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Office of the Press Secretary

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Press Gaggle by Deputy Press Secretary Bill Burton aboard Air Force One en route Atlanta, Georgia

Aboard Air Force One
En Route Atlanta, Georgia

9:44 A.M. EDT

MR. BURTON: Fire away.

Q Tell us about the fundraising part of this. Who's he fundraising for?

MR. BURTON: It's a DNC fundraiser. But on specific numbers and details, I'd go to the DNC for that.

Q Did you say you would have some specific numbers afterwards?

MR. BURTON: I said on the specific numbers you should go to the DNC on that.

Q Is the message going to be pretty similar to what we've heard in him say in the past couple fundraisers?

MR. BURTON: Yes. You'll hear the President talk about the importance of continuing to move forward and the choice that voters will have in the fall between Democrats who are -- who will continue the policies that are getting us out of this economic crisis, and Republicans who want to put us back with the policies that got us into it.

Q What's the President hearing about the hoped-for effort tonight to plug the BP well?

MR. BURTON: Well, obviously we're watching cautiously. You know, this is obviously slowed down by the storms -- Bonnie -- that came sweeping through the Gulf. And we're constantly monitoring and the President is continuing to get updates on it.

Q Does the President -- President Obama think Charlie Rangel should accept reprimand and/or step down?

MR. BURTON: Well, the President made comments on this over the weekend in an interview that was taped on Friday but aired on Sunday. He was a leader on ethics when he was in the state senate, he was a leader on ethics in the United States Senate, on the campaign trail for President, and as President has put into place some of the most sweeping ethics reforms in the history of the executive branch. There's a bipartisan process that's working through some serious questions here and the President thinks that it's appropriate that they conduct that process.

Q That wasn't actually an answer to the question.

MR. BURTON: Say that again?

Q That wasn't actually an answer to the question. A wise answer, but it wasn't actually an answer to the question.

MR. BURTON: The answer to the question is there's a bipartisan process that's working its way through and we're going to wait until they appropriately answer all those questions before weighing in on something that's a matter before that committee.

Q But he did weigh in, in the comments over the weekend, saying that he should end his career in a dignified fashion. What is he saying with that?

MR. BURTON: I think the President's comments speak for themselves. When it comes to this process, he's just not going to put his thumb on the scale of its outcome.



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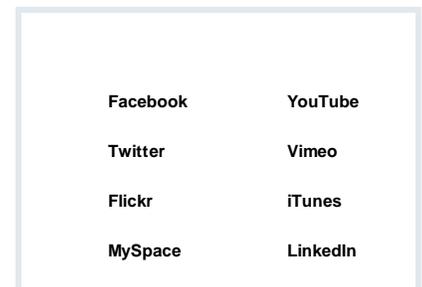
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Q Didn't he just do that?

MR. BURTON: No.

Q Speech length today, first speech?

MR. BURTON: I would say about 20 minutes.

Q Bill, is this speech today going to be sort of the start of a series of events leading up to the August 31st deadline? Are we going to see him talk about this more?

MR. BURTON: Yes, you'll see the President, the Vice President, and members of the President's administration talking about some of the successes that we've had in Iraq. There's a lot going on in the world right now, so a lot of Americans probably don't realize that when the President started this administration, there were some 144,000 American troops in Iraq. By the end of August, there will be 94,000 less troops there; we'll be down to 50,000. America's combat mission will have ended, and we will have transferred security over to the Iraqi people.

Q You started the Iraq strategy in February of 2009. It was predicated on the idea that he wanted to keep enough troops there long enough for there to be a government in place. There's no government in place, won't be a government in place by the time they get down to 50,000. Why the change in strategy?

MR. BURTON: Well, I think we need -- I think it's important to focus on the real success that the Iraqi people have had at democracy here. And if you look back at the last elections, it took some six months to form a government. And the fact that there are competing parties and individuals who want to lead this democracy is a sign of the kind of progress that they've made.

So there has been some positive movement on talks in forming a government, and we're confident that in the shorter term there will be a government in place. And also keep in mind that there is a functioning transitional government that's in place right now.

Q But is he --

Q Are you concerned that they haven't been -- since the last election that they haven't been able to move forward on that, and they might not by the time we reach the August 31st deadline?

MR. BURTON: It's something that the President is watching. And obviously we're doing what we can to help facilitate them along. But when you consider that last time it took them six months to put together the government, the fact that there's a stable transitional government in place right now is a sign that this process is working.

Q How stable is it, though, Bill? I mean they're deadlocked on where they're going to go from here. Is there concern that there's going to be a governing vacuum as August 31st hits?

MR. BURTON: I would say that it's very stable. And in terms of a governing vacuum, the fact that the government is functioning right now and the government is pretty effectively taking on the duties that are prescribed to governments is a good sign.

Q When is the next time the President is going to speak to a troop audience? Is he going to see some of the troops coming back?

MR. BURTON: I don't have an answer for you. I don't know that there is -- I'm not sure. Without looking at the schedule, I don't want to just guess.

Q Does this -- what message does the Iraq drawdown this month have for those who are concerned at home about Afghanistan?

MR. BURTON: Well, I think you're looking at two separate issues. The message on Iraq is that the President made a commitment on the campaign trail and in the first days of his presidency that he would end the combat mission in Iraq at the end of August of this year. And that's exactly what's happening. So I would say that the message is that when the President makes a commitment, he keeps it.

So as it relates to Afghanistan, the President made comments on that in the interview yesterday. He'll talk about that a little bit today. We obviously have some difficult challenges in that country, but we do think that we're continuing to make progress.

Q He made a commitment to begin pulling out troops from Afghanistan in July 2011. Yesterday, Speaker Pelosi said she hoped it's more than just a few thousand that Vice President Biden talked about a couple of weeks ago. Defense Secretary Gates said, I hope it's basically very few people at first. Where is the President on that?

MR. BURTON: Well, the President is exactly where he was when he laid out this strategy with the troops at West Point, and that is we're going to assess where we are. July 2011 is an inflection point. We will begin to transition our troops out. But he is an executive who likes to base his decisions on facts, and he'll take a fact-based assessment and make the right decision then.

Q Somebody saw Reggie carrying a baseball bat. Is it a prop for something today or is it going somewhere?

MR. BURTON: Reggie was carrying a baseball bat, so I would encourage you guys to be on your best behavior.

Q Bill, he is meeting with the executive board of AFL-CIO Wednesday. What is on the agenda there?

MR. BURTON: I'll get back to you on more specifics. But as it stands, they'll talk about a wide range of issues. He will also use this as an opportunity to talk about some of the things that we've done to get the economy moving in the right direction. We've continued to see steady growth. There's a lot more that we need to do and the President isn't satisfied with the rate of growth. But they'll obviously be talking about jobs and the economy.

Q Anything on tax cuts?

MR. BURTON: I don't know. I'll get back to you.

Q Okay. And one other question. Bloomberg Markets reported about the death benefits and insurance companies holding the benefits. Do you know if the President can take reform action by executive order on something like that? And if you don't know, can you check?

MR. BURTON: I don't know whether he can do that by executive order.

Q Would you be able to check?

MR. BURTON: Sure, I'll check that out for you.

Q Are any prominent Georgia Democrats going to be with him today at the fundraiser?

MR. BURTON: Yes, there will be some prominent Democrats, and I'll make sure you guys get a list of those before we land.

Q Is Roy Barnes going to be at any of these things?

MR. BURTON: He won't be.

Q Where is he?

MR. BURTON: He had some previously scheduled events.

Q Can you get us a list of the Georgia Democrats who won't be there?

Q Roy Barnes. (Laughter.)

MR. BURTON: I think that -- I think there's a lot of Democrats in the state of Georgia, but I don't have a full list of those. Sorry about that.

Q Is Shirley Sherrod going to be there -- have you said?

MR. BURTON: No -- I don't know. I just glanced at the list, but I don't think that she was on it. She is from a different part of the state.

Thank you.

END

9:54 A.M. EDT