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Press Briefing by Dana Perino

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MS. PERINO: Good afternoon. One note: On the schedule, as you know, the President, at 3:00 p.m., is going to have remarks on the African American History Month. Because of the -- the speech is happening a little bit later in the day, at 3:00 p.m., soon we will be able to release the remarks as prepared for delivery, so you'll have those.

Let me give you a little briefing on what he plans to talk about. He will celebrate -- he will talk about the month's celebration and the theme of it, which is celebrating America's cultural diversity. And in today's speech he will talk about how much progress our nation has made toward overcoming racial inequality, but as the President of the United States, he will say that there's a lot more that we could be doing.

He will also highlight one risk that comes with this progress. As past injustices become more distant memories it can be easy for some to lose sight of the real suffering that took place, and in particular, he will focus on one symbol of that suffering, which is the noose. He will note that there have been a number of recent and disturbing reports about nooses being displayed. One report says that 70 -- over 70 reports of such incidents have been recorded since December of 2006. He will stress the importance of understanding the shameful history of the noose and why it causes such a visceral reaction. And he will make clear that noose displays or lynching so-called jokes are offensive, wrong, and have no place in America today.

Finally, he will honor several African American leaders who are helping lead the way in fostering tolerance across our country. And I expect those remarks to be released shortly.

In addition, today in the Senate they are considering legislation to reauthorize the Protect America Act, which will permanently close the intelligence gap that we had in our intelligence-gathering system, and provide the tools that our intelligence community needs in order to help protect America.

They've made good progress today defeating amendments that could have weakened the bill, and have added some amendments that improved the bill. And at this point, the legislation is shaping up to be one that the President can support, and we look forward to final passage in the Senate today.

Q Venezuela is threatening to shut off oil supplies to the United States if Exxon is successful in seizing some Venezuelan assets. Do you take the -- does the White House take the Venezuelan threat seriously?

MS. PERINO: What you were referring to is a matter of private civil litigation, which we won't comment on. But, of course, we are mindful that oil is sold on a world market. And at the same time, while these discussions are going on, and there is a private lawsuit, the President continues to push forward to make sure that in America we are further diversifying our own source of fuels, including producing here at home in environmentally sensitive ways, and also seeking alternatives.

Q But it's -- I know it's a matter of a private lawsuit, but the President of Venezuela and the country's oil minister both are raising these threats to cut off oil supplies to the United States. What's your response?

MS. PERINO: It's possible that when there is a litigation that's ongoing, different parties will say anything to try to win over on an argument, and it's not something that the federal government is going to get involved in.

Q Did you find out anything more about the Israeli apartments, the U.S. role in that?

MS. PERINO: It's a little bit unclear as to what the announcement actually was, so we continue to look into that. Let me go back to one thing, which is that the President has said that he believes that President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert are two leaders who are committed to working on a final status agreement by the end of the year. At the same time, the President noted when he was on his trip -- well, back at the Annapolis Conference in November of 2007, and then on his trip in the Middle East in January, just last month, that there are going to be issues that are going to be very difficult for both sides to work through, and that what's most important is that the leaders remember that they need to continue to look at the big picture, and let their negotiators deal with the specifics of the issues.

We know that their two negotiators, their foreign ministers, recently met. We understand that they had a good meeting. And hopefully they will be able to continue to meet. And we're going to continue to monitor and press them and push them to make sure that they can seize the opportunity that's in front of them.

Q Are you afraid to take a stand on this issue? I mean, they are taking land, Palestinian land, that doesn't belong to them.

MS. PERINO: I think that's -- what I said, Helen, is that we understand that this is an issue that's going to have to be worked out between the two. It is not clear if these were new -- this was a new announcement, or if it was a reiteration of an old position. So while we'll look into that, we will say that on these issues of settlements and borders, refugees, all of these issues are going to be very difficult, not to mention the issues of security that Israel is concerned about.

Q Well, when you keep taking other people's land, and you keep worrying about your security -- talk about the big picture. Think of the Palestinians losing all their homes and land.

MS. PERINO: I think the President thinks of both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and especially -- he is a President, and the first President who has called for the Palestinians to have a state of their own, so that they could live in peace and security.

Q Let's see -- where is it?

MS. PERINO: Well, part of what we have to get through this year is a discussion between the Israelis and the Palestinians for a final status agreement, and that's what we're working towards.

Q General Cartwright this morning said on Capitol Hill that he's concerned about indications of this return to a Cold War mind-set regarding the Russian overflight of the aircraft carrier. Is that a sentiment the President shares, as well?

MS. PERINO: I haven't spoken to the President about it. I know that these issues happen from time to time, so I'll refer you to DOD for anything more on it.

Q Dana, in the President's remarks to CPAC last week, he said that one of the timeless truths that the administration believes in is personal responsibility. So is the President at all concerned that any of these administration programs to help homeowners struggling with the mortgage crisis, that they do the opposite, they actually absolve them of responsibility for decisions they made, some of them risky decisions that -- and that while they may help homeowners in the short-term, they don't really do anything in the long-term to encourage more prudent responsible behavior?

MS. PERINO: A couple things. First of all, on the housing situation, it was last August that we started moving forward on several housing initiatives, both for short-term, mid-term and long-term reforms.

In the short-term, one of the things that we did is work with the Secretary of Treasury and the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to set up a private sector organization that could help people who were at risk of losing their home. And just today, Secretaries Paulson and Jackson announced that they're going to take that even further and work with people who are already behind in their mortgage payments.

We have to remember that these are contracts that were freely entered into -- except for a very small number of cases where there might have been fraud that was involved, and those cases could be prosecuted under the law. But it's not in anyone's interests for the economy to collapse under the strain of a housing market that's in a downturn. And so what we've tried to do is figure out a way to help people, especially those who were -- who took subprime loans in order to keep their homes and keep the neighborhoods vibrant, and to work within both the private sector and also Congress to help change the way that we deal with these loans. And that's one of the reasons that the President has asked for Congress to take up modernization of the Federal Housing Administration.

There's lots of different things that we can do to try to help people stay in their homes and to make better choices. I would also remind you that the President just announced a Financial Literacy Council to help people take more responsibility for their own savings and their own decision-making, to live within their means and to make sure that they're making prudent decisions on behalf of their families. And so there's a lot of different things we can do on different fronts.

Q So there's no concern that any of these programs the administration has initiated are in any way encouraging people to go ahead and make the same mistakes twice?

MS. PERINO: No, I think -- no, I don't think there's concern, and I also think that consumers out there, having been educated about what can happen in a situation where you might have taken a subprime loan, or you could get out too far over your skis and not be able to afford what you've committed to, even -- and consumers are paying attention. And so I think that everybody -- out of this, one of the good things that will happen is everyone will be more educated and hopefully make better decisions.

Goyal.

Q Just a quick question, Dana. As far as terrorism -- violent terrorism is concerned, a lot of reports are coming out in the press -- (inaudible) -- that after seven years of 9/11, al Qaeda in Pakistan have camps, are still training terrorists, but they are using new techniques, training the people from different countries, including from the U.S., and sending them back to their home country to attack. Is President aware of this, has been briefed now on this new technique they are using?

MS. PERINO: Goyal, I think we saw that technique used on September 11th, when 3,000 of our citizens were killed. So we're very much aware of it and we're working to prevent any further terrorist attack on our country and then working internationally to prevent it in other countries, as well.

Olivier.

Q Two for you. The first one you're probably going to refer me to DOD, but does the United States have any role to play in the search for the ambassador and the two nuclear technicians who have gone missing, presumed abducted, on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan?

MS. PERINO: No. We are aware of the situation, but I would refer you to the Department of Defense for that.

Q And then, a leading communist politician in India says that his party is going to hold up the U.S.-India nuclear agreement until there's a new President here. Any concern about that? Are you -- the ambassador there says this is pretty much a once-in-a-lifetime shot. Do you agree with that? Is this --

MS. PERINO: Well, I hadn't seen those remarks. What I can say about that initiative -- which is the civil nuclear arrangement between us and India -- is that it's something that we would like very much for our country to be able to enter into agreement with India because we believe that nuclear power is a good thing for the environment, and it's a good thing for powering both electricity for homes and for businesses. And a country like India needs to think about how it's going to diversify its resources, not only for how -- make sure that the lights turn on when the kids are at home trying to do their homework, but also because they are facing environmental problems, especially in regards to coal that is burned -- for the problems that that causes for people's respiratory health, as well as problems in water.

So this agreement is one that we have done very carefully, through the State Department. We're trying to work with India. We would hope that they would see the benefits in it, and we continue to work with them to try to make it happen.

Q Can I follow?

MS. PERINO: Yes.

Q Do you think President has been in touch with the Prime Minister of India, with Manmohan Singh? Because there are also some deals that are going on with Russia and China and other countries, France --

MS. PERINO: I don't think they've been in touch recently, but obviously at the State Department they're in touch with them quite regularly.

Q Dana, has the President doing any event in order to push for the approval of Merida initiative – request of Capitol Hill in order to have approved before the meeting with the President of Mexico and the Prime Minister of Canada next April?

MS. PERINO: Well, I don't know any events that we have on the schedule, but that is something that we are going to continue to work with Congress on. We think it's very important for the national security of our own country, but, as well, for the security and for peace for that border region, especially down on the border with Mexico. So we'll continue to work on it. And of course, the President will be talking to President Calderon and President Harper – I'm sorry, Prime Minister Harper, about that in April when he's in New Orleans for the meeting.

Q This week up on Congress, many members of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs are saying that the White House has any -- hasn't presented any concern with regard to the human rights abuses in Mexico, in this new fight of narcotics by President Calderon, using the Mexican military to combat drug narco-traffickers. Is this true, the White House hasn't expressed any concern about it, human rights situation in Mexico?

MS. PERINO: I don't think that that's accurate. Of course, it's something that we're concerned about and continue to work with Mexico on. But we also appreciate how aggressively President Calderon has worked to fight counter-narcotics – fight the narcotics situation down there, and especially the violence that is preventing people from being able to have a good life and a good job.

So we'll continue to work with them. We'll try to get this initiative passed through Congress as rapidly as possible.

Q Dana, one more on the stimulus plan the President is going to be signing tomorrow. What about the economists who say, great election year move, but in terms of stimulating the economy, by the time those checks arrive, even if the IRS works flat out, the earliest they arrive is May, they're going to trickle out through July – the stimulus will be too little and too late?

MS. PERINO: Well, one thing I have learned as I've gotten more up to speed over the last several months on the economy, is that you can find an economist that can say just about anything about the economy. But I think, across-the-board, if you look from a wide variety of perspectives, that the general sense is that this move by the Congress, bipartisan move, will actually have a beneficial effect on the economy. I saw that from the Congressional Budget Office Director today, as well, which obviously he is not always in agreement with the administration.

But remember, it's not just the checks that are going to end up in consumers -- many consumers' hands, soon, after the Treasury Department is able to get that underway, but also small businesses know that they have a certainty now, after tomorrow's signing, that they can take advantage of the tax incentives that are part of the stimulus package for them, as well. That's another part of the deal that doesn't get as much attention as the consumer aspects of it, but the small businesses are the ones who are really helping create the jobs, which is part of what the stimulus package is supposed to do. So hopefully that will help us head off any potential recession.

Q And on the economy, any thoughts, any comments on GM's announced \$39 billion record loss and their plans to either buy out or potentially lay off some 74,000 workers? And any kind of ripple effect that could have on this rough patch the economy is in?

MS. PERINO: The report from GM reflects what we've known for a long time, which is that the automotive industry in the United States is having some difficulties, and they are trying to work through those. They're trying to restructure. They have a changing marketplace; buyers have different tastes, and there are issues regarding how high their cost of business is. So they're trying to restructure. And I think that over the long-term that the President believes strongly, the long-term health of the U.S. automotive industry is strong.

But they have some issues that they're going to have to work through, and we obviously keep in mind all the people today who were affected by that, because that news is hard to take for a family. There are worker retraining programs that are very important and it's also critical that we make sure that those programs are effective, not just out there for looks, that they actually have an impact on how somebody can change their careers or change their lifestyle, to make sure that they are competitive in the 21st century.

Q To that end, if I could, in the past the President has met with the Big 3 automakers' CEOs. Is there any further plans for something like that, or any role for the administration to play as they work through these tough times?

MS. PERINO: I know that the administration keeps in close contact with representatives from those companies. I don't know of anything on the schedule right now, though.

But another thing to keep in mind is one of the most important things that the President of the United States can do is ensure that we have good pro-growth policies going forward, which is another reason he is signing the stimulus package tomorrow, to make sure that we can ensure against any potential downturn and keep the overall health of the economy good so we can make sure consumers are out there purchasing and that our businesses are remaining competitive.

Helen.

Q What are the things that you like in the FISA bill, compromises? I haven't seen them on the wire. Do they have immunity for telephone companies? Did that pass?

MS. PERINO: Yes, that was a provision that was upheld in the Senate. There was also an amendment call -- that Senator Dodd sponsored, which would add the issue of weapons of mass destruction in the --

MS. LAWRIMORE: Bond.

MS. PERINO: Sorry?

MS. LAWRIMORE: Bond.

MS. PERINO: Bond? Sorry. Yes. The Senator Dodd amendment failed. (Laughter.) The Senator Bond amendment.

Q They don't have to have warrants?

MS. PERINO: What?

Q They don't have to have warrants to wiretap?

MS. PERINO: That's not what this is about, Helen. Anyone in America who would require a wiretap that – you have to go through the process of getting a warrant. This was about dealing through the FISA court to make sure that our intelligence gaps remain closed when dealing with phone calls overseas.

Q But were the telephone companies told that it was legal to wiretap six months before 9/11?

MS. PERINO: The telephone companies that were alleged to have helped their country after 9/11 did so because they are patriotic and they certainly helped us and they helped us save lives.

Q Thank you.

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