



For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
February 28, 2008

Press Conference of the President

10:05 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. Laura and I, as you know, recently came back from Africa, where we saw firsthand how the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief is saving lives. I had a chance to go to the -- speak to the Sullivan Foundation the other day about our trip, and the reason I did so was to remind the American people about how important it is for our nation to remain generous and compassionate when it comes to helping people overseas.

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 [Presidential Remarks](#)

 [Audio](#)

I also, during my trip, urged Congress to reauthorize the Emergency Plan and increase our commitment, and they did. They approved a good, bipartisan bill, that maintains the principles that have made this program effective. And so I want to thank acting Chairman Howard Berman and Ranking Member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and all the members of the Committee for the action they took. This afternoon they're going to come down and I'll be able to thank them in person -- I'm going to brief them on the trip. Obviously, our hope is now that the House will act quickly and send the bill reauthorizing PEPFAR to the Senate, and I'd like to sign it into law as quickly as possible.



Members should also act on a very urgent priority, and that is to pass legislation our intelligence officials need to quickly and effectively monitor terrorist communications. At issue is a dispute over whether telecommunications companies should be subjected to class-action lawsuits because they are believed to have helped defend America after the attacks of 9/11. Allowing these lawsuits to proceed would be unfair. If any of these companies helped us, they did so after being told by our government that their assistance was legal and vital to our national security.

Allowing the lawsuits to proceed could aid our enemies, because the litigation process could lead to the disclosure of information about how we conduct surveillance, and it would give al Qaeda and others a roadmap as to how to avoid the surveillance. Allowing these lawsuits to proceed could make it harder to track the terrorists, because private companies besieged by and fearful of lawsuits would be less willing to help us quickly get the information we need. Without the cooperation of the private sector, we cannot protect our country from terrorist attack.

Protecting these companies from lawsuits is not a partisan issue. Republicans and Democrats in the United States Senate came together and passed a good bill, protecting private companies from these abusive lawsuits. And Republicans and Democrats in the House stand ready to pass the Senate bill, if House leaders would only stop blocking an up or down vote and let the majority in the House prevail.

Some in Congress have said we have nothing to worry about, because if we lose the cooperation of the private sector we can use the old FISA law. They're wrong. FISA was out of date. It did not allow us to track foreign terrorists on foreign soil quickly and effectively. And that is why a dangerous intelligence gap opened up last year, and that is why Congress passed legislation that reformed FISA -- but they did so only temporarily. The law expired; the threat to America has not expired.

Congress understood last year that FISA did not give our intelligence professionals the tools they needed to keep us safe. The Senate understands that the FISA -- old FISA didn't give us the tools needed to protect America. The bipartisan bill it passed provides those tools our intelligence professionals need. Yet the House's failure to pass this law raises the risk of reopening a gap in our intelligence gathering, and that is dangerous.

Another vital priority for protecting the nation is prevailing in Iraq. Unfortunately, this week the Senate debated yet another bill that threatens to cut off funding and tie the hands of our commanders in Iraq. It seems that no matter what happens in Iraq opponents to the war have one answer: Retreat. When things were going badly in Iraq a year ago, they called for withdrawal. Then we changed our strategy, launched the surge and turned the situation around. Since the surge began, high-profile terrorist attacks are down, civilian deaths are down, sectarian killings are down, and our own casualties are down. U.S. and Iraqi forces have captured or killed thousands of extremists, including hundreds of key al Qaeda operatives and leaders. Reconciliation is taking place in local communities across the country. That reconciliation is beginning to translate into political progress in the capital city.

In the face of these changes on the ground, congressional leaders are still sounding the same old call for withdrawal. I guess you could say that when it comes for pushing for withdrawal, their strategy is to stay the course. It's interesting that many of the same people who once accused me of refusing to acknowledge setbacks in Iraq now are the ones who are refusing to acknowledge progress in Iraq. If we followed their advice a year ago, Iraq would be a far different and more dangerous place than it is today. And the American people would be at greater risk.

If we follow their advice now, we would put at risk the gains our troops have made over the past year. Congress does need to act when it comes to Iraq. What they need to do is stand by our brave men and women in uniform and fully fund the troops.

Finally, Congress needs to act to help homeowners avoid foreclosure. Unfortunately, the Senate is considering legislation that would do more to bail out lenders and speculators than to help American families keep their homes. The Senate bill would actually prolong the time it takes for the housing market to adjust and recover and it would lead to higher interest rates. This would be unfair to the millions of homeowners who make the hard choices every month to pay their mortgage on time and it would be unfair to future home buyers. Instead, Congress should move ahead with responsible legislation to modernize the Federal Housing Administration and Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. By taking these steps we can help struggling homeowners and help our economy weather the difficult time in the housing market.

I'd be glad to take some questions. Terry.

Q Mr. President, bad economic news continues to pile up, the latest today with the GDP barely growing. Are you concerned that a sagging economy and hard times will help defeat John McCain, like it did your father in 1992? And how far are you willing to go to prevent that?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm concerned about the economy because I'm concerned about working Americans, concerned about people who want to put money on the table and save for their kids' education. That's why I'm concerned about the economy. I want Americans working.

And there's no question the economy has slowed down. You just cited another example of slowdown. I don't think we're headed to a recession, but no question we're in a slowdown. And that's why we acted, and acted strongly, with over \$150 billion worth of pro-growth economic incentives -- mainly money going into the hands of our consumers. And some money going to incent businesses to invest, which will create jobs.

And so we acted robustly. And now it's time to determine whether or not this pro-growth package will actually work. Now, the checks will start going out in the second week of May. There are going to be letters out soon explaining who is eligible for the refunds. Credit will happen in the first week of May. In other words, some people will choose to have their bank accounts credited. And in the second week of May, we anticipate the checks start moving out of Washington.

And the purpose is to encourage our consumers. The purpose is to give them money -- their own to begin with, by the way -- but give them money to help deal with the adverse effects of the decline in housing value. Consumerism is a significant part of our GDP growth, and we want to sustain the American consumer, encourage the American consumer and, at the same time, we want to encourage investment. So we'll see how the plan works.

Q But the political context --

THE PRESIDENT: You're trying to get me to be the pundit again. Look, you all figure that out. I mean, we've -- what I'm dealing with is the situation at hand, and I appreciate that -- both Democrats and Republicans in the United States Congress and Senate for getting this bill done very quickly. And it's a substantial piece of legislation, and it's a good sign that we can figure out how to cooperate with each other at times.

And so we'll see the effects of this pro-growth package. I know there's a lot of -- here in Washington, people are trying to -- stimulus package two and all that stuff. Why don't we let stimulus package one, which seemed like a good idea at the time, have a chance to kick in?

Yes.

Q Mr. President, Turkey's ground offensive in northern Iraq is now a week old with no end in sight. How quickly would you like to see Turkey end its offenses, its incursion? And do you have any concerns about the possibility of protracted presence in northern Iraq causing further destabilization in the region?

THE PRESIDENT: A couple of points on that. One, the Turks, the Americans, and the Iraqis, including the Iraqi Kurds, share a common enemy in the PKK. And secondly, it's in nobody's interests that there be safe haven for people who are -- have the willingness to kill innocent people.

A second point I want to make to you, Matt, is that there is a special forces presence in northern Iraq -- in Kurdistan -- now, apart from what you're referring to. So there is a presence. And there has been a presence for a while.

Thirdly, I strongly agree with the sentiments of Secretary Gates, who said that the incursion must be limited, and must be temporary in nature. In other words, it shouldn't be long-lasting. But the Turks need to move quickly, achieve their objective, and get out.

Q But how quickly, sir, do they need to move out?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, as quickly as possible.

Q Days or weeks?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, as possible.

Q Sir, I'd like to ask you about Russia. The Democratic candidates, when asked about the new Russian leader, Dmitry Medvedev, didn't appear to know a great deal about him. I wonder what you can say about him, how much power you think he's really got, with Putin still in the picture? And critics would say you badly misjudged Vladimir Putin. So what would be your cautionary tale to your successor about the threat Russia poses, and how to deal with this new leader?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know much about Medvedev either. And what will be interesting to see is who comes to the -- who represents Russia at the G8, for example. It will be interesting to see -- it will help, I think, give some insight as to how Russia intends to conduct foreign policy after Vladimir Putin's presidency. And I can't answer the question yet.

I can say that it's in our interests to continue to have relations with Russia. For example, on proliferation matters, it's in our interest to be able to make sure that materials that could cause great harm aren't proliferated. It's in our interest to work together on Iran. As I said I think in this room the last time I was here, I appreciated the fact that Vladimir Putin told the Iranians that they will provide -- they, Russia -- will provide enriched uranium to run the Bushehr power plant, thereby negating the need for the Iranians to enrich in the first place. I thought that was a constructive suggestion, and we need to be in a position to be able to work with Russia on Iran.

There's a lot of areas where -- yesterday, for example, with the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, I talked about a missile defense system in Europe, but I believe it's in our interests to try to figure out a way for the Russians to understand the system is not aimed at them, but aimed at the real threats of the 21st century, which could be a launch from a violent regime -- a launch of a weapon of mass destruction.

So there's areas, David, where we need to cooperate and -- let me finish -- and so it's -- I'm going to try to leave it so whoever my successor is will be able to have a relationship with whoever is running foreign policy in Russia. It's in the country's interest. That doesn't mean we have to agree all the time. I mean, obviously we didn't agree on Kosovo. There will be other areas where we don't agree. And yet it is in the interest of the country to have a relationship, leader to leader, and hopefully beyond that.

Q But first of all, are you suggesting, or are you worried that, in fact, Medvedev is a puppet for Vladimir Putin? And --

THE PRESIDENT: No, I wouldn't say that. That's your conclusion, not mine.

Q No, I'm asking the question about whether you're concerned. But isn't there something you took away that you can offer to your successor about how it's risky in the process of sizing up your Russian counterpart? Don't you think that you learned something from your time with Putin?

THE PRESIDENT: Here's what I learned -- here's what I learned: I learned that it's important to establish personal relations with leaders even though you may not agree with them -- certain leaders. I'm not going to have a personal relationship with Kim Jong-il, and our relationships are such that that's impossible.

But U.S.-Russian relations are important. It's important for stability. It's important for our relations in Europe. And therefore my advice is to establish a personal relationship with whoever is in charge of foreign policy in Russia. It's in our country's interest to do so.

Now, it makes it easier, by the way, when there's a trustworthy relationship, to be able to disagree and yet maintain common interests in other areas. And so we've had our disagreements. As you know, Putin is a straightforward, pretty tough character when it comes to his interests. Well, so am I. And we've had some head-butts, diplomatic head-butts. You might remember the trip to Slovakia. I think you were there at the famous press conference. But -- and yet, in spite of that, our differences of opinion, we still have got a cordial enough relationship to be able to deal with common threats and opportunities. And that's going to be important for the next President to maintain.

Yes, Jonathan.

Q Mr. President, do you believe if we have the kind of rapid pull-out from Iraq that Democrats are talking about, that we would be at greater risk of a terrorist attack here at home? And when Senator Obama was asked a similar question, he said, "If al Qaeda is forming a base in Iraq, then we will have to act in a way that secures the American homeland and our interests abroad." So I'm wondering if --

THE PRESIDENT: That's an interesting comment. If al Qaeda is securing a al Qaeda base -- yes, well, that's exactly what they've been trying to do for the past four years. That's their stated intention, was to create enough chaos and disorder to establish a base from which to either launch attacks or spread a caliphate. And the intent of the surge was to send more Marines into the area that -- where they had proclaimed their desire to set up a base. That was Anbar province. And so, yes, that's one of the challenges we face, is denying al Qaeda a safe haven anywhere. And their intentions -- that's what they said, that they would like to have a base or safe haven in Anbar province.

Yes, Bill.

Q But --

THE PRESIDENT: No, next turn.

Q But the question about --

THE PRESIDENT: Nice try. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: You obviously haven't been here long. John, where have you been, Jonathan? (Laughter.)

Q Across the river.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, okay, yes. Welcome to the other side. (Laughter.)

Q You can get the Congress to protect telecom companies from lawsuits, but then there's no recourse for Americans who feel that they've been caught up in this. I know it's not intended to spy on Americans, but in the collection process, information about everybody gets swept up and then it gets sorted. So if Americans don't have any recourse, are you just telling them, when it comes to their privacy, to suck it up?

THE PRESIDENT: I wouldn't put it that way, if I were you, in public. Well, you've been long been long enough to -- anyway, yes, I -- look, there's -- people who analyze the program fully understand that America's civil liberties are well protected. There is a constant check to make sure that our civil liberties of our citizens aren't -- you know, are treated with respect. And that's what I want, and that's what most -- all Americans want.

Now let me talk about the phone companies. You cannot expect phone companies to participate if they feel like they're going to be sued. I mean, it is -- these people are responsible for shareholders; they're private companies. The government said to those who have alleged to have helped us that it is in our national interests and it's legal. It's in our national interests because we want to know who's calling who from overseas into America. We need to know in order to protect the people.

It was legal. And now, all of a sudden, plaintiffs attorneys, class-action plaintiffs attorneys, you know -- I don't want to try to get inside their head; I suspect they see, you know, a financial gravy train -- are trying to sue these companies. First, it's unfair. It is patently unfair. And secondly, these lawsuits create doubts amongst those who will -- whose help we need.

I guess you could be relaxed about all this if you didn't think there was a true threat to the country. I know there's a threat to the country. And the American people expect our Congress to give the professionals the tools they need to listen to foreigners who may be calling into the United States with information that could cause us great harm. So, on the one hand, the civil liberties of our citizens are guaranteed by a lot of checks in the system, scrutinized by the United States Congress.

And secondly, I cannot emphasize to you how important it is that the Congress solve this problem. The Senate has solved the problem. And people say, would you ever compromise on the issue? The Senate bill is a compromise. And there's enough votes in the House of Representatives to pass the Senate bill. It's a bipartisan bill. And the House leaders need to put it on the floor, let the will of the House work. In my judgment, it happens to be the will of the people, to give the professionals the tools they need to protect the country.

Elaine.

Q Mr. President, you've stressed over and over in recent days particularly the importance of FISA reform to help keep America safe, and yet you have not yet filled a key national security post. Fran Townsend announced her resignation months ago, in November. What is the delay there, and what are Americans to make of that delay? Is America less safe because of it?

THE PRESIDENT: We got a fine man named Joel Bagnal working that office right now. He's a professional. I trust his judgment. He's a real good guy. And no, they shouldn't worry about Joel. He knows what he's doing.

John.

Q But, sir, the American --

THE PRESIDENT: John.

Q The Homeland Security Advisor is a key post. What's taking so long?

THE PRESIDENT: Joel Bagnal has occupied the position, Elaine. He's doing the job, and I've got confidence in him. And so should the American people have confidence in him. He's a fine professional. He knows what he's doing. And I'm very comfortable in saying, on your cameras, that our staff in the White House, led by Joel Bagnal, knows what they're doing when it comes to advising the President on matters of homeland security.

John.

Q Thanks, Mr. President. There's been a lot of criticism on the campaign trail of free trade policies and even talk about the U.S. opting out of NAFTA. And it doesn't seem that you want to discuss the prospects of Republican candidates on the campaign trail this year, but --

THE PRESIDENT: Not yet.

Q Not yet. But just given all the concerns about the economy that people have, do you feel like you could win in a state like Ohio if you were running again for President?

THE PRESIDENT: Landslide. (Laughter.) Look, I am a big believer in free trade. And the reason why is I firmly believe that free trade is essential to the formation of high-paying, quality jobs. In other words, people who work for industries that export goods to overseas are likely to be paid more than their -- other workers.

Secondly, if you look at the -- our economic growth recently, particularly last year, a major portion of that growth came as a result of exports. It's an essential part of our economic picture.

Yes, I heard the talk about NAFTA. One statistic I think people need to know is I think there's roughly like \$380 billion worth of goods that we ship to our NAFTA partners on an annual basis. Now, \$380 billion worth of goods means there's a lot of farmers and businesses, large and small, who are benefiting from having a market in our neighborhood. And the idea of just unilaterally withdrawing from a trade treaty because of trying to score political points is not good policy. It's not good policy on the merits, and it's not good policy as a message to send to our -- people who have, in good faith, signed a treaty and worked with us on a treaty.

Thirdly, those of us who grew up in Texas remember what the border looked like when we were kids, and it was really poor. And you go down to that border today, it is prosperous on both sides of the river, to the credit of those who proposed NAFTA, and to the credit of those who got NAFTA through the Congress. If you're worried about people coming into our country illegally, it makes sense to help a place like Mexico grow its economy. Most folks would rather be finding a job close to home; most folks would rather not try to get in the bottom of an 18-wheeler to come and put food on the table.

This agreement has meant prosperity on both sides of our borders, north and south. And I believe it's in the interests to continue to seek markets for our farmers, ranchers and businesspeople. I also know it's in our interest to insist that when people sell products into our countries [sic], that we get treated fairly. In other words, if we treat a country one way, people in a country one way, we expect to be treated the same way -- like Colombia.

The Colombia Free Trade vote is coming up. Many of their products come into our country much easier than our products go into theirs. It makes sense to be treated equally. But on this vote, there's an additional consequence. If the Congress rejects the Colombia Free Trade Agreement, it will sorely affect the national security interests of the United States. It will encourage false populism in our neighborhood. It will undermine the standing of courageous leaders like President Uribe. And I strongly urge the Congress, when they bring this -- when the Colombia Free Trade Agreement is brought to a vote, to seriously consider the consequences of rejecting this trade agreement.

Mike.

Q Mr. President, on FISA, do you worry that perhaps some House Democratic leaders are playing a high-stakes game of "wait and see," in terms of if we get attacked, we all lose; if we don't get attacked, then maybe that makes the case that you don't need all the powers in FISA?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I don't think so. I mean, I think that's -- that would be ascribing motives that are -- I just

don't they're the motives of the House leaders to do that. I think they're really wrestling with providing liability protecting to phone companies. I don't think that's cynical or devious, Michael. That's just too risky.

A lot of these leaders understand that there is an enemy that wants to attack. The caucus, evidently, in the House -- the Democratic Caucus -- is, you know, concerned about exactly Plante's question, you know. And I just can't tell you how important it is to not alienate, or not discourage, these phone companies.

How can you listen to the enemy if the phone companies aren't going to participate with you? And they're not going to participate if they get sued. Let me rephrase -- less likely to participate. And they're facing billions of dollars of lawsuits, and they have a responsibility to their shareholders. And yet they were told what they were going to do is legal.

And anyway, I'm going to keep talking about the issue, Mike. This is an important issue for the American people to understand. And it's important for them to understand that no renewal of the Patriot Act -- I mean, the Protect America Act -- is dangerous for the security of the country, just dangerous.

I'm sure people, if they really pay attention to the details of this debate, wonder why it was okay to pass the Protect America Act last summer, late last summer, and all of a sudden it's not okay to pass it now. And so I will keep talking about the issue, and talking about the issue.

Michael.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to ask you about another issue that's kind of come up on the campaign trail, in terms of discussion, which is, this is a point of view that has been espoused, that we would be better off if we talked to our adversaries, in particular, Iran and Cuba, you know, without preconditions. And as President, you have obviously considered and rejected this approach. And I'm wondering if you can give us a little insight into your thinking about this, and just explain to the American people what is lost by talking with those when we disagree?

THE PRESIDENT: What's lost by embracing a tyrant who puts his people in prison because of their political beliefs? What's lost is it will send the wrong message. It will send a discouraging message to those who wonder whether America will continue to work for the freedom of prisoners. It will give great status to those who have suppressed human rights and human dignity.

I'm not suggesting there's never a time to talk, but I'm suggesting now is not the time -- not to talk with Raul Castro. He's nothing more than an extension of what his brother did, which was to ruin an island, and imprison people because of their beliefs.

I had these wives of these dissidents come and see me, and their stories are just unbelievably sad. And it just goes to show how repressive the Castro brothers have been, when you listen to the truth about what they say. And the idea of embracing a leader who's done this without any attempt on his part to release prisoners and free their society would be counterproductive and send the wrong signal.

Q No one is saying embrace him, they're just saying talk --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, talking to him is embracing. Excuse me. Let me use another word -- you're right, "embrace" is like big hug, right? You're looking -- I do embrace people. Mike, one of these days, I'm just thinking about -- (laughter.) Right, okay, good, thank you for reminding me to use a different word. Sitting down at the table, having your picture taken with a tyrant such as Raul Castro, for example, lends the status of the office and the status of our country to him. He gains a lot from it by saying, look at me, I'm now recognized by the President of the United States.

Now, somebody would say, well, I'm going to tell him to release the prisoners. Well, it's a theory that all you got to do is embrace and these tyrants act. That's not how they act. That's not what causes them to respond. And so I made a decision quite the opposite, and that is to keep saying to the Cuban people, we stand with you; we will not sit down with your leaders that imprison your people because of what they believe; we will keep an embargo on you; we do want you to have money from people here in the homeland, but we will stay insistent upon this policy

until you begin to get free.

And so that's the way I've conducted foreign policy, and will continue to conduct foreign policy. I just remind people that the decisions of the U.S. President to have discussions with certain international figures can be extremely counterproductive. It can send chilling signals and messages to our allies; it can send confusion about our foreign policy; it discourages reformers inside their own country. And in my judgment, it would be a mistake -- on the two countries you talked about.

Sheryl.

Q Mr. President, thank you. I want to bring you back to Senator Obama's comment on Iraq. Do you believe that his comment was naive?

THE PRESIDENT: I believe Senator Obama better stay focused on his campaign with Senator Clinton, neither of whom has secured their party's nominee yet -- nomination yet. And my party's nomination hasn't been decided yet either. And so there will be ample time to discuss whoever their candidate -- the positions of whoever their candidate is.

Nice try, Sheryl. Would you like to try another tact, another question?

Q Well, you said it was an interesting comment. Okay, I'll follow on it. About Iraq, you have said in the past -- (laughter) -- that you want to leave a sustainable policy --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q Wait a minute --

Q I'd like to have another question.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay.

Q You want to leave your --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it was just -- give her -- should we vote on whether she gets another question? (Laughter.)

Q You've said, Mr. President, that you want to leave Iraq in a sustainable situation --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I do.

Q -- at the end of your administration. Can you describe for us specifically what do you mean by "sustainable"? Do you have specific goals and objectives that in your mind would meet the criteria of sustainability?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, which is to keep enough troops there so we can succeed. And David Petraeus will -- for example, David Petraeus will come back, along with Ryan Crocker, here later on this spring and will make a recommendation as to what those troop levels ought to be.

The idea of having a request by the Iraqi government for a long-term security agreement is part of sustainability. And obviously we're going to be pushing hard at the same time to get the political process moving forward.

I don't know if you noticed yesterday, but it was a very interesting moment in Iraqi constitutional history, when part of the -- a member of the presidency council utilized his constitutional right to veto one of the three pieces of legislation recently passed. I understand the use of the veto, intend to continue to use it, but I thought it was a healthy sign that people are thinking through the legislation that's passed, and they're worrying about making sure that laws are constitutional. And I feel pretty good about the fact that they're, of course, going to continue to work to make sure that their stated objective of getting provincial elections done by October of 2008 will happen.

So there's going to be a lot of -- my only point is sustainability is political, economic and security.

Yes, Ed.

Q Good morning, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, thank you.

Q If I could get back to the economy. The GDP numbers today show that our economy is increasingly relying on U.S. exports to keep growing. How important is a competitive dollar in keeping U.S. exports strong?

THE PRESIDENT: We believe in a strong dollar policy, and we believe that -- and I believe that our economy has got the fundamentals in place for us to be a -- is to grow and continue growing more robustly, hopefully, than we're growing now. And the dollar, the value of the dollar will be reflected in the ability for our economy to be -- to grow economically. And so we're still for a strong dollar.

Q Can I follow up on that, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: Maybe.

Q The --

THE PRESIDENT: I guess you are -- I haven't said yes. (Laughter.)

Q What's your advice to the average American who is hurting now, facing the prospect of \$4 a gallon gasoline, a lot of people facing --

THE PRESIDENT: Wait, what did you just say? You're predicting \$4 a gallon gasoline?

Q A number of analysts are predicting --

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, yeah?

Q -- \$4 a gallon gasoline this spring when they reformulate.

THE PRESIDENT: That's interesting. I hadn't heard that.

Q Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I know it's high now.

Q And the other economic problems facing people. Beyond your concern that you stated here, and your expectations for these stimulus checks, what kind of hope can you offer to people who are in dire straits?

THE PRESIDENT: Permanent tax -- keep the tax cuts permanent, for starters. There's a lot of economic uncertainty. You just said that. You just said the price of gasoline may be up to \$4 a gallon -- or some expert told you that -- and that creates a lot of uncertainty if you're out there wondering whether or not -- you know, what your life is going to be like and you're looking at \$4 a gallon, that's uncertain. And when you couple with the idea that taxes may be going up in a couple of years, that's double uncertainty. And therefore one way to deal with uncertainty is for Congress to make the tax cuts permanent.

Secondly, it's -- people got to understand that our energy policy needs to be focused on a lot of things -- one, renewables, which is fine, which I strongly support, as you know; two, conservation. But we need to be finding more oil and gas at home if we're worried about becoming dependent on oil overseas. And this -- I view it as a transitory period to new technologies that will change the way we live, but we haven't built a refinery in a long

time. We're expanding refineries, but we haven't built a refinery in a long time. I strongly suggested to the Congress that we build refineries on old military bases, but, no, it didn't pass. But if you've got less supply of something, as demand continues to stay steady or grow, your price is going to go up.

Secondly, on oil, we -- the more oil we find at home, the better off we're going to be in terms of the short-run. And yet our policy is, you know, let us not explore robustly in places like ANWR. And there are environmental concerns, and I understand that. I also know there's technologies that should mitigate these environmental concerns. They got a bill up there in Congress now. Their attitude is, let's tax oil companies. Well, all that's going to do is make the price even higher. We ought to be encouraging investment in oil and gas close to home if we're trying to mitigate the problems we face right now.

And so, yes, there's a lot of uncertainty, and I'm concerned about the uncertainty. Hopefully this pro-growth package will help -- this, one hundred -- I think it's \$147 billion that will be going out the door, starting electronically in the first week of May, and through check in the second week of May. And the idea is to help our consumers deal with the uncertainty you're talking about. But, yes, no question about it, it's a difficult period.

Yes, Ken.

Q Thank you, sir. Now that you've found a location for your presidential library, you've got to find the money to build it. Reports indicate that you may be trying to collect as much as \$200 million. Is that figure accurate? Do you believe it's important for the American people to know who is giving that kind of money to their President? Will you disclose the contributions as they come in? And will you place any restriction on who gives money and how much they can give?

THE PRESIDENT: No, yes, no, yes. (Laughter.) Next question. (Laughter.) I haven't -- phew, man. You obviously haven't asked a question in a long time. It was like, you know, -- one, I haven't seen the final budget. Two, as Donnie Evans said, who is the chairman of the foundation, we'll look at the disclosure requirements and make a decision. You know, here's -- there's a lot of people -- or some people; I shouldn't say "a lot" -- some people who like to give and don't particularly want their names disclosed, whether it be for this foundation or any other foundation. And so we'll take that into consideration.

Thirdly -- and what was the other?

Q Any restrictions on who can give? Will you take foreign money for this?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I'll probably take some foreign money, but don't know yet, Ken. We just haven't -- we just announced the deal and I, frankly, have been focused elsewhere, like on gasoline prices and, you know, my trip to Africa, and haven't seen the fundraising strategy yet. So the answer to your question, really, I can't answer your question well.

Q Where does the people's right to know this fit into all that?

THE PRESIDENT: We're weighing, taking a look, taking consideration, giving it a serious consideration. Nice try, though.

Olivier.

Q Thank you, sir. In China a former factory worker who says that human rights are more important than the Olympics is being tried for subversion. What message does it send that you're going to the Olympics, and do you think athletes there should be allowed to publicly express their dissent?

THE PRESIDENT: Olivier, I have made it very clear, I'm going to the Olympics because it's a sporting event, and I'm looking forward to seeing the athletic competition. But that will not preclude me from meeting with the Chinese President, expressing my deep concerns about a variety of issues -- just like I do every time I meet with the President.

And maybe I'm in a little different position. Others don't have a chance to visit with Hu Jintao, but I do. And every

time I meet with him I talk about religious freedom and the importance of China's society recognizing that if you're allowed to worship freely, it will benefit the society as a whole; that the Chinese government should not fear the idea of people praying to a god as they see fit. A whole society, a healthy society, a confident society is one that recognizes the value of religious freedom.

I talk about Darfur and Iran and Burma. And so I am not the least bit shy of bringing up the concerns expressed by this factory worker, and I believe that I'll have an opportunity to do so with the President and, at the same time, enjoy a great sporting event. I'm a sports fan. I'm looking forward to the competition. And each Olympic society will make its own decision as to how to deal with the athletes.

Yes, Mark.

Q Mr. President, back to the oil price -- tax breaks that you were talking about a minute ago. Back when oil was \$55 dollars a barrel, you said those tax breaks were not needed; people had plenty of incentive to drill for oil. Now the price of oil is \$100 a barrel and you're planning to threaten a plan that would shift those tax breaks to renewables.

THE PRESIDENT: I talked about some -- some of the breaks. And this is a -- this generally is a tax increase, and it doesn't make any sense to do it right now. We need to be exploring for more oil and gas. And taking money out of the coffers of the oil companies will make it harder for them to reinvest. I know -- they say, well, look at all of the profits. Well, we're raising the price of gasoline in a time when the price of gasoline is high.

Secondly, we've invested a lot of money in renewables. This administration has done more for renewables than any President. Now, we got a problem with renewables, and that is the price of corn is beginning to affect food -- cost of food, and it's hurting hog farmers and a lot of folks. And the best way to deal with renewables is to focus on research and development that will enable us to use other raw material to produce ethanol. I'm a strong believe in ethanol, Mark. This administration has got a great record in it. But it is a -- I believe research and development is what's going to make renewable fuels more effective.

Again, I repeat, if you look at what's happened in corn out there, you're beginning to see the food issue and the energy issue collide. And so, to me, the best dollar spent is to continue to deal with cellulosic ethanol in order to deal with this bottleneck right now. And secondly, the tax -- yes, I said that a while ago -- on certain aspects, but the way I analyze this bill is it's going to cost the consumers more money. And we need more oil and gas being explored for; we need more drilling; we need less dependence on foreign oil.

And as I say, we're in a period of transition here in America, from a time where we were -- where we are oil and gas dependent, to, hopefully, a time where we got electric automobiles, and we're spending money to do that; a time when we're using more biofuels, and we've taken huge investments in that; a time when we've got nuclear power plants and we're able to deal with the disposal in a way that brings confidence to the American people -- so we're not dependent on natural gas to fire up our -- a lot of our utilities, and a time when we can sequester coal.

That's where we're headed for, but we've got to do something in the interim. Otherwise, we're going to be dealing, as the man said, with \$4 gasoline. And so that's why I'm against that bill.

I thank you. It's been a pleasure. Enjoyed being with you.

Q Sir, do you think Hillary Clinton will be the nominee?

THE PRESIDENT: Pardon me?

Q You still think Hillary Clinton will be the nominee?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not talking about politics.

Q You said that before, though --

THE PRESIDENT: Trying to get me to be pundit-in-chief.

Q Are they qualified to be commander-in-chief?

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate you doing that.

Jackson -- Jackson, nice to see you. (Laughter.) Glad to see you back. (Laughter.)

END 10:51 A.M. EST

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