says that he's going to publicly and formally ask the President to release convicted spy Jonathan Pollard. One, I was just wondering if the President would seriously consider that request. And two, what sort of informal conversations have they had about Pollard?

MR. GIBBS: I would -- I don't know the answer to the second. Usually, as you know, most of their discussions have been done on a one-on-one basis. But I am not aware that that's something that the President is looking at doing.

Thanks, guys.

Q Robert, has speechwriting begun on the State of the Union?

MR. GIBBS: It has.

Q When did it start?

MR. GIBBS: Within the past few weeks.

END  
12:00 P.M. EST

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