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PRESS GAGGLE WITH

SCOTT McCLELLAN

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

9:53 A.M. EST

MR. McCLELLAN: Good morning. The President had his usual briefings this morning, and he, here shortly, in Arlington, will honor and congratulate the recipients of the 2003 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. This -- just a reminder -- this is the highest honor for performance excellence awarded by the President to U.S. organizations. And the President, in his remarks, will talk about our economy, and I think he'll also talk a little bit about the choice we face when it comes to strengthening our economy even more by opening markets and promoting free trade with a level playing field, versus retreating into economic isolationism.

So that's a quick overview of his remarks. And then the President, this afternoon, will participate in -- congratulate and participate in a photo opportunity with the winners of the VFW National Voice of Democracy Award. This is part of a scholarship contest, annual -- that has an annual essay competition for high school students, and it gives students the opportunity to voice their opinions on their responsibilities to America. And students must record their essays on a cassette tape. And the theme of this year's essay contest was "My Commitment to America's Freedom." And this program, this scholarship program provides more than \$2.5 million in scholarships each year.

Prior to that, the President will meet with the commander-in-chief of the VFW. And I brief at 12:45 p.m.; Ambassador Boucher is at 12:30 p.m. I think Defense -- Secretary Rumsfeld and General Pace will brief at 1:30 p.m. On "Ask The White House," you have Secretary Chao at 10:30 a.m. talking about her recent trip to Iraq.

All right, fire away.

Q Scott, can you give us an update on Ashcroft?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I think the Department of Justice has put out a release talking about his surgery later today.

Q Can we expect anything from the White House?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I'll keep you posted if there are any updates. He spoke to him last week, last Friday.

Q And nothing since then?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'll double-check. I don't believe so. He spoke to the Attorney General and Mrs. Ashcroft. Obviously, we all wish him a speedy recovery.

Q Do you have any comments on the new government in Russia?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm sorry?

Q The new government in Russia. They reshuffled their government, they appointed a new foreign minister, the former U.N. Ambassador --

MR. McCLELLAN: We continue to look closely at events as they unfold in Russia. We want to make sure that Russia deepens its commitment to rule of law and democracy.

Q Are you worried about this new poll out that shows the President behind Kerry, 39 percent approval of the economy --

MR. McCLELLAN: There are several polls that have been out recently, and I think you can expect there will be plenty of polls between now and next November. I think there's been a lot of attention, obviously, focused on the Democratic primary process and all the dramatic twists and turns that occurred during that primary process. It was kind of a one-way conversation based on attack after attack on the President. Now I think Americans are going to have plenty of opportunity to see the clear choice that they will have, come next November.

Q Scott, some people are struck by the fact that the President has started referring to Senator Kerry by name. They say that it's much -- he's doing this much earlier in the political cycle than other Presidents have done.

MR. McCLELLAN: The political cycle has moved much earlier than previous ones. I think you now have a Democratic nominee. So, obviously, the President will continue to talk about the choices that the American people face during this critical period in our nation's history.

Q Well, is he going to be fully engaged with Senator Kerry from now on, and it's a two-man race and the President will be running against him, talking about him all the time? Or was this an unusual, rare --

MR. McCLELLAN: The President will continue to talk about his agenda going forward for the country, and he will continue to talk about the -- talk about the differences in approaches.

Q And will he continue to reference Senator Kerry all the time?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think you can expect that he will continue to talk about his two highest priorities, winning the war on terrorism and strengthening our economy; and he will continue to talk about the choices we face when it comes to addressing those highest of our priorities. And he will continue to talk about the difference -- the choice that the American people have, come next November. The President -- you've heard him say he looks forward to a spirited campaign and a spirited discussion of the issues.

Q Does the President want to really get to the bottom of the cause of 9/11? If he does, why would he limit his interview with the commission to one hour and for other officials, and, stonewall on documents?

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm glad you brought this up. This administration has provided unprecedented cooperation to a legislative body in the 9/11 Commission. We have worked closely with the commission in a spirit of cooperation. And you only have to go back -- and I would appreciate it if you would report some of the facts of the type of access we have provided to the commission. We have provided the commission access to every bit of information that they have requested, including our most sensitive national security documents. And the commission chairman has stated such --

Q Well, the commission certainly is not satisfied.

MR. McCLELLAN: -- and as far as the President, the President looks forward to meeting with the chairman and vice chairman and answering all the questions that they want to raise.

Q Why don't you just open the books and get to the truth? The American people deserve it.

MR. McCLELLAN: Did you not hear what I just said, Helen? Have you not looked at the facts? I think you need to quit reading some of the coverage and look at the facts.

Q You just said, "all the questions they want to raise." That means he's no longer going to limit it to an hour?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, that's what it's scheduled for now. But, look, he's going to answer all the questions they want to raise. Keep in mind that the commission --

Q If they're still asking at one hour, he'll still answer them?

MR. McCLELLAN: Keep in mind that the commission has already had access to all the information they requested, as I just pointed out, including our most sensitive national security documents. That's what I'm talking about when I'm talking about unprecedented cooperation. And the commission has also -- yes, let me finish --

Q The issue is whether he's limiting it to an hour --

MR. McCLELLAN: Let me finish, Mark.

Q -- and I'm asking a very simple question. If they're still asking questions at one hour --

MR. McCLELLAN: I think it's important to point out the fact. Mark, let me finish. Mark, can I answer? Let me finish. It's important that we point out these facts when we talk about this issue, because the facts have not been pointed out. The facts have not been pointed out. But the President -- I mean, the commission will be meeting with the President, after having talked for hours on hour with White House and senior administration officials. We've provided more than 2 million pages of documents; we've provided more than 60 compact disks of radar, flight and other information; more than 800 audio cassette tapes of interviews and other materials; more than 100 briefings, including at the head-of-agency level; more than 560 interviews. Dr. Rice met with the commission recently, and even though only five members of the commission showed up, she sat down and visited with them for some four hours.

Q I appreciate that. You reported all that when you first told it to us. I'm asking --

MR. McCLELLAN: No, I don't think it was widely reported.

Q Forgive me, I take responsibility for what I report, and I reported it.

MR. McCLELLAN: I understand you -- I understand. But I take responsibility of talking to everybody here.

Q Okay. All the questions that they have, he's going to answer. If they're still asking at one hour, is he still going to answer?

MR. McCLELLAN: I just said that the President will answer all the questions that they want to raise. I think that's important to point out. I mean, it's important to point out the unprecedented cooperation we have provided to this legislative body. We have worked very closely with the commission.

Q -- when?

MR. McCLELLAN: Still working on the exact time for that, working with the commission.

Q Should we expect it soon?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, I mean, soon. They have to -- they're going to complete their report by the end of July now, so --

Q Let me just ask this again. You're going to -- you're committing the President to answer every question raised by the panel in that interview with him?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President looks forward to answering all the questions that they want to bring up.

Q Which might mean that it would last longer than an

hour.

MR. McCLELLAN: Look, he looks forward to the meeting. Let's let the meeting take place. Obviously, keep in mind everything that the commission has already had access to, everybody the commission has always talked to, and now they're coming to the President to ask some questions of the President -- or the chairman and vice chairman will.

Q I just want to clarify that you said that the --

MR. McCLELLAN: No, no, I understand.

Q -- President will respond to all of the questions the panel wants to raise.

MR. McCLELLAN: Absolutely, of course. Of course.

Q Personally?

MR. McCLELLAN: Of course. And keep in mind that what we're talking about here is a seven-eight month period. Not eight years. Now, these threats didn't happen overnight. These threats have been building for some time. But this President has taken action to do everything we can to make sure something like September 11th never happens again. He is strongly committed to making sure that this administration works closely -- continues to work closely and cooperatively with the commission to make sure that if there's anything else that they can bring to our attention to help us prevent attacks like that from happening every again, then we have that information.

Q Scott, purely from a PR point of view, how do you respond to a criticism launched by Senator Kerry yesterday who said, "The President finds time to go to a rodeo, but he doesn't have more than an hour for the 9/11 Commission?" -- wouldn't you

acknowledge that, however well you think the administration, the President, and however unprecedented you think the cooperation is, isn't he vulnerable to some criticism --

MR. McCLELLAN: Suggest -- look at the facts. I mean, I'll just point out the facts. Not suggesting; I'm pointing out the facts.

Q We would never suggest you do anything else, Scott. But my point is, don't you think that there might be some kind of PR problem for the President when his chief challenger can say, you've got time to go to a rodeo, and you don't have time for the 9/11 Commission?

MR. McCLELLAN: That's why it's important for everybody to report all the facts and the type of cooperation we have provided to the commission, and the type of access we have provided to the commission. It is unprecedented. But in terms of those remarks, it appears that he does not want to let the facts get in the way of his campaign. The facts are very clear. This administration has provided unprecedented cooperation to the 9/11 Commission, and provided access to every single bit of information that they have requested.

Q Not unprecedented, I'm sorry. From Watergate on --

MR. McCLELLAN: Go look at the chairman's recent comments, Helen. I mean, I'll be glad to go back through those.

Q The only reason I won't accept the word "unprecedented" is because, as I pointed out to you once before, President Ford actually testified in open session before the House Judiciary Committee --

MR. McCLELLAN: Provided access to our nation's most sensitive national security documents?

Q Well, it depends on what aspect of --

MR. McCLELLAN: Provide more than 2 million pages of documents? Provided access to hundreds of administration officials?

Q So, but answer my question. When the President of the United States goes up to Capitol Hill, sits down in public session before an entire, full committee, and says, give me your best shot, how does the President sitting down for one hour --

MR. McCLELLAN: Look at the facts of what we've done. Well, no, but keep in mind, you're looking --

Q We're talking about the President's time.

MR. McCLELLAN: No, no, no, you're missing the point, that the commission has already had access to everything that they've requested, including our most sensitive documents. They've already sat down and visited with White House officials and senior administration officials. And now they'll have an opportunity to come to the President, and ask any question that they want to. The President is glad to answer their questions.

Q So your view is that all the cooperation you've given -- the White House has given up to now makes it so that really an hour of the President's time should be sufficient for them to get what they need out of him?

MR. McCLELLAN: The President is going to make sure, as we have, that they have all the information that they need to do their job.

Q Scott, just to make sure we're on the same page --

Q Scott, I think what's puzzling everybody is why don't you just say, instead of saying he's staying for an hour, why not just say he's going to sit there until the questions are answered?

MR. McCLELLAN: I said he's going to answer all their questions.

Q In one hour.

Q Where is this one hour --

MR. McCLELLAN: I'm not negotiating here from this podium with the commission.

Q Nobody has asked -- Scott --

Q -- one hour, is that what you're saying?

Q We're asking you to explain why there is this limit of an hour. Why not simply say -- forget the hour; the President is going to stay as long as he's needed?

MR. McCLELLAN: I think there are a lot of things that I pointed out. Go back to what the commission has already done, and then they will be sitting down with the President to visit with the President. And obviously, we're talking about -- we're talking about a seven-to-eight-month period here that they're going over. They're already going to have much of the information they need. Now they'll be coming to the President to ask some questions of him.

Q Scott, since it now seems like the time --

MR. McCLELLAN: Putting you next, Mike.

Q Scott, since now seems like the time is negotiable, the President will now answer for as long --

MR. McCLELLAN: I didn't say that. (Laughter.) Obviously, you work with the commission and you come to an agreement on the format and the setting for it. But I'm just stating a fact -- the President will answer all the questions they want to raise.

Q I'm sorry, we all think you said it, so you said it. Okay? Is that a deal?

MR. McCLELLAN: Putting words in my mouth? Just report what I said, is what I would appreciate.

Q What you said doesn't make any sense, Scott. I mean, you're saying he'll answer all the questions --

MR. McCLELLAN: Hold on. Norah has the floor.

Q All right. Go ahead, Norah.

MR. McCLELLAN: It's not free-for-all Tuesday.

Q Now that the time limit has changed with the President, is also under negotiation the number of members who will be able to meet with the President? Because you've said -- you just said the commission has already had access to everything they have requested. But, in fact, the full commission is requesting to

meet with the President, all the members, not just the chairman and the vice chairman.

MR. McCLELLAN: Look, he will sit down -- he looks forward to sitting down with the chairman and the vice chairman. I pointed out to you that Dr. Rice made herself available to meet with all the commission; only five members showed up. There was another National Security Council official where only, I think, four showed up. There has not been one single commission member who has participated in every interview. I mean, they depend on others to provide them information. And so you have to look back at past practice and keep that in context, as well.

I encourage you all to go out and report all these facts and the American people have a clear understanding of the type of cooperation that this administration has provided to the commission, because it is unprecedented, it is very much in a spirit of cooperation, it is very much in a spirit of making sure that the commission has all the information they need to do their job and do so in a timely manner.

Obviously, when you're talking about legislative, executive branch, there are principles involved on certain matters. But we have bent over backwards to make sure they have all the information they need to do their job.

Q Just to cross a "t" on Norah's question, you referred to answering all the questions the panel has, answering all the questions the commission has. I thought that that meant more than the chairman and the vice chairman --

MR. McCLELLAN: The meeting will be with the chairman and vice chairman. That's what --

Q Will it be for one hour or will it last -- (laughter).

MR. McCLELLAN: We've been through this. I mean, I'm not

looking at -- keep in mind -- I think it's important to report the facts of all the access that they've already had to information, which has been full access; all the access they've had to White House officials and administration officials; all the material that has been provided to them. And now they're coming to the President of the United States. Obviously, the President's most solemn obligation is the protection of the American people, and this President is acting to do everything we can to make sure something like September 11th doesn't ever happen again, by taking the fight to the enemy. And we're talking about -- we're also talking about a seven-eight month period, not an eight-year period. But these threats did not happen overnight, but this President is confronting them to make --

Q Why does he complain all the time, then --

MR. McCLELLAN: -- because he never forgets September 11th.

Q Will the President apply a different standard and a different response to the intelligence commission that he appointed when he comes to talk with them?

MR. McCLELLAN: What do you mean?

Q Well, are these the same rules and arrangements by which he would testify --

MR. McCLELLAN: You're talking about an executive appointed independent commission --

Q Right. Are these the exact same --

MR. McCLELLAN: -- and that's -- obviously, that's just getting underway. And we're going to work -- the President has directed the administration to cooperate fully with that independent commission. And that's what we will. But you're

jumping ahead of yourself at this point.

Q That's right, you're setting a precedent.

MR. McCLELLAN: You're jumping ahead of yourself at this point. That commission is just getting underway.

Q I'm jumping ahead of you, because you're setting a precedent with the President's --

MR. McCLELLAN: The President has directed the administration to cooperate fully with the independent commission.

All right, one last one.

Q Okay, so he will only testify for one hour -- that's a "yes"?

MR. McCLELLAN: Well, that's what has previously been discussed with the commission. But I'm saying the President, of course, is going to answer all the questions they want to raise. I think that you all should make that distinction.

Q It's scheduled for an hour; it might go longer.

Q It might go longer?

MR. McCLELLAN: Again, from this podium I'm telling you that the President, of course, will answer all the questions that they want to raise.

Thanks.

END

10:10 A.M. EST