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## The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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### **Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 2/8/2011**

*James S. Brady Press Briefing Room*

*See below for an answer to a question (marked with an asterisk) posed in the briefing that required follow up.*

*\*The President has not yet voted in Chicago's municipal election.*

*12:47 P.M. EST*

*MR. GIBBS: Let me -- I do have one quick scheduling announcement. Tomorrow afternoon at 12:30 p.m., the President will host Speaker Boehner, Majority Leader Cantor and Majority Whip McCarthy for lunch here at the White House.*

*Q Open coverage? (Laughter.)*

*MR. GIBBS: I don't know that they've set out that many plates, Ms. Compton. But I know the President is looking forward to a productive lunch.*

*Q We'd love to do it. We'd love to come. We're available.*

*MR. GIBBS: I will share that with the cooks.*

*Yes, ma'am.*

*Q I guess just quickly on that meeting, is there*

*anything on the agenda that you can tell us about?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think that the President looks forward to discussing all issues foreign and domestic.*

*Obviously, without a doubt, there will be I think a heavy discussion on the economy and on spending. And I think the President will have a chance to talk to -- through -- with them many of the things that he outlined in the State of the Union, and I have no doubt that they have their cares and concerns as well.*

*Q Will he be giving them any guidance on what's going to be in his budget?*

*MR. GIBBS: No, we will save that for them and for you for Monday.*

*Q And just a few questions on Egypt. Is the President concerned that if Mubarak steps down ahead of September that that could undermine reforms in Egypt or hurt the chances of free and fair elections?*

*MR. GIBBS: If he -- I'm sorry, if he steps down --*

*Q If he steps down earlier than September.*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, look, who leads Egypt and who leads Egypt when is a determination that can only be made by the Egyptians. What we've talked about throughout this process, and what I talked about extensively yesterday, was not about personalities but about a genuine and real process that leads us to those free and fair elections, a process that takes place without delay and produces immediate and irreversible results, progress for the people in Egypt.*

*I think there's a series of things that they have to do along the way. The dialogue has to be real in order to produce that real change. I think, first and foremost, as we've talked about throughout this, the government has got to stop arresting protesters and journalists, harassment, beatings, detentions of reporters, of activists, of those involved in civil society. We would call on all of those prisoners, as we have, to be released immediately.*

We believe that there has to be a process, that in this process that results in free and fair elections, that the emergency law be lifted, as we've talked about many times; that specific constitutional changes are made; and that we take concrete steps, as I've said, to free and fair elections.

And I will also add this. I think the rhetoric that we see coming out now that simply says that somehow what you see on TV has been drummed up by foreigners is at great odds with what we know is actually happening on the ground.

So I think that the process of who leads Egypt will be determined by Egyptians, but what we need to see now is continued progress by the Egyptian government to make these important real changes that demonstrate progress for the people.

Q But you have officials at the State Department who are saying that the chances of those changes being able to be enacted would be lessened if Mubarak resigned ahead of September.

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I want to be clear. I speak for the President of the United States of America. We are not here to determine who leads Egypt and when they lead Egypt. That's a -- that is a problem that only Egyptians can solve. As I said yesterday, there's no doubt there will be -- this is a -- this is not going to be an easy road. There will be bumps along the way. But it is important that the process that the government undergoes through negotiations with those that seek the representation that they deserve, that it be done in a way that's broadly inclusive.

We're not here to determine who leads Egypt. We are -- and I think the President was quite, quite clear -- the people of Egypt are not going back. They've moved forward and they're going to continue to move forward, and they're going to need to see progress from their government.

Q And then just finally, has Vice President Biden spoken to Vice President Suleiman today?

MR. GIBBS: Let me get a full readout. I do believe they have -- I don't know when they spoke, precisely. I will try to determine that. But one of the messages that Vice President

*Biden and a whole host of government officials have delivered at all levels of the Egyptian government are many of the things that I outlined: stopping the beatings and harassment and detentions; the release of those that have been held or detained; the release of political prisoners; lifting the emergency law; concrete constitutional changes that need to take place and concrete steps that move us toward that free and fair election.*

*And as I said, most of all, I think the notion somehow that what we're seeing is drummed up by foreigners is -- there's absolutely no evidence that that's the case.*

*Yes.*

*Q Robert, Egyptian Vice President Suleiman has said that there is a timetable for a peaceful transfer of power, and he said today that this process is on the right path. Is the President satisfied that the process is on the right path, or does he want to see something more tangible?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I think less important is what we think and more important is what the people of Egypt think. There were certainly reports that those that are out protesting today exceed what we've seen in the past several days. I think that is as good an answer for the Vice President of Egypt about the progress that the people in Egypt see and feel. It has to be tangible. It has to be real. It has to be immediate and irreversible.*

*Yesterday I think the Vice President -- Vice President Suleiman made some particularly unhelpful comments about Egypt not being ready for democracy, about not seeing a lift of the emergency law. And I don't think that in any way squares with what those seeking greater opportunity and freedom think is a timetable for progress.*

*But again, I think that's going to be determined by -- that's going to be determined by the Egyptian people. Whether or not the government is taking those concrete steps can't be arbitrated by us. We can't do play-by-play on each and every step that they take. That's going to be determined by the reaction in Cairo and throughout Egypt by the people.*

*Q But you certainly have a stake in that process going smoothly.*

*MR. GIBBS: We have a stake in stability in Egypt, in regional stability. I think that's been a cornerstone of what we've seen over the past three decades.*

*As I said here on Friday and I think as you've heard the President say, the threat of instability -- and you see this again today with the swelling crowds -- the threat of instability is in not making that progress and in not letting the people in Egypt see that the steps that are being taken along that process are real, it's something that they can feel, and it's something that will end in -- will end in free and fair elections based on a discussion that is had with a broad range of Egyptian society.*

*Q Just on one other topic briefly. On the proposal for the aid to states, are you concerned that critics may --*

*MR. GIBBS: On aid to states?*

*Q The jobless aid to states --*

*MR. GIBBS: Right, right, oh, I see.*

*Q -- that the President is going to propose in the budget. Are you concerned that critics may call this a bailout for the states?*

*MR. GIBBS: No, in fact, in many ways it prevents in the future from having exactly to do that. Obviously some states have experienced even greater economic downturns than we have on average at a national level. It's put pressure on the unemployment insurance funds.*

*The President's proposal does two things that are most important. It prevents increases in the federal tax that goes to the unemployment insurance fund, and that's tremendously important given where we are economically, but it prevents -- it prevents future state bailouts, because in the future, states are going to have to rationalize what they offer and how they pay for it.*

We are giving help to some states who have had to borrow and not been able yet to pay back, which would legally result in an increase in the federal share that has gotten through tax -- a tax on businesses, which we don't think makes any sense right now.

So let's, in states that are overdrawn on this, ensure that we don't place an extra burden on them. Let's give them some time, in an economic downturn, to have what they need to effectively meet the needs of those that are unemployed and give them an understanding that in the future, as I said, they're going to have to rationalize what is offered and how they come up with the funds to pay for what is ultimately offered.

Jake.

Q The protesters, according to accounts from reporters on the ground, the protesters in Egypt, feel the need to keep protesting because they feel even if the drips and drabs of reform announcements keep coming from the Egyptian government, they fear that if they stop protesting, opposition leaders will be targeted and the Egyptian government will clamp down. Does the administration agree with that?

MR. GIBBS: Jake, that's not for me to -- as I said a minute ago, I don't think there's a lot of utility in our play-by-play of this. I think that the people that are expressing their desire for greater opportunity and freedom are going to continue to express that desire until the government takes the very concrete steps that I outlined a minute ago to address those concerns. And if they don't, then those protests will, I assume, continue.

Again, I do think it is important -- and I said this at the very beginning, Julie's question, which is we -- and have said this, quite frankly, throughout -- the concerns that the people of Egypt have cannot, will not and should not be addressed through violence. It shouldn't be addressed through beatings and detentions and the like. And I think the pressure is only going to be lessened and the demands for greater freedom met through a concrete process.

Q But the administration, even though obviously you're not dictating what Egypt needs to do, you have -- the government

*has offered guidance and suggestions as to what the Obama administration thinks would work well and what needs to happen, although you're not dictating anything, and one of those things, one of those suggestions, has been, you said from the podium, that transformation process, the transition process, cannot start in September.*

*Others in the administration have said that they have concerns about anything being rushed because you can't just go to a democracy in 60 days, and also fear that the Muslim Brotherhood would arise in the vacuum -- let me just ask the question -- which is, if we're saying two months is too soon, and September is too far, what exactly kind of timeline would the administration like, with the understanding that you're not dictating anything? What kind of suggestions are you making?*

*MR. GIBBS: I think it's -- I think we should understand a few things first, Jake, is that -- I guess -- I guess I would reject the notion of there just being two answers to this, right, in the sense that I think you have seen and heard the government of Egypt, as well as those seeking greater recognition and freedom -- they've all acknowledged that there are some real and genuine constitutional changes that need to be made before we can have free and fair elections, right?*

*So right now, in order to qualify for the ballot, you go through a process of getting those in parliament, elections that we criticized, to basically sign up and bless your candidacy.*

*Well, you can understand that those that are seeking greater freedom might not think that's the best way to get to free and fair elections.*

*So I think the notion that you either, that what you had, which is September or immediately in terms of all of these changes -- I don't think that's necessarily the case. I think -*  
-

*Q That's what I'm saying. What are you -- I'm asking what --*

*MR. GIBBS: What I'm saying is there has to be a dynamic process to meet and address many of the concerns and the grievances, to set up a system where the world will watch an election that we all agree is free and fair. What timeline that*

*takes I think is not for us to determine. But unless or until those that are seeking to have their grievances addressed -- until they believe that that's actually happening, the pressure is going to continue.*

*That's why we've continued to advocate for a genuine process of negotiation to see this through.*

*Q And lastly, in his interview with ABC News, President Mubarak said that he told the President that he didn't think he understood -- that President Obama doesn't understand Egyptian culture. Did Mubarak say that, and what did President Obama say back?*

*MR. GIBBS: I wouldn't read out what -- the specifics of the call. I think obviously the President and the administration have respect for what Egypt has accomplished over three decades and what President Mubarak has accomplished. But I think what is clear is what the President said -- has said over the past few days, that the people of Egypt have moved and they're not going back to what was.*

*Q As you track the progress on the ground in Egypt, what can you look at today that's different from yesterday for progress being made?*

*MR. GIBBS: Again, Dan, I do not want to be the -- just as I'm not going to be the arbiter of what freedom of speech is in Egypt, I don't think it's -- I don't think it makes sense for us to be the arbiter for whether today meant good progress or whether today was enough progress. I think that the world, quite frankly, understands what needs to happen.*

*We've enumerated some ideas, many of which I just said, that would demonstrate to the Egyptian people that a process that is serious, immediate and irreversible is underway. And that's a process that must continue. We've got a long road to go to get to free and fair elections.*

*Q But the President yesterday talked about progress in those comments when he was walking, so --*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I think what the President alluded to, and I think what many have alluded to, is the fact that there is*

*the beginning of a process to do that. Okay? But setting up and having a process to do that is just part of it. Now we've got to see -- we've got to see some -- and you heard Vice President Biden say over the weekend in his readout that we need to understand what the arc of this is and we need to see, as the Egyptian people do -- most importantly -- need to see progress along that arc.*

*Q Has the President gone to his intelligence community and sort of pressured them to take a look at some other hotspots, perhaps, to see if something like what happened in Egypt could be at risk of breaking out in other countries?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, without getting in specifics on intelligence, obviously the intelligence community provides daily an update on what it sees happening in countries both in the Middle East and throughout the world.*

*Q But has the President applied more pressure now to say, hey, I need you to go and take a look at this in a much more focused way?*

*MR. GIBBS: The premise of your question is somehow that that hasn't already happened.*

*Chip.*

*Q Robert, you said earlier that it's not about personalities, but then you specifically talked about Suleiman and said that he made some unhelpful comments. So if you've got a personality in there who is not helping and, in fact, may be hurting the process, it is about personalities, isn't it? Is he the right person for this job?*

*MR. GIBBS: No, no, I think -- I want to say this. I think people have unnecessarily looked at what some people have said to believe that we've determined who should be the next leader of Egypt and when that leadership change should happen. That's not for us to determine.*

*That is -- the Vice President is -- I should say Vice President Suleiman -- is -- has been tasked with the process of including opposition groups, those in civil society who have not been represented in government, along this -- to institute a*

*series of negotiations along this process to end in free and fair elections.*

*That's a process we support. That certainly has to happen. But the notion that we've somehow laid hands on a particular person to lead Israel -- I'm sorry, to lead Egypt is just not the case.*

*Q No, I'm not saying that you've laid hands on them to lead, but you certainly could voice an opinion that he's not the right person to be in there if he's saying unhelpful things.*

*MR. GIBBS: That's not -- well, look, I was pretty clear yesterday on what I don't think anybody in the world thinks represents progress. The process, though, Chip, can't -- we cannot determine every actor in that process, the timeline of every action in that process --*

*Q You can't determine it, but you can have opinions and say, we would prefer he not be there.*

*MR. GIBBS: And as I said a minute ago, I'm not going to be the play-by-play announcer, and neither is this administration, for what represents progress in Egypt. Chip, we're just not -- the people in Egypt are not looking for anybody in this country to tell them what constitutes the meeting of those freedoms.*

*Why would we think we could do that? Why would we think that we could determine who should be in charge of -- that's -- that is only something that can be determined by those that are in Egypt and those that are taking part in that process.*

*I do think, Chip, that the world will know as -- and we will see it through the eyes of those who desire greater representation -- we'll know if progress is being made at a pace in which the Egyptian people believe it should be happening.*

*And that's I think what we're all watching.*

*Q I think you're right that the Egyptian people and even the protesters understand --*

*MR. GIBBS: Can you mark down he said he thought I was right?*

*Go ahead.*

Q You're right that the Egyptian people, the protesters

--

MR. GIBBS: He said it again.

Q You were just so right.

Q It's his last week. (Laughter.)

Q You got to throw him a bone.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, I know. I realize that -- (laughter) --

Q In this one extraordinary --

MR. GIBBS: I can hardly wait to see what you say on Friday. (Laughter.)

Q In this one extraordinary instance, you're --

Q Such a handsome guy, also. (Laughter.)

Q But he's not a play-by-play announcer. (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: I am not -- right. Somebody -- you guys -- so somebody can update the video, I am not a play-by-play commentator. (Laughter.) It would be a good gig, let me tell you. (Laughter.)

Q The protesters say they understand the United States is not in a position to determine what happens here, but on the other hand, they are so deeply frustrated that the President says the right things about human rights and universal rights and freedom of speech and everything else, and then they don't understand how he can then not demand that Mubarak and Suleiman get out of there, since they're the people who have implemented this oppressive system for so long.

MR. GIBBS: But then, I guess the question would be -- I guess you'd ask the question -- well, then, would you have us determine who that next person is? Would you have us determine what this council looks like that does this? Would you have us determine what that council can debate matches the definitions

*of freedom of access and freedom of speech and freedom of assembly?*

*That is not a task or a series of tasks that I think many in Egypt want us to do. And I don't think that the cares and concerns of those that we see each day is going to be met by a process that is dictated by somebody else. It has to be a process that involves directly the Egyptian people.*

*And again, we will see based on what happens with those that continue to protest, whether the pace of what we understand -- we all understand needs to happen, what the government of Egypt has acknowledged needs to happen. We will all understand if the pacing meets the demands.*

*Q And real quickly, the lunch tomorrow, is that going to be a regular thing, a weekly thing?*

*MR. GIBBS: I don't think it's a weekly thing. I know we had Senator McConnell in I think late last week. I think the President, as you heard him say at the beginning of the lame duck session, that we needed to do better to reach out and have those discussions, and I think this is certainly part of that.*

*Q And just the four of them in the room? The three Republicans and the President?*

*MR. GIBBS: That's as I understand it. And Ann of course. Go ahead. (Laughter.)*

*Q Robert, is the President comfortable if Mubarak stays through September?*

*MR. GIBBS: Mike, I don't know how many times I can say two things: We're not going to be the play-by-play commentators and that's not for us to determine. That is --*

*Q At one point last week, you said the transition needs to start yesterday --*

*MR. GIBBS: I did.*

*Q And the impression we all got, I think, was that*

Mubarak needed to go. So now I'm just trying to get a sense of whether --

MR. GIBBS: But I think we've been very, very clear and very, very consistent that we are not going to pick those leaders. We are not going to -- as I just said, we're not going to define the membership in this process. The transition -- remember that the transition we will see throughout this process happened many, many times on the road to free and fair elections. And quite frankly, there's a lot to do in that process. The fact that that transition has to start, as the President said, now, and as we've repeated since, it's because many of the things that I outlined are going to require those discussions and those negotiations.

So it is -- again, it's not up for us to determine the personalities and who's going to lead and when they're going to lead and when they're not going to lead. That's the job of the people of Egypt and that's the tough work that's involved in a democracy.

Q Last crack at it. Does the White House believe the protests will stop as long as Mubarak is there?

MR. GIBBS: I think that you will continue to see those exercise their great desire to be recognized and to enjoy the freedoms and opportunities that they wish to -- I think you will continue to see that unless or until the process of an orderly transition that is broad-based begins to show immediate and irreversible change. I think that's what the Egyptian people want and I think that's what the world is waiting for.

Q A quick follow-up based on the O'Reilly interview. He said that he did not raise taxes. A taxpayer group says, in effect, he has raised taxes on a couple things; he's also cut taxes. I'm wondering, do you guys disagree with that assessment?

MR. GIBBS: I've not seen what the group has said. I would note that I think the Congressional Budget Office released figures yesterday that show that for the third consecutive year the American people are paying less in taxes than they did during the previous administration.

Chuck.

Q Is it fair to say that our policy towards Egypt is forever changed?

MR. GIBBS: Well, we -- let me give you a broad answer to this, Chuck, because I think obviously we want to see the continued robust partnership that we've had, the stability in the region and around the world that that partnership has brought. I think Egypt has forever changed. I think that what the President said --

Q But not necessarily our policy yet?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think -- look, again, I don't want to get into hypotheticals about what things look like in a year or in five years. But I think there's no doubt that what the President said, that Egypt is not going backward, I think that what we've seen transpire over the past 10 days has been nothing short of remarkable. I don't think that anybody -- we have, other administrations have, called for the type of change that you're seeing now -- it's happened in a very, very short period of time, but it is -- you look at the size and the scope of the announcements that have been made, it's astonishing.

Q I ask I guess -- when does our policy change towards Yemen, towards Saudi Arabia, towards Jordan? When there's a groundswell like Egypt?

MR. GIBBS: No, no, no, I think -- no, no, let's be clear because --

Q Beyond what we say rhetorically.

MR. GIBBS: -- this was the case when -- when the President talked to the President of Egypt several weeks ago about what was happening in the Middle East, he reiterated that our calls for the government of Egypt to institute the type of reforms that we have long thought needed to be assumed.

Q I understand that, but we are now actively -- after there were protests --

MR. GIBBS: No, no, no, no --

*Q -- we as a -- as a U.S. government actively got involved in trying to push them across --*

*MR. GIBBS: No, no, no, no.*

*Q So we didn't send Ambassador Wisner? I mean, we wouldn't have done that. We're not sending an ambassador to the King of Jordan, right?*

*MR. GIBBS: Hold on -- hold on, let's -- you've now generalized across the sweep of the entire Middle East, so let's try to get this -- let's go backwards just a tad.*

*We have in Saudi Arabia and in Yemen and in many of the countries that you discussed talked to them, as our administration and as previous administrations have, about greater access to freedom, greater access to freedom of speech, assembly -- all of those things.*

*Our position on bringing democracy to the Middle East and bringing greater freedoms to those people didn't -- wasn't developed as a result of what happened in Tunisia or what we've seen in Egypt.*

*Ambassador Wisner went for -- with a specific message and a specific conversation and to report back, okay? There were -- that was an instance that, based on the fact that we were seeing rapid change. But the broad notion of what we want to see happen in countries in the Middle East and throughout the world is shaped by the values with which we started our country.*

*Q I understand that, but what happened in Egypt spurred us -- spurred your administration, the administration to get more active in the situation in Egypt. Is that now going to forever change? Is the administration planning to get more active in Yemen, planning to get more active in Saudi Arabia --*

*MR. GIBBS: Again, I don't --*

*Q -- planning to get more active in Jordan? Or is this just you wait for a groundswell?*

*MR. GIBBS: No, again, I think you're generalizing broadly.*

*Obviously we have a team that is -- that monitors and works through a whole host of bilateral relationships because many of the countries that you just mentioned, we have very important relationships with.*

*And look, as events dictate, we will respond to them. I just don't want to generalize across countries --*

*Q Is it fair to say that that is --*

*MR. GIBBS: I think what's happening in --*

*Q -- something would have to happen before we'd change our policies in another country?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well -- no, no, but I think it's -- again, I have throughout this -- as we've spoken about our universal values, I think it's important not to generalize across a platform of countries that, again, as I've said, may be at different stages in their own political development.*

*Q Earlier today you guys sent out basically I guess a position on -- you want Congress to re-enact, to continue the powers that you have with the FISA courts and some of these intelligence -- some of the parts of the -- how do you assure supporters of yours who didn't like the President's decision in 2008 when he voted for these changes in the law that gave these expansive powers, how do you assure them that they're not being abused?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, first and foremost, the reason --*

*Q -- to monitor this?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, there's FISA courts to do that, and I think -- look, there were -- this was a debate that happened in '05 and '06 and '07 and even in '08 that -- look, there were some that wanted to do away with FISA warrants and the court system that -- and as the President said, it is important that we have a mechanism that watches the watchers. That's -- that is in this instance an important aspect of what the judicial branch does.*

*Q I understand the process. When does the public -- I mean at some point do you allow sort of -- some sort of scrutiny on this outside of the FISA court?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I think -- again, the role in government to do that is through a very specialized set of developed courts in order to ensure that what is done meets the law.*

*Q And you want new changes in the law at this point --*

*MR. GIBBS: Again, I think it -- obviously this is -- there are important activities that need to be reauthorized, and that's where our focus is now.*

*Q Very quickly, has the President voted yet in Chicago?\**

*MR. GIBBS: The President requested, as the First Lady did, requested an absentee ballot. I do not know if that has been filled out, but I can put that on the list.*

*Laura.*

*Q On the unemployment insurance proposal, are you at all concerned that this is going to be read as an increased tax on business at a time when the administration is working hard to mend its relationship with the business community?*

*MR. GIBBS: No, because, look, this specifically -- this policy, if enacted, would prevent further federal tax increases, would help states make up for the shortfalls they have and give them time, as I said, to rationalize what they offer and how they pay for it.*

*In other words, you have in 2011 and 2012 and parts of 2013 the ability to make the type of structural changes that a state would need to make in order to ensure that, again, what they offer and how they pay for it, that that's met up so that we can do this responsibly.*

*Q Do you think that the states are going to take up the opportunity to increase the tax?*

*MR. GIBBS: That's -- I think what you have to -- what we think has to happen in those out-years is that you cannot*

*continue to offer something at a state level, right, that is not ultimately supported by the base with which you're funding it, right?*

*Look, those are the discussions that are happening at -- have happened for many years at the state level. They're happening now at the federal level in terms of getting our fiscal house in order. I think that whether it happens at the federal level or the state level, we can't -- we have to make some tough decisions about ensuring that we can pay for what we're offering.*

*Q And just one other issue. How does that -- in terms of the announcement from the Vice President today about the rail investment, how would you pay for that?*

*MR. GIBBS: That will be in the budget on Monday.*

*Yes, sir.*

*Q Robert, thank you. Back in 1979, President Carter was criticized for allowing the Shah to come here for medical treatment. If it came to the point where Mubarak had to flee, would the U.S. allow him to come here?*

*MR. GIBBS: I think getting into that sort of hypothetical at this point doesn't make a lot of sense.*

*Q Also real quickly, your comments on the CBO report, didn't the report actually say that Americans aren't paying so much less in taxes but tax receipts are down because so many people have been laid off? Would you like to clarify your --*

*MR. GIBBS: No, I'd point you to the report.*

*Q Robert, is it accurate to say that the administration has extended its -- for want of a better expression -- expectation timetable for change in Egypt?*

*MR. GIBBS: I think that -- I think it is accurate to say that Vice President Biden, in discussions with Vice President Suleiman and discussions that we've had government-to-government -- we want to understand that they have a timetable to make change, yes.*

*Q But what would you say to someone in Egypt who -- especially people on the streets who've told reporters that they think that the pressure from the United States for change is easing up after hearing some of the things that have been said the past couple of days?*

*MR. GIBBS: I hope they'll listen to what we've said -- I don't think I've -- I think if there's any -- I don't think I've eased up in any way. I don't think that -- I don't think what we've said, I don't think what the President has said has in any way eased up on what we need to see.*

*I said that the transition should begin yesterday when I was asked the day after the President spoke and the day after President Mubarak spoke. And I think, again, you're going to continue to see pressure within the people of Egypt unless or until the process makes those type of changes.*

*So I think that we have enumerated the universal values that we believe everyone should have, and I think we have been clear in making sure that the government of Egypt understands that they have to take those concrete steps.*

*Q Where do things stand on the aid review?*

*MR. GIBBS: No different than when I mentioned it I think a couple of Fridays ago, which is we will monitor the actions in response to what is happening in Cairo and in Egypt and make determinations as to whether that would affect our aid. And that -- we continue to monitor that.*

*Yes, ma'am.*

*Q On the unemployment insurance aid to states, is that the primary way that the administration sees the federal government aiding states with their fiscal situations?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, look, this was obviously a particular situation because, as Laura mentioned in her question, if you -- if states are borrowing off of a UI account, not able to pay that back, then the law says that the rate has to increase at a federal share on businesses. We don't think that makes sense right now. We think that we ought to make sure that that*

*doesn't happen, that states have a chance to rationalize, again, what they offer, and that in the meantime we're helping other states that might fall into things that you've seen in Michigan, in South Carolina and Indiana, with that fund.*

*Q Could we expect other proposals in the budget that would go toward helping states with their fiscal --*

*MR. GIBBS: I shouldn't preview the budget.*

*Q And also, does the administration consider the fiscal situation that states are facing to be in crisis category yet?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I think that without getting into a specific word or series of words, obviously I think in each stage of -- or each year that we've been in office, you've seen tremendous shortfalls. Obviously there are a number of states that are experiencing particularly acute shortfalls. And that has an impact on the economy.*

*Q On the lunch tomorrow, talk about the thinking behind having just House Republicans as opposed to House and Senate or Republican and Democratic leadership.*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think the President will take an opportunity to see and to meet with a whole host of different leadership entities and things like that. As I said, I think it was Friday that Senator McConnell was here to have lunch with the President. So I think over the course of the next many weeks you'll see folks in here to see the President and the administration as we move forward.*

*Q Is there a sense that he can get more done if it's just Republicans as opposed to the Republican and Democratic clash that might come from having leaders of both parties there?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I think that, again, I go back to draw on what the President said in December -- or I don't remember if it's December or November at this point now -- late last year that he needed to do a better job of reaching out. And I think hearing what their concerns are and, quite frankly, understanding that the House Republicans now play the important role of governing House -- governing half of the legislative branch. They're going to be -- they're involved in the*

*responsibility of governing, and I think an exchange of ideas on the issues that we face are important.*

*Q And on a different issue, since this is your last week, do you have advice for your successor that you'd be willing to share with us?*

*MR. GIBBS: No. (Laughter.) We have had many private conversations about that.*

*Connie.*

*Q One domestic and one international. If Israel is threatened by any of these new governments or by Hamas or Hezbollah, if its existence is in danger, would the U.S. come to Israel's assistance?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I think regardless of the situation facing any government in the region, our friendship and our -- our friendship, our partnership and our alliance with Israel is unchanged.*

*Q And on this Washington Post story about the wealthy taking up arms in the District -- a very interesting story. What does that say about the level of confidence of the American people in a criminal situation?*

*MR. GIBBS: I read a lot this morning but I don't know that I read that one.*

*Q If you could look at that and --*

*MR. GIBBS: I will.*

*Q Back to Vice President Suleiman. I just want to be clear about the call that the Vice President I gather made. Did the administration see Suleiman's remarks and say, we've got to say something about this? Was it to object to that?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I objected to and said that I thought what he said yesterday was unacceptable in this process.*

*Q Is that what prompted the call?*

MR. GIBBS: No, no. Again, I think that -- as we talked about yesterday, I think there's a counterpart-to-counterpart relationship with Vice President Biden and Vice President Suleiman as a continued channel to discuss the process and the pathway to free and fair elections.

Q On that process, one of the criticisms that's been made of it is that it has not been terribly inclusive at this point, that a very small subset of the opposition is involved. Has that point been made to the Egyptians?

MR. GIBBS: It has. It has -- both privately and publicly. Again, unless or until there's a broad base of those that are not currently represented in government, unless or until those are involved in this process, I think you're going to see the reaction that you see from the people of Egypt.

Yes.

Q One other thing, if I may. There have been reports that the three-way meeting -- American, Pakistani and Afghan foreign ministers -- is now in some question because of the continued detention of the U.S. diplomat in Pakistan. Is that true?

MR. GIBBS: Let me -- I think State has got better details on that and I'd point you over there.

Ann.

Q Thanks, Robert. As you wind down here, have you given any advice to your successor on press policy, on access? And do you have any regrets about --

MR. GIBBS: I should probably take all these questions. Do I have any regrets about --

Q Do you have thoughts about things that have gone on the last two years that you wish had gone better?

MR. GIBBS: Oh, let me tell you, I'll say this -- and I don't want to answer for you all and I don't want to answer for anybody in the country, but I think if you do a job for a specific amount of time and look back and say you wouldn't have

done anything differently, you probably haven't spent a lot of time thinking back about what you did.

I mean, look, I take my transcript home every night and I read my transcript. And I think if there's a time in which I've read that transcript that I've thought, wow, perfect, I did it all just right -- I mean, it may happen on Thursday night -- we don't brief that day -- (laughter) -- but I mean the notion that somehow you don't look back and think you would have done things differently -- look, I will have quite a bit of time to more aptly focus on it.

I will say -- look, I think -- and I'm going to go back to Ari because I avoided doing this and you repeated his question almost verbatim and I swallowed the hook -- (laughter) -- so, look, I think you have to have -- we discuss in pretty broad detail and in great depths the situation that's transpiring thousands of miles away. This is -- when things like that happen it's more than just -- this is more than just a conversation that is happening between this side of the room and this side of the room. It's happening and people are watching it not just throughout this country but throughout this world.

And your questions and my answers are being translated in languages that are spoken in continents far away.

I think it demonstrates the importance of a strong freedom of the press, a sharing of information. I think the reason that we can speak about the universal values that we hold so dear, and we can speak about it halfway across the world, is because it's something that we think is so tremendously important.

Q Have you given advice to your successor?

MR. GIBBS: That was Ari's question. We have talked a lot about -- I'm not going to share that advice. I'm going to let that counsel remain private. But Jay and I have talked a lot about the importance of this job. And I don't mean that as a personal thing. I mean this will long outlive -- in a country like this, it will long outlive the personality of myself, just as it long outlived the personalities that came before me and will long outlive who comes next.

Q Have you written your note for the flak jacket yet?

MR. GIBBS: *I'm not going to share that --*

Q *Robert, there was a -- based on what you're saying here today, there was a story in The New York Times a few days ago that said that the United States was involved in discussions with the Egyptians to have Mubarak turn over power immediately. Is that story incorrect?*

MR. GIBBS: *I'm not going to get into conversations that are had between our government and --*

Q *But you've been pretty clear that the United States is not supposed to be getting into when Mubarak should leave and suggested very strongly that we have not tried to get him out immediately. Have discussions like that taken place where we are pressuring him to get out?*

MR. GIBBS: *I am not going to get into the details of every conversation that is had with our government and other foreign governments. But I want to be clear that these are decisions that can, and can only, be made by the Egyptians.*

Q *So the United States has not tried to remove Mubarak from power right away?*

MR. GIBBS: *Keith, I don't know how many times I can answer the same question --*

Q *You're not answering it.*

MR. GIBBS: *No, I am. You're just not accepting my answer.*

Q *Okay. One other quick question. You talk a lot about what the Egyptian people want, and I think everybody would agree that the Mubarak regime is a repressive regime, and we do know that there have been a lot of very passionate people out in Tahrir Square. But how do we actually know what the Egyptian people want?*

MR. GIBBS: *Well -- but, see, Keith, that is -- that's why would don't -- that's why we're not the ones who are checking off on what the process has to be. Again, as I said --*

Q *But you quote what the Egyptian people want several times*

already in this briefing. What I'm wondering is -- and they may want exactly what you're saying, but how do we know what -- why people --

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think -- I mean, I think the reason that you can ask me questions about why the Egyptian people don't think they have greater freedoms is because those freedoms are enumerated in many of the stories that I read around -- from different outlets around this room. It's written on signs in Tahrir Square. It's held up by people -- but again, Keith, I think what is --

Q You could get people out on the Mall with lots of signs; that doesn't mean that the majority of American people support whatever they're out there for.

MR. GIBBS: Keith, you are enumerating far better than I could why it is not for us to arbitrate. Now, if somebody holds a sign up on the Washington Mall, it may not constitute the majority of opinion in this country but it probably constitutes the majority of the opinion that that person holds. And guess what. This is a great and exciting country that allows anybody to walk out on the Mall with a sign that expresses their viewpoint.

But that is -- what you are saying is the exact reason why our government isn't going to determine the definition of individual or group freedoms in a country like Egypt. We can talk about the universal values of free speech, of freedom of assembly, freedom to communicate across the Internet or social networking, but it is not up to -- and it should not be up to our government or some entity in our government to determine what the scope of freedom of speech looks like in Egypt.

That is for the precise reason that we give the answer that this is up to Egyptians. It's not a way of just simply saying that phrase over and over again. It's what we believe.

Q But you're not just saying that -- you're insisting on them doing certain things, and you're justifying it based on the will of the Egyptian people. I've heard you say it many times. We're not just --

MR. GIBBS: Keith, Keith --

*Q It's not just a totally hands-off process.*

*MR. GIBBS: Keith --*

*Q And I'm not saying -- I don't know what they're --*

*MR. GIBBS: Keith, I think you should just go get any newspaper or turn on any television set inside of this building and I think you'll see many -- do I know every person's concern in Egypt? I will go way out on this limb and say, I do not.*

*But again, I don't think you have to have -- you could pull up your rabbit ears and figure out what people are concerned about in Cairo because it's all over the TV.*

*Go ahead.*

*Q I have just a question about Senator McConnell's meeting here last week. Was it just the President and the Senator?*

*MR. GIBBS: It was just the two of them.*

*Q And what did they discuss?*

*MR. GIBBS: Same thing I think that I talked about that I think will be discussed in their lunch tomorrow.*

*Q Did the President have any Democratic leaders over last week at the White House?*

*MR. GIBBS: None that I'm aware of, but I will double-check.*

*April.*

*Q Thanks, Robert.*

*Q Robert -- thank you, Robert. On the issue of the meeting and finding common ground and civility, realistically how long does this administration think that they're going to be able to have civility and finding common ground, this whole era of that right now, as we're walking into presidential campaigns and things of that nature?*

MR. GIBBS: Well, I don't know how many months the presidential campaign is away, but it's a long way away.

And, April, there are important things that have to happen in Congress and around the country to meet the concerns and to meet the problems that we face, the challenges that we have that are required that we take action on well in advance of the calendar of a presidential election.

Q There is posturing right now on the --

MR. GIBBS: Look, this town is --

Q Both sides --

MR. GIBBS: That's what happens in this town. That's what -- but, again, I think the clear message from the American people in the election was that they don't need that, they don't want that. They're looking for two parties to be able to sit down and have those conversations and work out answers to those problems.

I think it will -- it's what's required. It's not what may happen.

Q Now, also I asked you last week about the President's involvement in Rahm Emanuel's --

MR. GIBBS: Yes, let me -- I will ask -- I will see if I have any update on that after -- if I find out if the President and the First Lady have voted.

Q And I want to ask -- I want to ask you something about your departure. You consciously made a decision to leave. But from day one you have enjoyed that podium -- beyond the professionalism --

MR. GIBBS: Let me -- as I've said a hundred times, well, probably 10,000 times, if you didn't enjoy some element of this, you'd do it for about three days, and you would turn in your pass and hope no one ever found you again. (Laughter.)

I mean, the truth is -- if you don't have some enjoyment in

--

*Q* By the way, should we be judging you on that negatively that you enjoy this? (Laughter.)

*MR. GIBBS:* I assume you do, too. Well, some of you have contracts that require you to sit in these seats. (Laughter.)

*Q* So you're saying there's no gray area -- there's no gray area.

*MR. GIBBS:* No, no. Look, again, I think -- look, first of all, I don't want to turn this into my fond farewell.

*Q* It is.

*MR. GIBBS:* It's the least favorite topic I have, which is me.

*Q* But it's about you.

*MR. GIBBS:* But I think what's important is -- like I said, I think if you were to have somebody in this job that didn't enjoy doing this job, like I said, it is one of the most challenging jobs I think that is had in all of this government for the precise reason of we're up here talking about a subject that can influence what happens 10 miles and 10,000 miles away.

But if you didn't have some enjoyment in doing this job, like I said, it would compound how -- you couldn't do it long.

Yes, sir.

*Q* There's some skepticism about the President's call for corporate tax reform because he hasn't produced key specifics, like what the rates should be, what the treatment of foreign taxes should be, what is the difference between a preference and a loophole. It isn't really -- how long do we have to wait for the specifics of his plan?

*MR. GIBBS:* Well, I think it's important to understand that this is not going to be we put out a plan, we say, hey, this is our plan, take this or leave this. I think the President started a series of discussions about this with business leaders

at the Blair House. Those conversations -- and with Secretary Geithner -- have continued to happen. This is a process that is not going to -- not going to take a matter of days or weeks; it's going to take months if not years. So I think this is a long process that will involve stakeholders at all levels with both political parties weighing in on their ideas about how we meet the goal of reforming the way corporate taxes are done, lowering that rate, but keeping it deficit neutral.

Yes, ma'am.

Q I have two questions.

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Going back on Egypt. You said many times that you credited the Egyptian army. Considering the history of the Middle East, many of the current and previous leaders came from in the military coup d'état. Three of them are in charge of the transition now in Egypt -- Suleiman, Shafik and Tantawi are military men. Do you really trust them they will lead the transition to free and fair election?

MR. GIBBS: Well, two things. One, I think we have rightly, I think, given some praise to the actions that haven't been taken, that many feared might be taken with an army deployed and hundreds of thousands if not millions of protestors. I think it's important, also, that we have -- we talked about today and we have talked about this previously, about continued restraint and adherence to nonviolence and assurance that anything involving harassment or beating or detention is ended immediately. So we will continue to watch, as I've said throughout this, the process of their reaction.

Secondly, again, I think the determination about the progress that's being made toward free and fair elections will be determined by those in Egypt.

Q Can I follow up on that?

Q Okay. I just want to go --

MR. GIBBS: She has one more and then I'll --

*Q -- to the second question, which is the British Foreign Minister William Hague said today that this is time for the U.S. administration to take a bold step in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process considering what's happening in the Middle East. Is this something that the President is considering now?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think the President has, and this administration have been, from day one, actively involved in seeking a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. And we understand and we know that our lack of involvement by this country is not likely to produce the outcome that the world hopes for with peace. Only through active engagement and involvement can that happen. We have and we will continue to do that.*

*But just like in this instance, we cannot construct or force on those two entities something that they're unwilling to take steps to do themselves.*

*Q Thanks, Robert.*

*Q Thanks, Robert. You started off by calling for the arrest of journalists to stop, and our own reporting shows that the military police was involved. Do you still think the Egyptian military showed professionalism, impartiality and restraint?*

*MR. GIBBS: Well, I would refer you to what I said a second ago, which is obviously the restraint that we saw in Tahrir has been important. Without getting into who may or may not be involved, any involvement -- look, the government of Egypt has a strict responsibility to its citizens to assure their safety and security, to ensure that they're able to exercise their right to protest in a peaceful way.*

*And that goes for foreign journalists who are there to cover that story. I watched yesterday a couple of interviews with two journalists from FOX that -- I mean, the pictures were hard to watch, the after-effect several days later of whomever that was, beating, detaining, harassing those reporters -- and that has to stop regardless of who is either in charge of or involved in that.*

Sam.

*Q Robert, can you just tell us real quickly why the meeting -- why the President's meeting with McConnell wasn't on the public schedule?*

*MR. GIBBS: I'd have to check. I don't know the answer.*

*Q There's been talk on the Hill about reopening up the individual mandate in health care legislation. How firm is the President and the administration's commitment to that provision considering that at one point in time, he was not supportive of it?*

*MR. GIBBS: Sam, we -- look, we -- the President had to make a conscious decision about how to ensure that the legislation would prevent the problem that we've seen with free riders; in other words, people that never think they're going to get sick and don't get sick, but they get hit by a bus and show up at the emergency room, and then they charge us basically to pay for it.*

*The protections that we will have as part of this law that are derived from ensuring that it's not just a certain segment of the population that's covered but that everybody has coverage is an important foundation in this law.*

*The President supports it. We've gone to court to maintain it. And as the President has said, we will work with those who want to see improvements in this law regardless of policy -- I'm sorry, regardless of party. But we believe that individual responsibility is a foundation for this.*

*Q Have you not seen another provision that can do what that provision does?*

*MR. GIBBS: I think if we thought there was a better way of doing it, we would have done it that way.*

George.

*Q I just wanted to follow on Abby's question on the topics that came up with Senator McConnell.*

MR. GIBBS: *Let me see if I can get --*

Q *There's one -- well, but there's one topic that wouldn't come up with the House leaders. Did the President raise the issues of judicial confirmations? And are we going to see any further push by the President on confirmations?*

MR. GIBBS: *Let me go check on that right now.*

*Yes, sir.*

Q *Thanks, Robert. Back to Egypt, has there been a certain amount of soul-searching and reevaluation in the administration about how to deal with undemocratic governments that are nonetheless helpful to the United States?*

MR. GIBBS: *Well, look, we have important -- as I said earlier, important bilateral relationships throughout the world. We cannot institute or force change on any of those governments. We can speak out directly, privately and in public on the universal values that we support. And I think what you've heard the President say and I think what my guess is governments throughout the world are seeing is that what happens in a country when a government appears not to be responsive to the needs of, the concerns of, its citizens. And I think as the President has said, each and every one in government has the responsibility to do that.*

*Savannah.*

Q *We just had a wire cross that said the First Lady said the President has now quit smoking and hasn't smoked in almost a year. Just wonder if you know anything more about that.*

MR. GIBBS: *I think that goes along with what I said -- I don't remember when we last discussed this.*

Q *You were pretty vague about it --*

Q *You said nine months --*

Q *You said about nine months ago --*

MR. GIBBS: *No, I said we had --*

Q You said nine months ago.

Q You hadn't seen -- yes, you hadn't seen --

MR. GIBBS: No, no, I said he hadn't smoked in nine months.

Q Do you know what helped him finally kick the habit?

MR. GIBBS: I don't doubt that the First Lady --  
(laughter.) No, no, I don't mean that in a funny way.

Q Has Marvin quit?

MR. GIBBS: Marvin has quit.

Q Have you started?

MR. GIBBS: I have -- (laughter.) I have not, and I --

Q So Marvin quit?

MR. GIBBS: Hold on, let me, let me -- Marvin doesn't smoke. Eugene Kang -- Eugene, I hope you're still not smoking because I just mentioned you. There are number of people that have decided not to --

Q Boehner? (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: -- that have decided to make that -- I think -- look, I will say this --

Q Did they do it all together?

MR. GIBBS: They did around the same time. I will say this. I think -- and I didn't mean to be -- I didn't actually mean for what I said about the First Lady to be humorous as much as -- I think that when somebody decides to quit smoking, to try to overcome the physical addiction that they have, they do it not just because they want to, but because others want them to, and because others around them give them the type of encouragement that they need to break what is a tough habit to break.

*Thanks, guys.*

*END*

*1:53 P.M. EST*

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