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Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 2/9/2011

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. GIBBS: Mr. Feller.

Q Thank you, Robert. I wanted to ask about the meeting with the Republican leadership and something on Egypt, too, please. So Speaker Boehner and Majority Leader Cantor essentially both said that there was agreement at the lunch on the need the cut spending and on the need to do it together with the President. Is that how the President sees it as well?

MR. GIBBS: Yes. I just came from talking to him about the lunch. He thought it was very constructive; that they agreed on -- expand a little bit -- on cutting spending and reducing our deficit; that we should have a broad discussion about, with the American people, the size and the scope of the problem that we face in getting our fiscal house in order. They discussed issues like trade as areas where we could work together.

Obviously our Trade Representative testified on the House side today, saying that the administration would soon send up the language around the South Korea free trade agreement and intensify our engagement to address both Colombia and Panama in hopes that those negotiations could be concluded this year and agreements could then be sent to Congress thereafter.

They agreed that education, an issue that we have worked on in a bipartisan way over the first two years of the administration, continues to be one where Democrats and Republicans can and

should work together. Regulations that are outdated and don't work was another topic. They also talked some about foreign policy, particularly managing the transitions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But I would say obviously reducing the deficit and growing the economy were the things that, according to the President, were most discussed at the lunch.

Q In the area of spending and the deficit, did the Republican leadership and the President reach and specific agreement on anything?

MR. GIBBS: No, I don't -- not that I'm aware of, no.

Q Okay. Was that something that was ever part of the agenda for this meeting?

MR. GIBBS: No, this is -- look, I think this is going to be a long discussion on the steps that we need to take to reduce our deficit, and I don't think that people looked at this as a negotiating session.

Q While that was happening or earlier, the House Republicans spelled out some proposed spending cuts, some \$35 billion worth, including areas such as high-speed rail and education that the President obviously wants to invest more money in, and in some cases conservatives want even bigger cuts. What's your reaction to that?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I know that not long ago we saw parts of that list. I know OMB is taking a look at that. There's broad agreement that we have to change the way Washington works, particularly as it relates to spending. We have to do so in a way that protects important investments so that we can win the future. So I think the President looks forward to working with Republicans and other Democrats to make progress on these issues.

Q One question on Egypt, please. The Israeli Defense Minister is coming here later today to meet with Mr. Donilon and Secretaries Clinton and Gates. Can you say what the mission of that meeting is and whether you think the President might stop by?

MR. GIBBS: Let me -- I don't know the answer to the latter question. I think he's in town for some regularly scheduled meetings. I think we'll have a readout on some of those discussion afterwards.

Q Is it fair to say that you think he will be pushing the message about concerns of Mubarak stepping down too quickly?

MR. GIBBS: I am not going to presume what somebody from another government might say to us. That's not my role.

Q One on the Republican leadership meeting, and the other on Egypt. What, if any, specific areas of spending cuts did they discuss in this meeting?

MR. GIBBS: The President didn't give me details on that.

Q And did the President at any point ask the Republicans not to use as a political football the threat to not lift the national debt ceiling, which Republicans said they weren't.

MR. GIBBS: I didn't get that level of detail from him. I think our position on that is fairly well known.

Q Okay. And on Egypt, the Egyptian Foreign Minister is telling PBS that Vice President Biden's call for immediate lifting of the emergency law in Egypt was -- he was amazed by that, and he felt that the Egyptian government could not make such a move until the unrest had been put down and calm had been restored. What's your response on that?

MR. GIBBS: I think as we've said in the readout of the Vice President -- from Vice President Biden's call to Vice President Suleiman -- that an orderly transition must begin now, that it must produce without delay immediate and irreversible progress. And I think it is clear that what the government has thus far put forward has yet to meet a minimum threshold for the people of Egypt. That's why many of you reported the crowds in yesterday's protests were bigger than even those on Friday.

I think we were all, and have been, struck here at the diversity of those that you saw in the street yesterday -- diversity of age, diversity of lifestyle, diversity of ideas. And I think it is clear that the Egyptian government is going to have to take some real concrete steps in order to meet the threshold that the people of Egypt that they represent require from their government.

And I think unless, or until that progress takes hold, I think you're going to see the continued pictures that all of us are watching out of Cairo and of over cities throughout Egypt. So I think the best way to do that is for Vice President Suleiman, as the head of this process representing the Egyptian government -- is to expand the size and scope of the discussions and the negotiations with those that are not in power, and to take many of the steps that we outlined yesterday, one of which is lifting the emergency law. One of them is -- are constitutional changes so that we get toward free and fair elections. But I think it's obvious that they have yet to meet the threshold that will satisfy most of the people.

Jake.

Q Has anybody in the Obama administration reached out for consultations or discussions at all with anybody in the leading opposition group in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood?

MR. GIBBS: Not that I'm aware of.

Q In terms of your readout of the President's meeting with the House Republican leaders, you said -- you made a reference to intensifying our engagement in the Colombia and Panama free trade agreements. The Republicans say those free trade agreements are good to go, send them up, we'll vote for them. What do you mean when you say "intensifying our engagement"?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think there are some -- and as Ambassador Kirk said today, there are some outstanding issues -- look, these free trade agreements have been -- haven't gone anywhere in Congress because there continue to be some outstanding issues particularly around internationally recognized labor rights that I think many believe must be addressed.

I think the model that we used for South Korea is one that Ambassador Kirk and the President believe can result in an agreement that will capture broad bipartisan support, hopefully as soon as we can get some of this worked out.

But I don't -- there shouldn't be -- once the agreement gets done on South Korea, I don't expect that there would be a lot of delay in getting that done. We had again outstanding issues as it related to South Korea, particularly on autos and beef. We worked that out and stakeholders from both sides of the political spectrum, business and labor are now endorsing that free trade agreement.

Q So do they need to be renegotiated, Colombia and Panama?

MR. GIBBS: We need to address some outstanding issues like we did with South Korea.

Q Right, but with South Korea you renegotiated the deal, right?

MR. GIBBS: No, we addressed outstanding issues.

Q Can you explain what that means?

MR. GIBBS: There are issues that need to be addressed, and that's what we're going to do address them.

Q I don't know what that means when you say you have issues that need to be addressed. There's a trade agreement -- you renegotiated with the South Korea government is what you did.

MR. GIBBS: No, we -- there were shortcomings in what needed to be addressed on issues relating to autos and beef, which had prevented an agreement from being voted on. There are, as I said in my earlier answer to you, outstanding issues relating to Colombia and Panama that also need to be addressed.

Dan.

Q Is it safe to say that Vice President Suleiman's vision for the transition process is not entirely in line with the U.S. position?

MR. GIBBS: I think that his -- the process for his transition does not appear to be in line with the people of Egypt, and I think we believe that more has to be done and I think, more importantly, the people of Egypt think more has to be done. I think that's why you continue to see the size of those gathered to express their concerns about their lack of recognition and freedom and opportunity -- why those ranks continue to grow. I think the Vice President was clear with Vice President Suleiman on some steps that needed to be taken to address the concerns that we see.

Q And is the White House still confident that he's the right person for the job? I know over the weekend there were a lot of positive comments made by this administration about sort of support for him and what he was doing.

MR. GIBBS: No, I -- again, Vice President Suleiman -- we've done this about four times but I'll try one more time. Vice President Suleiman is in charge of a process in representing the Egyptian government to negotiate with those not in government in order to get us on a path toward an orderly transition that ends in a free and fair election. It's not for us to determine who's in charge of that process with the Egyptian government. It's not for us to determine who sits in a room representing the opposition -- except for us to understand that when unrest grows and the size of these crowds grow, it's clear that the threshold of meeting a broad-based coalition in -- that represents a broad-based coalition of civil society, that that's not been reached. I think that is what continues to be the problem.

Q But if it's not for you to decide, then why, then, is the Vice President -- we saw strong language from the Vice President essentially putting pressure and offering up some demands, some things that need to be changed. So, clearly, there is a position. There's something that you want to be done in Egypt, right?

MR. GIBBS: More importantly, Dan, there's something the people of Egypt want to be done.

Q Right, but the administration does as well. It's not just about the people in Egypt --

MR. GIBBS: True --

Q -- it's what the White House wants to happen there.

MR. GIBBS: It's what I think everybody in the international community understands has to be done to meet the demands of those that are protesting in Cairo. Again, it's obvious -- you're reporting it, what people are looking for. And we've talked about lifting the emergency law for quite

some time. We put out a statement last year at its extension that, going backwards almost three decades, this was not something that we thought was in any way helpful. That happened -- you see people believing that that should be rescinded just like we do.

But, again, it is not for us to determine the outcome. It's not for us to determine all of those participants. The participants on the government side are -- is Vice President Suleiman. That's why the Vice President of our country has talked to him about broadening this process, quickening the pace of this process. Because, again, what we see happening on the streets of Cairo is not altogether surprising when you understand the lack of steps that the government has taken to address their concerns. I mean, I think that's what we see happening.

Q Does the White House feel that it has a full understanding of all of those participants and what their motives are?

MR. GIBBS: Again, it's not for us to determine, Dan. We're not going to pick which seven people represent Egypt.

Q I'm not saying pick them. I'm just saying do you have an understanding --

MR. GIBBS: No, you are, Dan. In fact, you are. That was inherent in your questions.

Q No, no, what I said was do you think that you have a full understanding of all of these players and what their motives are. I'm not saying whether or not you're supporting them or picking them. Do you think you have a good understanding of --

MR. GIBBS: I think -- again, this is something for the Egyptians to work out. I think -- again, I think what you saw yesterday was a very broad coalition -- represented a very broad coalition of grievances and concerns by the Egyptian people. Again, one of them -- I think somebody that stirred a lot of passion yesterday was somebody who works for a Silicon Valley company. I think, again, that there is a broad array of -- you saw families, you saw older people bring their children. You say -- there's a broad cross-section of Egyptian society that seeks the types of freedoms that many have sought for quite some time.

And the government is going to have to be responsive to those concerns. And if not, you're going to see, as I think everyone anticipates, the size of these protests, certainly as we get to Friday, get bigger and bigger.

Chip.

Q Robert, we've talked about Suleiman, but I just want to -- some of his quotes recently are that there will be no ending of -- yesterday and today -- "There will be no ending of the regime. We absolutely do not tolerate it" -- meaning the civil disobedience. "We cannot bear this situation for a

long time and we must end this crisis as soon as possible.” People on the ground there say they think what he’s threatening is a violent crackdown if these protests don’t end. Do you agree?

MR. GIBBS: I think, first and foremost, we would reiterate, and we have at every discussion that we’ve had at all levels with Egyptian government, that the demands of those protesting cannot be addressed with violence, and should not. I think -- again, I think, Chip, if you layer what the government of Egypt is saying, if you put that on one side of the ledger, and then on the other side of the ledger you put a growing number of people out seeking redress of those grievances, then you understand that what he’s saying is not assuaging the concerns of those in protest. And they’re going to have to do more; it’s clear.

Q That’s exactly why some on the Hill today, some former State Department officials said it’s conceivable we’re moving toward a Tiananmen Square situation, because the rhetoric is -- the tough rhetoric is increasing from Suleiman, in spite of the Vice President’s call --

MR. GIBBS: I think that --

Q -- and the protesters are getting tougher on their side by increasing the size of the crowd and having stronger statements about Mubarak having to go.

MR. GIBBS: I don’t think anybody -- I do not think anybody believes and I don’t think anybody wants on our -- in this government that --

Q -- for their government.

MR. GIBBS: Well, I’m not a spokesperson for their government, Chip. But I think that -- I think our strong belief is that the process -- again, I think if the process is expanded, if a broader group of those not in government take part in this process -- it’s clear that the government is going to have to do some changing, some immediate and some irreversible change. And I think --

Q That could mean a crackdown in the eyes of Suleiman.

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, Chip, I would simply reiterate as we have said from the very outset of this that it is our -- we strongly condemn any violence that we’ve seen. That is not in any way going to meet the concerns of those that you see in the streets.

Q Your message today is very consistent with yesterday’s, but --

MR. GIBBS: I try.

Q -- but first Vice President Biden had that call and put out the press release yesterday in which he said that he had called on Suleiman to end the arrests and the harassments and the

beating, immediately rescind the emergency law, broaden participation in the dialogue and invite the opposition to participate in discussions on -- but if anything, from his statements of yesterday and today, he's moving in the opposite direction. So isn't it time for the White House to ratchet up the pressure, do something?

MR. GIBBS: And the crowds are getting bigger.

Q But what about the White House response? If you're saying you need to do X, Y and Z, and he's moving in the opposite direction, doesn't the White House need to do something else?

MR. GIBBS: I think what -- the White House can do only -- we're not in charge of, and we can't -- we're not going to be able to force them to do anything. But I think if Vice President Suleiman continues to pepper his statements with -- as he had two days before and Sheryl asked me about, that we're not ready to move toward democracy, not going to see anything change -- it is clear, as the President has said, that Egypt is not going back to where it was. Nobody believes that. And unless or until the government broadens the negotiations with those in the opposition, unless or until that happens, the pressure for them to do so is only going to get greater.

And I don't -- I think if there's some notion on the government's side that you can put the genie back in this bottle, I think that's gone a long time ago. And, quite frankly, we saw, Chip, what happened in the middle of last week when violence was entered into this equation, which is why the Prime Minister came out the next day and talked about what a fatal error that had been. And I don't think that -- nobody here believes that the grievances are going to be met with a violent -- that the grievances will be dealt with through a violent response in a way that helps move toward change.

Q If there is -- has the administration said to Suleiman that if there is violence again then we will cut the aid package?

MR. GIBBS: Well, we have been clear from the beginning of this that we will evaluate their responses to -- and their level of restraint will be evaluated as we make decisions on our aid.

Q So on the aid, it's still the same answer as it was two weeks ago?

MR. GIBBS: We are watching quite closely to see what those responses are, and the response of the government will determine what that aid looks like.

Q Does the White House have a timetable for getting these free trade deals done?

MR. GIBBS: Well, obviously, I think Ambassador Kirk said today that our hope is to get South Korea done in the first -- through Congress in the first half of this year. And it is our hope that we can resolve outstanding issues with Colombia and Panama this year and then move language to

the Hill soon thereafter.

Q Any thoughts on Senator Webb's announcement of retirement and impact it may have on 2012?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think the President had an opportunity to talk with Senator Webb earlier in the morning and thanked him for, yet again, for the service that he has displayed on behalf of his country. Obviously, the impacts that he's had on things like veterans through a post-9/11 GI Bill represent his mark on this country and the people that have served it. I think Virginia is going to be a very competitive state in -- as it was last time in both presidential and Senate elections.

Q Are you going to run? (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: I wouldn't serve if I was appointed. (Laughter.)

Q Who called who? Do you know?

MR. GIBBS: I'm sorry, Senator Webb -- I think the President called Senator Webb, but I think that was --

Q Before he made it public?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q So they had given you a heads-up?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Are you done? I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Q After you, Chuck. (Laughter.)

Q No, no, no.

Q Do you have any more?

MR. GIBBS: I love it, bipartisanship.

Q Ooooh --

MR. GIBBS: I meant between networks. (Laughter.) Golly.

Q Please note the groan.

MR. GIBBS: I know.

Q Exactly.

MR. GIBBS: Please put "groan" on the transcript. Maybe "Mixed groan and mixed laughter."
(Laughter.)

Q Are you done?

Q Somebody say something.

MR. GIBBS: I know, I was going to say -- (laughter.) Knoller has got his --

Q If it was not a negotiating -- I know, Knoller won't let it last very long. If it was not a negotiating session, what was it today? What was this lunch about?

MR. GIBBS: As I said yesterday and as the President said at the end of last year, we needed to do a better job in reaching out and -- look, I think we saw what happened in the lame duck session of Congress that when we can sit around a table and talk about what we agree on and what common ground is there, that we can get things done on behalf of the American people. So I think this was an opportunity to listen to each other and to figure out where that common ground is. Look, Chuck, I --

Q Is that one of the pieces of common ground, that you guys both agreed you didn't talk enough the last year?

MR. GIBBS: I don't know if that came out in lunch on their side. I know that that's what -- again, that's what the President said in a room of both representatives of the House and the Senate last year, that he needed to do better, and we're resolved to do that.

Q I want to follow up on Egypt. It was pretty remarkable the position you guys laid out in the readout of the Vice President's call to Vice President Suleiman, putting our policy out there in public of what we consider acceptable as the United States government. So even if you're not going to tell us what the consequences are, did Vice President Biden made it clear to Vice President Suleiman there are consequences in the U.S. relationship in some form or another if this policy isn't met?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, Chuck, I think the greatest consequence are -- the greatest consequences are the continued protests that we see and the increase in the size of those protests.

I think, as you heard the President say very early on in this, that every government has an

obligation to represent its people. And I think that while some had thought -- and I don't -- maybe we can wait this out, maybe we can set up some committees and some commissions and life will return to normal -- I think that's largely been answered by a greater number of people representing a greater cross-section of Egyptian society who've come out seeking their grievances to be addressed. And I think those are not likely to dissipate until the government takes some genuine steps, some of which we outlined.

But only they can solve this problem. Only the government of Egypt can enter into a serious process here. And again, I have no doubt that as we get farther and farther into this week, you're going to see more and more of them.

Q Secretary Napolitano testified this morning in front of the House committee and said in no uncertain terms that al-Awlaki in Yemen is the clearest threat -- terrorist threat to the United States and a bigger threat than Osama bin Laden or anything coming out of Afghanistan or Pakistan. Are we pursuing a new policy in terms of Yemen? Does this alter our Afghanistan policy? If this -- if the number one threat to the United States is now Yemen, the question that a lot of Americans may ask is then why is there so many troops in Afghanistan?

MR. GIBBS: Well, let's understand that one of the reasons why -- as you heard the President say in the State of the Union, one of the reasons why the breadth of the type of attack that we saw September 11th of 2001, why that is harder to take place today is because of the fact that in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, the leadership of al Qaeda is under the greatest pressure that it has seen since September 11th.

Look, we came in and -- to be honest, as we had said during the campaign, we did not think the central front for al Qaeda was in Iraq, that we believed it was in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And we shifted our resources accordingly. Obviously --

Q Well, now you guys are saying it's in Yemen. Does that mean we shift our resources again?

MR. GIBBS: Well, no, no -- and I can assure you our cooperation with and our relationship with the government of Yemen is incredibly important in addressing the counterterrorism threat that exists there.

I think it's clear that in the past 10 years, as we come up to the anniversary of September 11, 2001, that the threat has evolved, as our response, too, has evolved. We put greater pressure on Afghanistan and Pakistan -- Al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and we have increased our cooperation with counterterrorism exercises with the government of Yemen.

Jonathan.

Q Does the President have confidence in Margaret Scobey?

MR. GIBBS: Great, great confidence.

Q What do you -- can you tell us if she -- is she the lead envoy now? Or is there any thought of sending somebody like Ambassador Wisner back to --

MR. GIBBS: No, I think Ambassador Wisner was sent to have one conversation that he had. He reported back on that. Ambassador Scobey was well aware of that, and Ambassador Scobey takes part in the daily deputies committee meetings in the Situation Room run by the NSC in order to assess the situation on the ground in Egypt.

Q And is the President aware that the Iranian opposition, Mr. Mousavi, has requested a permit to protest -- or give a sympathy protest on February 14th? And does he have a message for the Iranian leaders on that?

MR. GIBBS: I think the Iranian leaders mentioned something around watching what was happening in Egypt. And I think I challenged the Islamic Republic of Iran to show its responsiveness to its citizens by allowing such a march to happen. And we'll see if the government of Iran is confident enough in its meeting the demands of its people to let its people show the demands that they have of their government. And we await their response.

Mark.

Q Robert, do you know if the Patriot Act extensions came up in the lunch meeting?

MR. GIBBS: I don't know the answer to that. I should have asked that question, and I don't know it. Obviously, as I said here yesterday, we're supportive of that extension. We actually -- I think as you'll see from our statement of administration policy I think that went out a couple of days ago, we support an even longer extension to take any of the uncertainty around extending these out past -- out into 2013 rather than just the 8th of December of this year. And we hope that that gets figured out soon.

Q You think that's possible?

MR. GIBBS: I do.

Q You've got more common ground on Republicans on that than with Democrats?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, I think there's been some concern on the Democratic side about seeing an extension bill -- I know at least in the Senate -- making sure that that extension extends longer than just a little more than 10 months. But my sense is that that will get done.

Q Did you get an answer on whether the Obamas voted?

MR. GIBBS: I think the transcript yesterday, it should have said that they received their ballots, but they -- at least as of yesterday, about 5:00 p.m. in the afternoon had not filled them out. I will check again.

Q Are they undecided? (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: I will check again and see if they voted. I'm resisting making a joke --

Q And before you leave, can you tell us what they're really digging up out there on the North Lawn? (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: I told you. They're moving the monument. It's -- they're going to do it at night. Everyone is going to wake up and, where did that thing go? And they'll look behind them and it will be --

Q I guess the answer is no? (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: Let me tell you, well, they've erected this gray wall in front of my office that I've threatened to go spray paint and make it a little bit more esthetically pleasing than -- (laughter.)

Q Do you know what they are building -- do you even know?

MR. GIBBS: I haven't asked. I probably should given the pounding that I hear in my office. Maybe it is the monument.

Mike.

Q All the options the administration is considering on Fannie and Freddie essentially amount to cutting down the support for that market, which would either raise fees and/or lower the amount that could be borrowed with government guarantees. Is the Obama administration going to backtrack on support for a working middle-class family buying houses?

MR. GIBBS: Let me address your question in a couple of different ways, Mike. Obviously, the financial reform legislation that passed a little more than six months ago required a process for reforming the nation's housing finance market. On Friday, Secretaries Geithner and Donovan will unveil what some of those options are, and I'll wait for them to do that.

Q Would you favor anything that made it harder for middle-class families to buy a house?

MR. GIBBS: I would favor both Secretaries rolling that out on Friday and answering all of your

questions.

Q Another topic?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q One of the elements of the Republican proposal on the budget is to eliminate AmeriCorps. Now, I remember -- eliminate funding for AmeriCorps, at least. Now, I remember in Iowa standing there in the audience while Ted Sorensen stood by Barack Obama -- he was talking about his call to public service, and support for AmeriCorps figured prominently in his campaign for President. Would he consider signing the piece of legislation that eliminated AmeriCorps?

MR. GIBBS: Mike, I think we're a long way from getting a piece of legislation to sign. As I said earlier, we look forward to seeing what Republicans have put out. You will see on Monday what the President puts out in a budget that over the course of the next five years will freeze spending levels resulting in cuts of about \$400 billion and rolling us back to a spending level as a percentage of our economy that we haven't seen since Eisenhower was President. I think we all agree that spending has to be reduced and I think we're going to spend a lot of time in the next several months working to see what investments need to be made to address the challenges that we have in the future, and I think that's what some of that debate is going to be about.

Q Will that be a question to them, eliminating AmeriCorps?

MR. GIBBS: I appreciate your multiple opportunities to get into a series of hypotheticals.

Q Can I just ask a question on Egypt? What role has the advice you've been getting from friendly Arab governments played in the sort of recalibrations of the administration policy over the last couple weeks?

MR. GIBBS: What recalibration of administration policy do you speak of?

Q I guess the main recalibration might be sort of the meaning of "now" when we're calling for an orderly transition.

MR. GIBBS: Well, I haven't spoken to any of those governments but I interpreted "now" the same way the President did, and that was both when President Mubarak said he was leaving and when the President said that that transition must begin now. I think that was a week ago Monday. But it's clear, Mike, that the government has not taken the necessary steps that the people of Egypt need to see. That's why more and more people come out to register their grievances.

But our notion of when the transition needed to have started hasn't changed. What the people of Egypt seek in those grievances hasn't changed. What has to change is the posture of the

government in addressing what the people of Egypt need to see.

Ari.

Q Was there much staff in the lunch? Was it just the four principals?

MR. GIBBS: I believe it was, on our side, the President, the Vice President, and the Chief of Staff; the Speaker, the Majority Leader and the Majority Whip -- a total of six.

Q So none of their staff?

MR. GIBBS: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q And the Associated Press came out with an investigation showing that several different CIA officials who were involved in some of the worst abuses during the Bush administration and even some incidents in this administration have been promoted to leadership positions and consistently not disciplined. Is the President comfortable with the system of discipline and accountability within the CIA?

MR. GIBBS: The President has great confidence in the men and women that do the very difficult jobs at the CIA. I have not looked into that and I would point you over to the CIA for that.

Q Robert, is Friday your last day?

MR. GIBBS: It still is, yes.

Q It still is?

MR. GIBBS: I mean, technically, I will be here until Sunday, but my last briefing is Friday.

Q You're last briefing will be Friday. So I'm just wondering if you might share with us what advice you would give to Jay and any reflections you might have -- (laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: It's like -- Ari tried that just yesterday. And then Ann did --

Q I'm sorry, I wasn't here until today. I was having lunch with the First Lady yesterday --

Q Oooh --

MR. GIBBS: Namedropper. (Laughter.)

Q -- where she made news and said the President --

MR. GIBBS: I had lunch Amy Brundage in my office as I got ready to answer Ari and Ann's questions. (Laughter.)

Q Well, since I missed it and you apparently didn't answer it yesterday, how about today?

MR. GIBBS: I did answer Ann's. I didn't answer Ari's, awkwardly.

Q Just keep asking. (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: As I said -- look, I'm not going to give you everything that I've talked to Jay about for a whole host of reasons, much as I'm sure you all have talked about what Jay is going to bring and aren't discussing those with myself and Jay. But, look, the advice I have for him is the, I think, advice that I got from the people like Marlin Fitzwater and others who have done this job so well. And that is, obviously first and foremost, regardless of what you know and what you're asked, your solemn obligation is to always tell the truth. And while that may seem readily obvious, obviously in the past it's not always been the case.

I think that as I said yesterday, I think it is remarkable to watch transpiring halfway around the world a fight for freedom of speech and a way of life that we have and we participate in each and every day here. I think the universal values that this government espouses, one of those is a healthy freedom of the press and a desire to have an informed public based on sessions like the one we're having.

And I'll say this -- while we're on the subject of halfway around the world, these sessions have been broadcast thousands of miles away and interpreted for billions of people. They watch your questions and they watch this government's answers. I think it reminds us of the seriousness with which we all approach our jobs each day and the seriousness with which the world watches the example of this country as an example for all the world.

So, that and a lot of other things. (Laughter.)

Q So you didn't give him a dossier on all of this?

MR. GIBBS: I didn't say that. (Laughter.)

Ann.

Q Can I follow on that? The President and his relationship with the opposition is something that's watched around the world, too. The luncheon today, you kind of skirted around the edges, very vague about what was talked, didn't get much specifics on --

MR. GIBBS: I don't think that's the case, but --

Q Does a lunch like this in the bigger picture of things have much impact? Is there a relationship between the President and the Speaker that takes root at something like this?

MR. GIBBS: I think that -- I don't think can only be a -- I don't think and I don't think the President believes this can be a one-time-only affair. I think that in order to -- particularly in a government that is divided in its control, obviously the requirement for something to get here means it has to go through an entity that's controlled by the Republican Party and an entity that's controlled by the Democratic Party. So we know without the type of dialogue and seeking of common ground that something like today's lunch does, we're not going to see any progress on behalf of the American people on the issues that they have concerns about -- reducing our deficit, an atmosphere for creating jobs, the continued safety and security of the American people.

So I think all of those require that we try on both sides a little harder to understand where the other side is, and more importantly, to understand where we all agree. And I think that continues that process.

Q Is the President forswearing some of the sharper political rhetoric that he used in 2010?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I mean, look, I think each entity would say that what is said in a campaign is different than -- we have campaigns for a reason, right? We have -- people make choices and then after those campaigns we get about to governing the country. I think what -- certainly what this President hopes is that we spend the next many months leading up to something that's far, far away, in 2012, that we spend the next many months addressing and finding that common ground and addressing the challenges that we know the American people want us to address. There will be plenty of time to get back to a political campaign and I think it's important that we spend time focusing on what's on people's minds.

Q Can I follow up on that for a second?

MR. GIBBS: Sure.

Q Tomorrow I believe the Republicans in the House will be unveiling about a half trillion dollars worth of specific budget cuts they want to enact relatively immediately. Did the President in effect get a preview of that? Did they get that specific in this?

MR. GIBBS: Not that I'm aware of. Again, I think they talked broadly about the need to cut spending, but I am not aware that they got a preview of what they will unveil tomorrow.

Q I want to ask about tomorrow, but on the subject of the transition, do you know is Jay going to brief on Monday, dive right in?

MR. GIBBS: I believe he will.

Q Okay. And then can you talk a little bit -- I know there's going to be a call with more specifics --

MR. GIBBS: If he's not, he is now. (Laughter.)

Q Are you going to leave him some ties, some of those nice purple --

MR. GIBBS: You like the -- maybe a couple of nice purple ties would do him well.

Yes, sir, I'm sorry.

Q I know there's going to be a call with more specifics, but can you talk a little bit about what the President is going to be saying tomorrow on his trip to Michigan?

MR. GIBBS: Let me wait for that. I mean, obviously the President is -- he'll get into some policy specifics on this, but obviously what the President outlined in the State of the Union with an agenda that out-innovates, out-educates and out-builds the competition. We're focusing tomorrow in Marquette the portion of building the type of infrastructure and wireless networks that are needed to attract the jobs of tomorrow and to help train students to continue to be the most productive workforce in the world. So we will highlight that tomorrow in the trip and they'll have more details on that call.

Q Robert, does the President think Governor Kaine would make a pretty good senator in Virginia? And does he think that Jim Webb might make a pretty good Secretary of Defense?

MR. GIBBS: I should answer both of those questions on Monday. (Laughter.) No, I -- without getting into who would be a good candidate for either one of those jobs, obviously, I think Senator Webb has great experience. I mentioned his continued service to this country, and obviously his service in the Navy has been important. And then obviously I think -- look, I particularly -- somebody like Governor Kaine was the governor of the state or commonwealth that I'm from, and I think he did a terrific job as governor and is doing a terrific job as the chairman of the DNC.

Glenn.

Q And one other quick question. The President obviously watches you. I presume he watches you when -- has he ever -- what was the most interesting piece of advice or observation he had after observing one of these?

MR. GIBBS: I can't recall necessarily that. I mean, look, I will say this, Glenn -- and I think one of the things that I think will continue not just with Jay but press secretaries that come after is the type of important access that each individual has and needs to do the type of job that you do.

Each of the last several days, particularly I've gone to talk to him about Egypt and to talk to him about what our continued public messaging has to be. And I know that Jay will enjoy the same type of access that I've had and that others before me have had in being able to go in and get from the President his thoughts directly. And I think that will be a great benefit to you.

Q Robert, I asked you a question --

MR. GIBBS: I can't --

Q I know Ari --

MR. GIBBS: It's April's voice and it's your heard, and -- freaked me out. (Laughter.)

Q Robert, I've been asking you a question for the last couple of days, and I hope you have an answer --

MR. GIBBS: Oh, is this the calls?

Q Yes. Am I going to get this by Friday?

MR. GIBBS: I will get this for you tonight. I went in to ask him about voting, and I got the answer. And I came back, and about 15 minutes later, I went to try to get the second answer, and he had gone to have dinner with the girls and I did not get an answer. I will get that as soon as I get out.

Q Thank you. I look forward to getting it for Friday. Now, also on the budget cuts, Jack Lew says that \$350 million will be cut from the community service block grants. What do you say to the poor and grassroots communities that benefit from these community block grants, as they also supported this President when he was then candidate Obama, as they believed he felt their pain?

MR. GIBBS: Well, he does understand the importance of this funding. But as Jack Lew said in his op-ed, and as the President and Jack have talked about in the construction of the budget, we have reached a point where we have to do something about what we take in and what we spend and the great divergence in those two numbers, and that this process is not going to be an easy one.

It means that on each side we're going to have to give a little on things that are even -- even that are greatly important to us. And if we simply exempted everything that was important to everybody in this process, we would simply continue the process of spending much, much more than we have.

Q But in the September the 10th press conference that the President had, he talked about his

efforts as a community -- someone who was in the community, who worked for the community. And how far -- and he understands -- he said he understood what it meant to be an advocate for grassroots organizations, advocate for communities. But how far did the President go to spare these \$350 million cuts to these programs?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, obviously, we had to make a series of decisions. I think when you see the budget come out, you'll see very little that was spared in the tough decisions that had to be made to construct a budget that gets us back on a path toward fiscal responsibility. It's not that he doesn't care about the grassroots; it's that all of these decisions are going to be tough.

And quite frankly, we -- all of the easy decisions have been made. Those decisions are going to not just impact the type of discretionary spending, April, that you're talking about -- you've seen that the Secretary of Defense is -- has made it one of his priorities to get rid of weapons programs that even those in the military don't want. So there are a series of tough decisions that will be laid out both in the budget that the President has, and in going forward, that even make changes to things that we believe are priorities.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you, Robert. I have two questions, brief ones -- one on American politics, one on Egypt. We know what you think of Chairman Kaine. Since his conversation with Senator Webb has the President had a phone conversation with Chairman Kaine or former Congressman Perriello?

MR. GIBBS: Not that I'm aware of either one. I will double-check, but -- see, when I came out here, he had not spoken with either one of those, no.

Q All right. And regarding Egypt right now, we all know very much about the conversations the Vice President has with Vice President Suleiman. You've spoken of contacts with other levels of government. Is the administration in touch with Dr. ElBaradei or with the former Egyptian foreign minister who sounds increasingly like a candidate for president?

MR. GIBBS: I know that -- let me check and see if the embassy has any more guidance. I know that the embassy reached out and talk with Mr. ElBaradei, I want to say sometime -- a lot of days run together -- I think sometime early last week. Let me see if I can get a better sense of when that date was and whether we've had other contact with each of those individuals.

Q Thanks, Robert.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, ma'am.

Q Yes. On Egypt, you've said several times in this briefing that the discussions need to be broadened out between the Vice President and opposition groups. Well, some of these opposition groups there, particularly the young people who have been leading the movement don't want to meet with Vice President Suleiman until Mubarak is gone. What is your message to them?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think, as I've talked about it before, if one side is unwilling to do anything in terms of change, and one side is not willing to meet until that side takes up all the change, you're going to find yourself in an intractable position.

I think it is incumbent upon each side to play an important and constructive role. From the side of the government we have, I think, very clearly laid out the steps, both in broadening those that are being talked to and then the steps that they should take on a path towards -- on an orderly transitioned path towards free and fair elections.

I think the opposition also has to come up with -- a whole host of those in the opposition need to come up with a path forward as well. I think that that conversation and those negotiations have got to take place or we're going to find ourselves in a largely intractable position.

Yes.

Q Thank you, Robert.

MR. GIBBS: I'll go here and then I'll go there.

Q I have a follow-up on that.

MR. GIBBS: Go there and then I'll go to you.

Q Thank you, Robert. On Egypt again, I just came back from Cairo, and we don't hear them as much or hear about them as much, but there are major pro-Mubarak demonstrations. And you could hear more and more from the first days to the last days people screaming, U.S. stay out of this. And so to which point is the administration worried that by supporting too openly the pro-democracy movement, it will fuel more dangerous anti-American sentiments?

MR. GIBBS: Again, this is not for us to decide or determine. And I don't think that -- I think what we see happening is -- what we see in terms of the growing number of crowds, people protesting, the demands of which can only met by the government. They can't be met by us and they can't -- we can't, quite frankly, compel any of the government to, well, just take this step. That's not for us to determine.

Quite frankly, as I've said before, we can't provide the definition of what those freedoms look like for the Egyptian people. So I think you've heard us say from very beginning of this that these are

challenges that can only be solved by the people in Egypt, on both side of this. That has been our posture the entire time, and that will continue to be our posture.

Q What's the message of this administration to the young people in Egypt demonstrating in the street? According to reporters, some of them have banners saying, "yes, we can, too." "We are ready to die for democracy." What do you want to tell them?

MR. GIBBS: Well, what I want to tell them is I think as the President said in his remarks after President Mubarak stepped down, that we hear your call for and respect your call for the universal rights that we've advocated that the government of Egypt pursue, and that it is clear to all of those that watch that unless or until progress is made, it's not likely that any of those crowds are going away. I think that's why it's incumbent that the government of Egypt, without delay, proceed in a process that provides the sort of immediate, irreversible progress that Vice President Biden talked about yesterday.

Tommy.

Q Thanks, Robert. I have two quick questions. First of all on Egypt, over the weekend, Sarah Palin said of the administration's response, we need to know what it is that America stands for so we know who it is America stands with. I'm wondering do you think that's sort of a dog whistle to the birthers? And is that a question of the President's American-ness?

MR. GIBBS: You know I -- Tommy, I said to -- I think Dan asked me this question on Monday --

Q Well, it wasn't just like that. (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: No, no, no, I'm sorry. Fair enough. Fair enough. I'm sorry. Let me rephrase that. Let me rephrase that. (Laughter.) Dan had asked me to respond to Sarah Palin. I think my response was that after having read what she said several times, it was hard for me to discern what she particularly was saying, so therefore I didn't really have an immediate reaction to, nor do I have upon reflection any either greater understanding as to what she said or reaction to it.

Q But she seems to be questioning the President's American-ness. You don't have a reaction? Do you agree with that or --

MR. GIBBS: I read that answer probably four times and still don't know what she -- still don't know what she said.

Thanks, guys.

Q You were getting ready to say --

MR. GIBBS: Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, Webb was -- I'm sorry, Secretary of the Navy, but obviously a Marine. Sorry.

Q Is tomorrow your last Air Force One ride?

MR. GIBBS: It is. It is.

END

3:05 P.M. EST

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