

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 12/14/2010

2:15 P.M. EST

MR. GIBBS: Good afternoon. Let's -- let me do a quick readout from the President's Afghanistan meeting -- Pakistan meeting this morning.

President Obama met for nearly two hours with his national security team on Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the beginning of the meeting, President Obama and Secretary Clinton reaffirmed the great debt that the administration and the American people owe to Richard Holbrooke and noted the extraordinary expressions of respect from Ambassador Holbrooke's life, demonstrated -- demonstrate the legacy that he's built over 50 years of service to his country.

Both General Petraeus and Ambassador Eikenberry noted that many Afghans had expressed their condolences to Ambassador Holbrooke's family to them over the course of the past day.

The President then reviewed the findings of the draft national security staff-led report on the progress that has been made in implementing our strategy, focusing on the three different components of the review: al Qaeda senior leadership, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In each area, the President and his team discussed both the progress that has been made as well as areas for additional focus moving forward.

The President directed his team to finalize the report, while also continuing to address the range of issues discussed in the report as we head into 2011.

The President will provide an update on our strategy to the American people on Thursday as he presents the findings of the review, along with members of his senior national security team.

And with that, Mr. Feller.

Q Where is he going to do that?

MR. GIBBS: Somewhere on the grounds. It won't be off-site.

Q Afternoon or morning or --

MR. GIBBS: I don't have the time with me on that.

Q That's in addition to the Wednesday Gates and Clinton --

MR. GIBBS: This is -- I don't know -- I have not seen tomorrow's schedule. This is the standalone AfPak review meeting that we talked about yesterday.

Yes, sir.

Q That's right, Thursday, I meant Thursday.

Q Robert, on the -- you said that the President, I believe you said, directed the staff to finalize the report.

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Does he want changes? Was he content with the review as it stands?

MR. GIBBS: No, there were some changes that -- as they went -- the President has obviously over the course of the past several days been reviewing different sections of the review itself, and asked, after some discussion, that some parts be augmented, yes.

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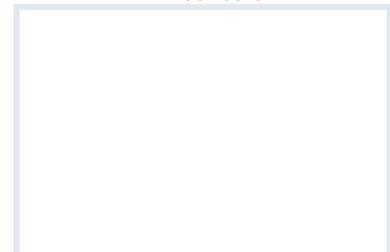
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Q You were in the meeting the whole time, is that correct?

MR. GIBBS: I was in there for most of the time, but not the entire time.

Q How would you characterize the tenor of the conversation? Was there dissent among the principals about the level of progress or anything like that?

MR. GIBBS: No, I think -- I mean, I think that when you see the review on Thursday, I doubt there will be, in all honesty, a lot of surprise at what the review lays out. I think you will see, as many of you have written and reported, that there has been some important progress in halting the momentum of the Taliban in Afghanistan. We have seen, through counterterrorism, success at degrading senior al Qaeda leaders. And we've seen greater cooperation over the course of the past 18 months with the Pakistani government.

You will also see in the review an enumeration of the continued challenges that we have in that region. They will focus on a few different areas, but clearly we have to strengthen -- continue to strengthen capacity inside of Afghanistan. And we still have the ongoing challenge and threat of safe havens in Pakistan. So -- plus I think you have overlaid with that the progress that an agreement that we saw in Lisbon with NATO and ISAF in agreeing on a strategy of beginning the transition in 2011 through 2014, where Afghans will take full responsibility for their nation and for their security.

So I think that's a tenor of what you'll see tomorrow. Again, a lot of that has been -- a decent amount of that you guys have covered and reported over the past several months. And I think this was an opportunity for the national security team to evaluate the progress and identify further challenges a little -- slightly more than a year after the President laid down a different strategy late last year.

Q You said see tomorrow -- you mean Thursday, right?

MR. GIBBS: Thursday, I'm sorry. Mara got me all confused.

Q My fault.

Q Is it fair to say that when you talk -- when you just recap the areas of progress -- and the President has also talked about those -- that the review will enshrine the President sees enough progress to stick with pulling troops home starting in July and the 2014 timeline?

MR. GIBBS: I think the review, as I said yesterday, will say that we are -- again, we're making progress and we still have many challenges. That's not to say -- but that the view is that our transition can and should begin, a conditions-based transition, of our added forces in July 2011, just as NATO came -- NATO also came to the conclusion of beginning to transfer some security in different regions and parts of the country at the beginning of next year.

Q One last quick question. How does the administration begin to fill the void of Ambassador Holbrooke, particularly given his history, but also where you are in this war review?

MR. GIBBS: Well, let me say a few things about Richard, because I think that -- I think our focus over the past almost 24 hours I think has been on what he would want us to focus on, and that is continuing to get this policy right.

When we haven't been focusing on that, I think we've been focused on the tremendous impact that his career has had over many decades and on many issues that have been at the forefront of our foreign policy. I think he was a public servant in the truest sense of those words.

So our focus has been on celebrating the diplomatic life and the life that he had with his family and friends -- and focus, quite frankly, less so on what might be next for that position.

Obviously Richard had a very talented team that continues even today to do the work that Secretary Clinton and President Obama asked him to do many months ago. I think the American people, as you heard the President and the First Lady say last night in their statement, are indebted to his service. And their thoughts and prayers and our thoughts and prayers are with his family.

Q Will he attend a service for him?

MR. GIBBS: I think scheduling is checking on when that might be. I don't know if that's been announced since the last time I heard this this morning. So I don't have the answer to that yet.

Q Thanks, Robert.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, sir.

Q Staying with Ambassador Holbrooke for a moment, it's been reported that his final words were, "You've got to stop this war in Afghanistan." What do you make of that?

MR. GIBBS: Well, Alister, I would point you to -- and I think you should all check what P.J. Crowley said at the top of his briefing today. P.J. has talked to a number of people that were in the room or familiar with the situation. And I



think it's emblematic of the fact that Richard was always focused on the task at hand.

But I think if you look at that transcript, you'll see there's a little back and forth as the medical staff is trying to get him to calm down and relax at some point, and he's saying that he's worried about Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the doctor says, "Well, let us focus on this." And he said, "Okay, great, you end the war in Afghanistan."

So, again, I'd point you to P.J. on this because he's done some checking around on that.

Q And if I could just change tracks. Is the President -- to talk about the tax package -- is the President willing to discuss any change in the estate tax with the House to secure the backing of House Democrats?

MR. GIBBS: Well, Alister, I'd point you to -- I think we answered something similar to this yesterday. We believe that the test vote in the Senate last night, the procedural vote, demonstrates the broad bipartisan support that the agreement enjoys not just in the Senate but with the American people and that we believe that what the Senate will pass, we hope today, will be the framework for what is taken up and agreed quickly by the House of Representatives.

Jake.

Q The region of Afghanistan and Pakistan is obviously so complicated yet so important to this administration that appointing somebody of the nature of Richard Holbrooke to a lot of foreign policy experts made sense because he was well known, he'd been doing it for decades. Can you talk at all about who you think could replace him or do you think it's just going to be a career foreign service person?

MR. GIBBS: I will say this, Jake. I don't know if those discussions have begun at State. There were no discussions of that in the meeting this morning and I have not heard discussions amongst the team here at the White House on that.

Our focus, obviously, as I said a moment ago, is on completing the review that Richard had been a big part of and to celebrate the life that he lived.

I think in many ways, and I don't think anybody would disagree, that -- the cliché would be "You've got big shoes to fill." I think it's probably a safe -- it's a safer thing to say that Ambassador Holbrooke is, as the President said, a giant in foreign policy and is not -- is irreplaceable.

That is not to say that there won't be somebody that the President picks. I think Richard possessed some very unique qualities. His experience went back to the conflict in Vietnam. All of you are -- know of the role that he played in bringing peace to the war-torn regions of Bosnia.

So in many ways he was a unique figure in American foreign policy.

Q One senior administration official said that one of the reasons so many people thought of him sometimes as a pain is because he would find a friction point in a meeting and he would charge right for it, bringing up whatever conflict there was, and that that might have been lacking at today's meeting since he was not there. Was there anybody to serve that role?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, the process that concluded today on the review is a process -- is a two-month process. So I think the notion that vast arguments would break out at that point in the process, the interagency process, is probably not what the administration official had in mind.

I do think it's fair to say, and I think -- look, it's why you want somebody of that experienced level and that stature, and you want somebody who will bore down on the problems and the challenges that you face.

I think that was certainly one of the things that Richard did. I have no doubt that his presence will be sorely missed. Again, I think he created and had a very talented team at the State Department that will continue the work that he did as somebody who was -- who played a big role in the formulation of the President's strategy and who was enormously supportive of the series of decisions that the President made at the end of last year and was -- that he was helping to carry out on the civilian side in both countries this year.

Q Do you think the war is going better now than it was a year ago?

MR. GIBBS: I don't think there's any doubt. We have -- and I think you'll see this from the review, and again, I preface it by saying it is not without its challenges. It is not without --

Q We're losing more troops than we were a year ago.

MR. GIBBS: And I think that is the sad impact of having more forces to stem the momentum that the Taliban had been making. There's no doubt that we would not be seeing either security or civilian progress were it not for the stemming of that momentum.

That's -- look, the President argued for years that we needed more forces, even as more forces were diverted to other conflicts, away from what the President believes was the central front.

I think you'll see in the review when it's made -- when a summary is made public, that because of the increased troop level, you've had an opportunity to push back on the Taliban in important areas of the country, something that wasn't happening until more forces were added.

Many challenges remain. As I said, as we have seen success, we understand that that success without following up in the capacity building of either Afghanistan as a whole, or those regions specifically, it's going to be hard either from a security or a governmental perspective to hold those areas. We've got to recruit, retain -- recruit, train and retain a security force of police and army to be able to do that.

You also have to create the civilian capacity that's necessary to deliver both the basic functions of either a regional or a national government and continue to make progress in doing so in order to hold those regions. All of that is what continues.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you, Robert. When you talk about the report needing to be finalized and that there will be some changes, are these changes for clarity, or are things being added that the President thought should be in there that were not?

MR. GIBBS: I think a little of -- I would say, I'd use both your examples, both for clarity and for the addition of things he thought should be in there. I would say this, this is -- the President did not make major changes today.

Q And will there be anything in the review about Pakistan and that country needing to step up more?

MR. GIBBS: Oh, without a doubt. I mean, there's -- again, the -- and I may have cut you off. Let me let you finish your question.

Q No, no.

MR. GIBBS: Okay. There's three aspects of the review: Afghanistan, al Qaeda and Pakistan. So, again, this is sort of along the lines of what I was telling Jake, and that is, we have seen over the course of many months an increased willingness to cooperate from the Pakistanis. But as you saw in both -- you'll see in this review and in reports that have been sent up I think early fall, late last summer, that there are things that we still need Pakistan to continue to cooperate with us more on and continue to do in order to prevent further safe havens from impacting the progress that ultimately can be made in Afghanistan.

Q And will that be laid out in blunt ways or blunt language being used about what Pakistan needs to do?

MR. GIBBS: I think we're clear -- we're certainly clear with our partners in Pakistan on this. And I think it will be clear, again, in the document that as we've seen greater cooperation, our challenges there remain.

Q And on the tax cuts, the President yesterday when he came out here to the briefing room talked about I believe making phone calls to some of these House Democrats. Has he been able to sway any minds there, those who have not been supportive of this, change their minds?

MR. GIBBS: I will simply say that I think the President has had some good conversations. And I think we are on a path toward getting this agreement through the House and ultimately to the President's desk, to ensure that middle-class families don't see their taxes go up on the 1st of January.

Q And will he continue making more calls today?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Yes, sir.

Q Should we expect anything in the report that is made public or that he enunciates on Thursday to point to any change in the beginning of a troop withdrawal schedule next July?

MR. GIBBS: No. I think we are on course for the July 2011 date, based on the conditions, as you've always heard the President say.

Q And will he indicate how large or small that withdrawal is likely to be?

MR. GIBBS: No, again, I think that's something that he will, with the Secretary of Defense and with commanders on the ground, work through as we approach that day.

Q So basically what you're telegraphing and what has been suggested for weeks is that there's progress being made, so don't worry about everything. It's just -- it's all moving ahead.

MR. GIBBS: No, no, I -- maybe you misunderstood the word "challenge" that I used a couple of half-dozen times.

Q -- challenges.

MR. GIBBS: No. If I can, I think you have seen in areas dealing with each of the three aspects of the report -- the momentum with the -- stopping and stemming some of the momentum of the Taliban, increased cooperation with the Pakistanis, and the degradation of al Qaeda leadership -- progress on all three of those fronts, with challenges small and great that continue.

I don't -- nobody expected that we would come out at a year into this and say, "Good news, all is well, and we can pack up." That's not what -- that's not was --

Q You also haven't heard anybody say that there's been major progress on perhaps the biggest issue -- the one that was apparently on Holbrooke's last words -- and that is dealing with the sanctuary which al Qaeda has in Pakistan.

MR. GIBBS: Well, Bill, that was one of, I think, one of the things that I outlined earlier that will be -- that remains one of our central challenges. There's -- without a doubt, safe haven in Pakistan by a whole series of people makes security and progress in Afghanistan more challenging. There's absolutely no doubt about that.

I think you'll see that in the review when the review is released, just as I think you've seen that, again, reported I think many places before the review.

Q A couple issues on the Hill. "Don't ask, don't tell," the House is introducing a standalone bill today. Does the President believe that perhaps a standalone bill is the best way to get this policy repealed legislatively?

MR. GIBBS: Well, Mike, I think the President is -- believes that the best way to change this policy is through a legislative vehicle. As you've heard me say, as you've heard Secretary Gates as recently as his -- coming back from his trip to Afghanistan, that his strong belief is that the policy will change one of two ways: either through the court system or through Congress.

His preferred and our preferred method is to do this legislatively through Congress. And it's our hope -- you saw a vote late last week, 57 senators support repeal. There were some absences and things like that. I think it's safe -- you can without a doubt say that a number far exceeding a majority is supportive of the repeal of that policy as you'd seen previously in the House.

And I think we have a strong chance to change that policy before Congress leaves the end of this year.

Q As the calendar goes by, is the President becoming worried that time may be running out on this issue for this Congress?

MR. GIBBS: No, I think the President believes that there's time enough to get several things done. The tax agreement I think obviously passed an important procedural hurdle yesterday and hopefully will be agreed on by the Senate today. I think the House will take it up over the course of the next several days. I think the Senate is likely to move to consideration of the ratification of the New START treaty, which is also a strong and important priority of the President.

Q Does the White House have a strong opinion about omnibus versus a continuing resolution?

MR. GIBBS: I've heard back and forth on a bunch of different things, but obviously one of the things that has to be done before Congress leaves is how we're going to pay for the operation of government going forward.

Q The omnibus I'm told is 1,924 pages. Do you worry that that could gum up things a bit?

MR. GIBBS: No, I just think it means a lot of people will be up late reading between now and, say, the 22nd or 23rd.

Q And who is going to read that?

Q Burton?

MR. GIBBS: I was going to say -- I noticed during the health care debate that was a big thing. And I assume many members up on Capitol Hill, Mark.

Q Do you really?

MR. GIBBS: I mean, I take them at their word.

Q Speaker Boehner?

MR. GIBBS: I take them at the word.

Q Just so we understand the frame for the AfPak review, it was just a review of what's working or not working in the execution of the strategy? You did not examine the strategy?

MR. GIBBS: No, no, we -- absolutely. I mean, we -- there was a comprehensive two-month review of where we are and what -- look, the President set out a series of goals in his West Point speech. Are we making progress with this strategy on meeting those goals? What is working? What has to be refined? What progress have we made? What

challenges persist? And how do we address those challenges?

Q So the question at the beginning of this review was, is this the right strategy after all?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Because it felt like administration officials were downplaying whether or not this was a review on the order of what we saw last year when they were looking at should we do counterinsurgency or should we do counterterrorism.

MR. GIBBS: Well, I don't -- look, this was not a -- this was a two-month review process that worked through the interagency. You saw the list of people at the meeting today representing a healthy side of both the military and the civilian component of our government. And everybody who's got an equity in or a project in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and in dealing with al Qaeda and counterterrorism was represented.

There weren't 13 three-hour meetings with the President because -- and I think it's important to understand that the President had these meetings last year, ending -- or culminating in the announcement of the strategy in the speech at West Point.

It would be -- it wouldn't be accurate to presume that somehow two months ago somebody said, well, let's see where we are. The President receives on a weekly basis extensive memos from military and civilian -- military leaders in Afghanistan and civilian counterparts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

On a monthly basis, as happened today, the policy is evaluated in a room that has about -- probably close to two dozen agency and departmental heads that have the equity in that policy.

So this is a policy that is examined on a weekly basis and then in a group with a monthly basis. So the notion somehow that not two months ago, Tom Donilon and a group of others said, well, let's see how that December thing is going, would be I think an inaccurate viewpoint of how we got to this stage in Afghanistan.

Q But at the same time --

MR. GIBBS: And I think it would be somewhat irresponsible for laying out how things are done in a conflict the size of Afghanistan.

Q I just wonder -- I mean, at the same time, you wouldn't -- it would be kind of absurd to continually re-litigate, do we have the right strategy, do we have the right strategy?

MR. GIBBS: No, that's -- but, again, those types of questions are asked on a weekly basis and evaluated on a weekly basis in those memos and certainly on a monthly basis in these meetings.

Lord knows if somebody had said in February of last year, this thing is way off the rails, we wouldn't have continued until the process started in October to evaluate -- I just -- that wouldn't -- we've dedicated the hard work and the effort and in some -- in all too many tragic ways, the full devotion of men and women in our armed forces not to take an honest and clear-eyed look at this approach every single day that we've had it.

Q That seems to contradict, though, what a senior administration official told us just a few weeks ago. They said, "This is diagnostic, not prescriptive."

MR. GIBBS: Again, Sam, I think it's important to understand that this is a process that happens every week and every month. I guess it's -- the notion somehow again -- as I was telling Savannah, the notion somehow that the President had a series of 12 or 13, I forget the exact number of three- or two-and-a-half hour meetings, and we just now have, over the course of two months, evaluated where we are, would be inaccurate.

I do think this is -- we did not set down two months ago and say, okay, is this working? We've been doing that every day since the President enumerated his policy. We wanted an evaluation as to where we were on the goals that the President had laid out, where were we on the implementation and time of achieving those goals laid on top of Lisbon, which just set forth NATO's policy that in 2011 we're going to begin to -- beginning of 2011 begin to transition security for regions and areas in Afghanistan to Afghan control, concluding with their control at the end of 2014, and evaluating the progress we've made and what needs to be looked at and where we are.

But, again, the notion, again, that -- and maybe we were wrong in saying this last December, the December review was not to start in October or November to see whether we had been -- we were on the right path 10 months ago. That would be -- I think that would be to ignore the efforts of, as I said, people that give their last and full devotion to keeping all of us safe.

Q I think where I'm confused is -- I mean, is it -- you seem to be telling Savannah that what's still being litigated is whether or not it's the right strategy, not whether or not the strategy is working.

MR. GIBBS: No, no, again, this is -- throughout the course of the year, in every meeting that the President has with David Petraeus and Karl Eikenberry, and it was Anne Patterson, our new ambassador in Pakistan, this is -- the notion somehow that we have gotten this far in, and somebody said, hey, this thing is way off track -- that's why there are -- that's why a weekly report, a monthly meeting is put in. That's why we go through whether -- for instance, are we meeting the recruitment, training and retention goals of a security force that comprises an army and

a police, right?

There's a graph that's given out each time that shows on the present course, are we going to meet the goals that we set forth at the beginning of this process for having in place an army and a police representing a security force that allows us to meet the goals and transfer security. Are we doing that? How many did we recruit last month? How many stayed? How many got trained? What are they doing? Where are they? Are we on, again, a course to meet that? So that's done in a constant thing.

Jonathan. Go ahead.

Q As you mentioned, the START treaty is probably going to be coming up actually -- might actually be coming up tonight, but the debate will really begin tomorrow. What is the President doing to make sure that that comes -- gets 67 votes? And some Republicans are talking about moving to strike the non-binding missile defense language out of the preamble of the treaty. And I'm wondering if you see the treaty text as inviolable or would you entertain changes to it?

MR. GIBBS: I will check with NSC on the language. I think it's pretty clear that when people like James Baker and others say that this is a treaty that will not affect our ability to conduct missile defense, probably there's no better example than at a meeting in Lisbon by NATO, where many encouraged the ratification -- the Senate to ratify this treaty. We also finally got -- we finally went from the theoretical to the reality of a missile defense shield for Europe that also protects America. So I think the notion that somehow those were in contradiction of each other were in many ways addressed them.

The President has tasked the Vice President specifically with -- and the Vice President has, over the course of many weeks, been making calls and visits to the Senate. I think it's clear that if you look at the number of Democrats and Republicans that have said they're supportive of this treaty, that number is at or exceeds 67. And certainly that's crucial and important. That's the number we need and that's the number that we expect to exceed when this is passed.

Q And one other thing. Harry Reid said today that it's possible that they're going to take care of whatever they can towards the beginning of next week, then go home and then come back for more votes between Christmas and New Year's. Would the President cut short his holiday for that?

MR. GIBBS: I'd have to -- I'm not familiar with that statement. So let me check with folks on that.

Roger.

Q Yes, on the CEO summit tomorrow, of the names that we --

MR. GIBBS: Can I just say -- I want to say -- I'll say this for like the 83rd time. Whenever three or more people get into a room -- summits generally happen in Iceland, and involve trench coats and nice hats. But this is a working group --

Q Beer.

MR. GIBBS: Right, I know. Three people have a beer in the Rose Garden and all of a sudden there's like a cable Chyron of all this stuff.

So go ahead.

Q The CEO working group --

MR. GIBBS: I know exactly what you're talking about, Roger. (Laughter.)

Q Excellent. You go to the head of the class.

MR. GIBBS: All right, yes, yes. I think there's probably somebody at Bloomberg right now scurrying to find different letters to plug in in lieu of "summit."

Go ahead.

Q There's a couple of repeat CEOs: GE, for example; Dow Chemical; PepsiCo. Are we going to see new faces there tomorrow?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think that -- I mean, look, this obviously is part of an ongoing discussion and working arrangement that the President has had with CEOs over the course of many months, whether we've had them in for Roosevelt Room discussions, whether he's had them in for lunch or dinner. I think some of the nation's largest employers, many of them haven't changed their CEOs.

So obviously there's some continuity to people that you've seen before, but I think you'll also see people that have also not spent a lot of time here.

The President wants to hear from them about what they see in the road ahead for the economy, and ideas that they

have on continuing our economic recovery.

Q And will he make any appeal -- there's a lot of cash sitting aside. The President has mentioned it; you've mentioned it. Will he make an appeal to them to spend some of that?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think the President will want to have a discussion about what steps -- I think whether it's something like the business expensing or the research and experimentation tax credit continuity -- that are important certainty for business. And the President will want to know, just as they'll want to know what steps we're taking to ensure that those tax credits are there, that what steps are they going to take as they see an economy get stronger and as demand picks up, how they're going to structure and invest.

Q And is it morning or afternoon tomorrow or --

MR. GIBBS: I think he goes over in the morning, but I think he's over there for a bit of time tomorrow.

Q Okay, and a related question. He met with Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates today. Part of the meeting was their program to get wealthy to give some of their wealth toward programs and such. Did the three of them, by any chance, ask the President to do any pledging on his own?

MR. GIBBS: I don't know. I mean, obviously the President -- well, I think it's pretty clear that the President is not quite in --

Q He's not in their league, that's true. (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: -- quite in the billionaires' league of what do you do with your money. But obviously the President has -- I think the President would believe strongly and I think you can see from the donations that he's made on an annual basis that -- certainly for those that have been blessed, that ensuring the opportunity of those -- ensuring the opportunity of others is important to him. And clearly it's what brought the Gateses and Warren Buffett here today.

Q Would he be willing to consider such a pledge at some point?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, I think he's -- I don't think he's, like I said, quite at the income club that -- of those other two. But I know that his charitable donations are something that are tremendously important to him.

Q Did they discuss the tax debate at all?

MR. GIBBS: I have not had an opportunity to talk with the President after the meeting. He went pretty quickly into the Afghan review, and I have not had a chance to talk to him about that.

Mara.

Q Just another question about the CEO working group meeting.

MR. GIBBS: It's working.

Q It's working. See, you got us --

MR. GIBBS: Good thing is the Chyron makers at NPR will not have to --

Q They're invisible at NPR, which is so great. (Laughter.) Yesterday you talked about trade as something that you thought was an area of agreement. But there must be a whole list of things that you see coming up in the year, whether it's tax reform, deficit reduction, infrastructure. I mean, could you talk about other areas where you think that the relationship will be different than the --

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, I think there's a series of -- and, look, we'll have more to -- and the President will have more to say on this before he goes tomorrow. But I think, as you mention, there are a whole host of important economic ideas and important things that you've heard the President talk about.

I would point you to the speech that he did a little more than a week ago in North Carolina, as an important marker for what he sees this country has to be involved in in order to create opportunities for people here at home and how obviously that is directly related to businesses and employers. We are not going to see a sustained economic recovery until we see that it is sparked and led by the private sector.

So I think whether that is -- and you've seen, again, some of this over the past couple of weeks, whether it is agreement on a free trade agreement that will open up important developing -- either developing markets or fast-growing markets for our products and creating jobs here at home; whether it is an investment in a sufficient infrastructure for the 21st century; whether it's education reform. There are a whole host of things I think that the President is interested in both talking to and hearing from CEOs on this tomorrow.

Q You've been asked before about why so much cash, why they're sitting on so much cash, even though their profits are going up. And you said, in answer to Roger's question, that you seem to accept the argument that it was about certainty, that they were sitting on the cash because they were --

MR. GIBBS: No. My answer was to say I think while they're going to say they're looking for certainty in certain things like expensing, which was something that the President -- look, consumer demand is what drives economic growth, and that's what drives decisions on whether or not -- if I'm trying to sell you something, I'm going to make more of them if I think the demand is greater for you to sell them. I think --

Q So you don't accept the argument that, oh, we're -- businesses aren't investing because they don't know what the tax structure is going to be?

MR. GIBBS: No, I think it's -- it is helpful to -- like, take business expensing, right? You're taking a policy that would spread the writing off of some fixed percentage over a 10-year period of time. I think putting that in a one-year period of time the President believes will have a stimulative effect on their investment strategy.

But in the end, the economy grows because of consumer demand, and that's where a lot of these decisions will derive from.

Q Robert, one of the things that was really interesting about last year's Afghanistan strategy review was the liveliness of the debate. The President made a point about wanting to look at all different sides of each issue. Has this year's review been characterized by a similar type of debate? Are there fault lines? Is there disagreement at all about what the problem is and what the solution is and what's working and what's not working?

MR. GIBBS: No, I think -- I think there's -- I mean, look, again, last year's extensive review, which led to strategic decisions and strategic implementation of -- particularly increased troops on the ground, I think that led to, as you said, a spirited conversation about the direction that we should go.

This year, as we've evaluated that, I think the President is -- and the team are comfortable with the strategy that we've picked, and now we're implementing that strategy.

So, look, any given meeting could still have some liveliness, and obviously there are still strongly held opinions. But I think there's pretty broad agreement on where we're heading and what the challenges are. I don't think there are -- that's why I started this by saying I didn't think you'll find a lot in Thursday's review that you find that surprising. I think, again, the progress that's been made and the challenges that remain are well known.

Q Just -- I guess I'm a little confused. So you had said that this -- excuse me, this view is ongoing or has been ongoing; it's a continuation. So what separates this two-month review with what's been going on all the time?

MR. GIBBS: Again, maybe I'm being the one that's confusing. This is to evaluate where we are, okay? Each month and each week, we evaluate whether the strategy that we're implementing is making the progress toward the goals that the President enumerated.

And that's -- again, the point I was also trying to make was, it is not as if we had this extensive decision-making period that led or culminated in the President's speech at West Point, only to now come back nine months later and see it is working.

That's something that's being evaluated constantly. And now this is a pretty extensive look into evaluating what the President said a year later and the progress that we've made.

And, again, what remains -- what has to -- what larger questions do we have drill down even further on? And how do we evaluate -- I mean, look, we've got an evaluation period that actually extends back farther than the strategic review that led to the policy decisions last year. And that is a whole host of years of our policy in Afghanistan.

Yes.

Q Thank you, Robert. We note that China's Vice President -- Vice Premier Wang is visiting the NSC Advisor Donilon this afternoon in the White House. Could you give us some detail about their meeting?

MR. GIBBS: Well, obviously I don't want to get too deep into what might be said before the meeting, but I think it is clear that -- I mean, obviously we have invited the Chinese to -- for a state visit in January. So obviously that is something that is always on the docket.

We have developments obviously in North Korea that you see Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg and NSC Senior Director Jeff Bader traveling to China to discuss. So I think a whole host of foreign policy and economic concerns will be on the docket.

Q When will the state visit date be --

MR. GIBBS: I think we're hoping to announce that in the next couple of days.

Q Robert.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, ma'am.

Q What's the President's sense of the dynamics in the House as the tax legislation would move over there? He sounded more optimistic when he came in here last night after the Senate vote. And is it still the case that you in no

way want that package opened up and changed in any way so that it would have to go back to the Senate?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, I think the framework that -- the framework that the President introduced a little more than week ago has, as you heard others say, has been changed to add the energy tax credits that were important to the President and a number of Democrats. So I think that the Senate is going to pass that, and that's going to be the basis of which the House takes up that legislation. Obviously we think it's also the basis for what will become the agreement that the President will sign.

Look, I'll continue to say that the President, as you heard, have -- and said at this podium just yesterday, understands the frustration that members have in not being able to simply extend the tax cuts permanently for middle-class Americans. But we didn't have the votes to do that in the Senate, and that's what led us to need to come up with something that didn't impact middle-class Americans with a tax increase on the 1st of January.

Q How does the vote look now in the House? Is the President still reaching out individually to members?

MR. GIBBS: Yes. The President will continue to make calls. And I think the President believes -- look, I think if you look at the -- look at events over the past 48 hours, 85 I think was the final number in the Senate last night -- 83-15. I knew there was a five in there somewhere. I wouldn't have done well in "The Price Is Right."

The 83 votes, I think, if you look at a number of public opinion polls that have come out, demonstrate broad bipartisan support. And I think the President believes that in the not-too-distant future we'll have an agreement that he can sign that preserves those tax rates.

Q And he can afford to lose a few Democrats and still find a wide enough margin to pass it in the House?

MR. GIBBS: I think so, sure.

Q Robert, Ambassador Holbrooke's frame of reference for the AfPak situation was Vietnam. He was extraordinarily concerned with Pakistan. Do you think, in his absence, it's the President's inclination to pick someone who is more skeptical, someone who sort of matches --

MR. GIBBS: Glenn, I got to tell you, I think there has not been a lot of time spent in the very few hours since Richard passed thinking about who's next.

Q Well, in this meeting, because clearly he prepped -- he had done some preparation for this meeting, did any of this --

MR. GIBBS: The President?

Q No, no, Ambassador Holbrooke.

MR. GIBBS: Oh, sure. I mean, he obviously was -- I mean, I think it's important that Richard was instrumental in the development of the policy that the President laid out a year ago and has been a big player in this every step of the way, both in the development and the implementation.

Q Did anyone express any of his opinions or observations that he may have collected prior to his passing? Was he sort of represented in the meeting?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I mean, look, I think -- again, I think the challenges that we have are well known and well documented to you and to the many people from a policy-making perspective that are in that room, Secretary Clinton, certainly foremost among them, from the State Department. Again, I don't think we've just -- we've spent a lot of time here working through who will occupy that position next.

Q But the larger issue isn't necessarily about personnel. The larger issue is you described a process today that seems to have gone fairly harmoniously. And you can say many things about Ambassador Holbrooke, but harmony was not his first priority.

MR. GIBBS: Well, no. Look, Glenn, don't misunderstand me. Harmony is not what has led all of these meetings or it's not the intended outcome. The intended outcome is to get the policy right. If one has to break a few eggs in order to make the omelet, people get that. That's happened certainly at every step of the way, and I think -- you mentioned Pakistan. Pakistan was a long point of discussion in the meeting today. I don't have any doubt that Richard's views were well represented on that score.

Margaret.

Q Thanks. I had a few brief questions about the Thursday review. Can you tell us how many pages it would be? Can you rule out there will be a call for -- or that the President would call for sending any additional troops to Afghanistan or anyone else as a result of the policy?

MR. GIBBS: The document does not call for any additional force changes. I think the document, as I said, will show that we're on track for July 2011. Obviously the President asked for some changes in the document today, so in terms of the number of pages, I don't know.

Obviously there's going to be -- there's two version of this. There will be an executive summary that we'll put out publicly, and then obviously there is a top secret and classified version that has been constructed as well.

Q In terms of the al Qaeda part of the strategy, beyond dealing with Pakistan and Afghanistan, will it deal with AQAP, will it deal with Yemen, and can you give us some foreshadow of --

MR. GIBBS: Not that I'm aware of. Again, our focus on this was -- best I -- I'll double-check, but I think this is focused only on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Q And then are we looking beyond the President's statement on Thursday at any kind of a speech that's remotely akin to West Point where he broadly and in-depth addresses the American people about a year after the speech? Or did he basically do that in Afghanistan when he was there last week?

MR. GIBBS: No, I think -- I mean, look, I think there's no doubt that how the public views our efforts I think anyone would admit to you is important in the overall effort in these two countries. I think you'll hear the President lay out extensively his thoughts on where we are. And then, as I said, some of the senior policymakers will be in here to take some of your questions around that.

So I don't see that there will be a West Point-type speech, but I think an extensive discussion of where we are is certainly what you'll see on Thursday.

Yes, sir.

Q Shifting gears, tax cuts are not the only thing that expire on December 31st. The Build America Bonds program does as well. Over the summer, the National Conference of Mayors and League of Cities have said it's so essential to them that in its absence they're now warning of potentially up to half a million layoffs at the state and local level, and withdrawing these subsidies for municipal bonds, but they're really concerned of the impact of that. Why didn't the White House fight more for the extension of the Build America Bonds program?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, we have -- there are a lot of things that the President wanted to see that aren't in this agreement. Obviously the Build America Bonds and other things are things that the President believes are important.

Obviously -- I think there are obviously -- there are a series of budgetary concerns that -- at a state and local level that I'm not entirely sure all of that is a result of -- or could be remedied with Build America Bonds.

But obviously it's an important investment that the President and the team put in the Recovery Act. And, look, there are things that we'd like to see extended that just aren't in this agreement.

Q If states like Illinois and California that are particularly in dire straits came with their tin cup in hand, would the White House agree to -- is there another bailout for the states in the works? Is that something you'd consider?

MR. GIBBS: I'm not aware that there has been a bailout for the states that was previous to your question today.

Q Well, through these subsidies, which are, in effect --

MR. GIBBS: I don't think investing in infrastructure is -- maybe I'm misunderstanding the premise of your question. But I don't think paying down on a municipal rate for a bond to invest in infrastructure is a bailout. I mean, that's how we build schools. I don't think that when we build schools we consider that a bailout.

Bill.

Q Robert, just to clarify one thing, you mentioned senior officials perhaps coming in the Briefing Room?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Yesterday, you mentioned perhaps the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State. Is that the plan?

MR. GIBBS: That is -- or that was, schedule permitting. And I have not double-checked on that, but that's --

Q That's what you're hoping --

MR. GIBBS: That is my hope.

Q And on another scheduling item, the President is meeting the CEOs tomorrow --

Q Thursday?

MR. GIBBS: Yes. I keep saying tomorrow, don't I? Thursday, I'm sorry.

Q Thursday, Thursday.

MR. GIBBS: Mara got me so --

Q Okay, but tomorrow he is meeting --

MR. GIBBS: Tomorrow's AfPak summit. (Laughter.)

Q Tomorrow he's meeting with the CEOs --

MR. GIBBS: Come on, come on, guys. I know it's been like 45 minutes, but come on, that was pretty good.

Go ahead, Bill. I'm sorry.

Q My question is, on Friday, he is meeting Friday afternoon with a group of labor leaders.

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Is that a summit? (Laughter.)

Q Can you tell us what that meeting is about and who will be attending?

Q And is that a summit?

MR. GIBBS: It is part of the ongoing effort, as I said yesterday; the CEO meeting is part of it; meeting with economists that represent the left and the right of the political spectrum last week. Look, I think the President -- we're heading into an important year in our economy. And the President wants to hear from a series of different perspectives on what their ideas are.

So, as you said, we'll see labor leaders on Friday. We'll see CEOs on Wednesday. We've seen economists over the past week. And I think it all gives the President and the economic team here a full understanding and a candid discussion of the ideas that are available and where they see the economy heading.

Q Thanks, Robert. Just a couple of questions. Most people believe that START would pass early next year, even if it weren't taken up this year. Why prioritize -- why is the White House prioritizing --

MR. GIBBS: I'm not sure that the argument inside of here has necessarily tracked the premise of your question.

Q So, you actually don't believe that it would pass next year?

MR. GIBBS: I know this, the President would like to, because we -- more than 67, the number needed for ratification, have said this year that they support it. I don't know why you'd put off until next year what the President believes we can get done this year.

Q One more question. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Amos, has spoken out a couple times out of the context of hearings where his opinion is asked for -- within a congressional hearing, that's one thing. But just off the cuff to reporters again today spoke about lifting the ban being too distracting. And he said, "I don't want to lose any Marines to distraction. I don't want to have any Marines that I'm visiting at Bethesda with no legs." Is the President worried about -- sorry.

MR. GIBBS: That's all right. No, no. That's fine. I thought I was about to get hit by something.

Q Just a little technical glitch over there. Is the President worried about having the Commandant of the Marine Corps, who is his appointee, sort of constantly raising opposition to his own stated belief that the policy needs to be changed and would actually increase national security, not decrease it?

MR. GIBBS: I think that -- I think the President's views and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs' views and the Secretary of Defense's views are fairly well known. I think the President, as the Commander-in-Chief, has a strong viewpoint, I think backed up by the survey conducted by the Pentagon as to the attitude of the men and women in our military, that this can be done in a way that strengthens our national security, preserves the best fighting force in the world, and most importantly does away with a policy that he doesn't think is just.

The President -- I mean, look, the President met with --

Q Is he worried about the Commandant? I mean, the Commandant is continually challenging the assumptions of the Commander-in-Chief.

MR. GIBBS: No, I mean, look, I think their views have been -- I think their views are very well known, just as the Commander-in-Chief's views are very well known. I think if you look at the Commander-in-Chief, the head of the Pentagon, and the head of the -- the Chair of the Joint Chiefs, you'll find unanimity in the belief that it's time to do away with this policy, and that's exactly what the President is working to do. I think what's also important is the Senate has clearly taken the views of all of these players into account, and last week, as I said, well north of a majority of those people said it was time to end this policy. So I think that's what we're on the verge of doing.

I'll go to Tommy and then I'll go here and then I'll head back.

Q Thanks, Robert. I just have one question and one follow-up from yesterday. First, does the White House have

any reaction to reports of conflicts of interest regarding the judge who struck down the health care law?

MR. GIBBS: I'm sorry, say the first part again.

Q Does the White House have any reaction to reports of conflicts of interest regarding the judge who struck --

MR. GIBBS: I don't have any reaction particularly on that. I think if you -- look, there was a lot of commentary on yesterday's ruling. I think it is important to get a couple of points of perspective. Eleven cases challenging the constitutionality of some portion of the health care bill have been dismissed. Two federal courts have actually upheld the constitutionality of the very provision that another court ruled differently on yesterday. And as I said, 115 miles apart, two judges in the same commonwealth came to different conclusions.

So I think if you take a -- if you really look at the ruling, the thing that I'm struck by is quite honestly the narrowness of the ruling based on the petition that the Attorney General made. The Attorney General -- and I think to be clear, the Attorney General wanted the entire piece of legislation, based on proving what he thought was one segment of the bill unconstitutional, that the whole bill would be struck down. The judge actually, despite a lack of a severability clause in the larger legislation, severed his ruling on the mandate away from the rest of the legislation.

The practical impact -- because the only thing the judge dealt with was one aspect of the legislation to be implemented in 2014 -- there's no practical impact at all as states move forward in implementing the decision -- or implementing the law that Congress passed and the President signed. So I think --

Q It sounds like you're saying it could have been worse. Do you think that the fact that it could have been worse means the conflict of interest is --

MR. GIBBS: No, I don't have, Tommy, anything with me on what you asked me about the conflict. I think what I'm struck by is less that it could have been worse, but just how narrow it was. And, again, we talked a little bit about this yesterday, but a lot of coverage happened for just two weeks -- not a lot of coverage happened for something two weeks ago where the -- where a judge in a different district in the same commonwealth ruled and upheld the constitutionality of the very same provision that a judge ruled differently on yesterday.

What I think that means is that this is -- some aspect of this is going to wind its way through the legal process as states move forward and as the judge explicitly let the states move forward on dealing with the law that Congress passed. I think the notion somehow that there's some historic crack in this is not held up by what the judge actually ruled on.

Yes, sir.

Q Robert, I just wanted to follow on the Haiti question from yesterday. Did you get --

MR. GIBBS: They've got somebody looking. I think -- if I'm not mistaken, I think what Senator Leahy, as head of the foreign operations -- I think foreign operations subcommittee for appropriations, was discussing something about -- as we've evaluated the election. I don't have anything --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. GIBBS: Yes. Yes, sir.

Q Yes, thanks, Robert.

MR. GIBBS: Right behind you.

Q Oh, I'm sorry -- thanks a lot, Robert. Just returning to Afghanistan. In the last six months, the President has lost his top U.S. commander in Afghanistan with the resignation of General McChrystal, and now with the passing of Ambassador Holbrooke, he's lost his top U.S. envoy to the country. And I just wanted you to weigh in on how big these losses are to the war effort. Or in your view and the President's view, is the war effort strategy for dealing with Afghanistan bigger than any one person?

MR. GIBBS: Of course it's bigger than any one person. Obviously Richard had, as I said earlier, a set of experiences that made him crucial and important to this effort. General McChrystal has been replaced by General Petraeus. And I think you'd be hard pressed to see how that has negatively impacted the effort.

Obviously we miss his presence today, and we will no doubt miss his presence in the future. I think the Secretary of State, his staff that remains, and many of the ambassadors that he has come into contact with and some of whom he has shaped over his five decades in diplomatic service will help lead the effort to continue to make progress on the civilian side and to make progress on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Thanks, guys.

END

3:24 P.M. EST

