

**The White House**  
**Office of the Press Secretary**

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**Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, 12/20/2010**

**James S. Brady Press Briefing Room**

12:44 P.M. EST

MR. GIBBS: Mr. Feller.

Q Thanks, Robert. A few questions on START. Can you give us your updated sense of where we stand? Does the White House feel that it has -- still has the votes?

MR. GIBBS: The White House believes that before Congress leaves town, that the Senate will ratify the New START treaty.

Q So are you confident ultimately you'll have the votes or right now is it still in play?

MR. GIBBS: Look, obviously, the President and the Vice President continue to communicate with senators in order to ensure that they have the most up-to-date information. Obviously you heard last week I think a pretty compelling endorsement from General Cartwright, the Vice Chair of the Joint Chiefs, speak to one of the misconceptions about the impact of preamble language on our missile defense posture. And I think that's been dealt with rather effectively.

We were asked over the weekend whether Senator Kyl or Senator McConnell's opposition impacted passage and I don't -- I have not talked to anybody here who had them as "yes" votes at any point in this process anyway. So their statements in my mind don't impact passage.

Q Are the concerns that you're still hearing at this point from senators who have not committed are ones that you consider to be substantive in nature?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, we have -- as I've said here before, there have been 18 committee hearings on this; a thousand questions asked and answered; a treaty that's been on the Internet for eight months. If there are senators with substantive questions, we can have anybody that they want to speak with them about those questions. We feel very confident that all of their questions have good answers.

Again, General Cartwright is the expert on the chair -- on the Joint Chiefs staff on missile defense. And when he stands in this room and says that there are no concerns with preamble language on missile defense, that's a weighty endorsement for what's in the treaty.

Q Can you give us an update on the President's week ahead, as best you can tell right now? Specifically -- (laughter) --

MR. GIBBS: The question I got from the President. (Laughter.)

Q Specifically on "don't ask, don't tell" signing and --

MR. GIBBS: Yes, my sense, without having a specific time at this point, is that "don't ask, don't tell" will be signed -- the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" would be signed by the President likely on Wednesday morning.

Q Morning?

MR. GIBBS: Morning. So that gives you a sense of the parameters of our week ahead. I anticipate that -- I don't know the size of the event, but I think there are a lot of people that are interested in seeing it.

Yes, sir.

Q So, Robert, just a little bit more on START, Senator Kyl, he said over the weekend that, "snookered on missile defense, tactical nuclear weapons verification." You're not worried he's going to influence some other Republicans to vote against this?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, I think his views on that aspect of our treaty have been very well known. Again, the expert in the U.S. government on those issues was -- is General Cartwright. And I think he was very clear -- and I think there was an amendment over the weekend to strike some of the language in the preamble, and it lost fairly convincingly.

So, again, I think if there are those with questions about the impact of or the effects of any aspect of our policy as it relates to the START treaty, there are many people in this government that can answer those questions. It's our strong belief -- again, as enumerated by General Cartwright -- and I think as you see when we were in Lisbon as NATO endorsed our missile defense policy; at the same time they're arguing for the ratification of the START treaty. So it's clear that the treaty and missile defense are not in competition with each other.

Q Can I ask one other thing? Bill Richardson is in North Korea. Are you expecting to hear back from him? Are you going to get a report on --

MR. GIBBS: I don't --

Q Apparently there's some -- he may have gotten an agreement --

MR. GIBBS: He is on a private trip. It is not one that is in any way sanctioned by the U.S. government.

Q Sanctioned by CNN. (Laughter.)

Q So with the move on "don't ask, don't tell," what is the White House's message to service members who may be serving right now who are in the closet, gay and lesbian, or service members who have been discharged for being openly gay or lesbian? As of Wednesday morning, can people who are gay and lesbian in the service be open about who they are? As of Wednesday morning, can those who have been discharged reapply?

MR. GIBBS: Look, Jake, I think there are a series of implementation and legal issues that lawyers in this building as well as in the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice are working through, and obviously working through a longer and larger implementation policy process once the President signs the repeal into law. I don't have -- I don't -- I wouldn't -- not want to be in a position to at this point give that legal advice.

Q As for START, Condi Rice, the former Secretary of State, has come out in favor of the START treaty but she has said with caveats that the Senate should make clear and in an accompanying resolution that the preamble language that some think links missile defense with this treaty, it should be made even clearer in this resolution that there is no linkage. Because she says sometimes in her experience the Russians have taken language, even non-binding preamble language like in the START treaty, and used it to justify an argument or a point of view. Does the administration have any issue were the Senate to take that sort of step?

MR. GIBBS: I think, Jake, we'd have to look at the wording of a resolution. Again, we -- our view and the view of not just those that negotiated the treaty but more importantly those that are our implementers of the missile policy, missile defense policy, believe strongly that the language does in no way inhibit any of our actions.

Q But don't -- haven't Russians leaders made comments indicating that they interpret it differently?

MR. GIBBS: Our policy on missile defense and protecting Europe and protecting the United States is not done with Russian sign-off. We have a -- for many years, a missile defense shield for Europe and for the United States was a theoretical exercise. At Lisbon, it became a realistic missile defense shield for Europe and the United States based on a phased adaptive approach constructed by General Cartwright and others that make what we have always wanted a genuine reality.

That's -- again, that's not done with Russian sign-off. That's the policy that our government thinks is best for our partners and allies in Europe and for the protection of the people of the United States.

Q And regarding the letter that the President sent to senators over the weekend on Saturday about -- enumerating or elaborating on the commitment to missile defense, to all four phases of missile defense, one response from a Republican was that, that's great that they're telling us, but had they also told the Russians. Are the Russians aware that President Obama is committed to four phases of missile defense?

MR. GIBBS: Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Q You talked about how the President and the Vice President are still providing up-to-date information I guess to lawmakers who have questions or concern about START. Why did so much of this -- whether it's START or DADT or the tax cuts -- end up being in the final minutes of the fourth quarter, getting all of this done, all of this jammed into this short period of time? What happened that led to this?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I don't -- "don't ask, don't tell" is an issue that's been argued for 17 years, so I don't -- I'm not sure anybody has -- I'm not sure anything -- maybe you're an Eagles fan, and there's a different fourth quarter analogy that -- I don't --

Q In terms of getting it done -- I'm saying in terms -- there's so much that has --

MR. GIBBS: A few people got that. I appreciate that. (Laughter.)

Q I'm not an Eagles fan, but the fact that so much is trying to get crammed into --

Q Unnecessary. (Laughter.)

Q Sorry. Patriots.

MR. GIBBS: Giants fans on this side --

Q But the fact that so much has been --

MR. GIBBS: Patriots -- where are you from?

Q New England.

MR. GIBBS: Okay, all right. I was going to say, just wanted to make sure --

Q Well, I'm not from there but --

MR. GIBBS: Oh, you're not from there --

Q Long story. I lived there. A complicated story.

MR. GIBBS: Go ahead, I'm sorry. We digress. (Laughter.)

Q This is not going to be --

MR. GIBBS: We digress.

Q Go on and tell us. (Laughter.) Go on.

Q But why did it come down to this, where so much was trying to get done in this short period of time?

MR. GIBBS: I don't -- I guess I don't understand. I mean, you mentioned the tax agreement. The tax agreement, we -- there wasn't a resolution to it before Congress left for the elections. The START treaty didn't get a vote before we left for the elections. But again, I don't -- maybe I'm not totally understanding the point that you're trying to get me to respond to.

Q We'll move on from there. (Laughter.) How does the President feel -- the fact that going into -- after the election, there were so many questions raised about whether or not the President could get all of these things that he wanted to get done, done before the end of the year --

MR. GIBBS: Not just all -- I think any.

Q Or any of them. And I think Jake wished you good luck when you ticked off all the various items. What is --

MR. GIBBS: And an Eagles fan. (Laughter.) Go ahead.

Q So what is the President's sense now as he sits back --

Q Two of them have been defeated, for the record. (Laughter.)

Q But the fact that he was able to get --

MR. GIBBS: You should see the email the President sent Jake. (Laughter.)

Q The fact that he was able to get the tax deal and the fact that he was able to get DADT, and you seem very confident about START, what is the President's feeling now?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, I think first and foremost, the President believed that each of these things -- and I will say this, too -- the President believes strongly and is disappointed greatly that we have yet to get the DREAM Act passed. But I think in each of the instances that you're talking about, whether it's the tax agreement, "don't ask,

don't tell," and what I believe will be passage and ratification of START, I think you'll see strong bipartisan majorities in support of issues that are important to the American people -- reducing the threat of nuclear weapons, reducing -- ensuring that taxes for middle-class families don't go up.

I mean, I think there is a lesson of the importance that these issues have with not just those on Capitol Hill but with the American people, and that two parties can and should work together to get things like that done, whether it's in December of the end of a two-year Congress or in January, the first month of a two-year Congress.

Q Is the President expressing any sort of sense of vindication that you would say looked to sort of defy some of his critics?

MR. GIBBS: No. You know, again, he is focused on getting our remaining priorities finished before the end of this session.

Chip.

Q Robert, as a former Eagles fan, are you suggesting -- (laughter) -- are you suggesting that getting START through the Senate is a bit like scoring four touchdowns in seven minutes?

MR. GIBBS: No, I was not understanding the fourth quarter analogy that Mr. Lothian was making.

Q Why does Congress and the President and Washington generally act like a college kid and wait until the last minute to get everything done?

MR. GIBBS: I don't -- again, I don't -- I think when you do your two-year retrospectives you'll see that we got a lot done prior to the end of this session.

Q But all the papers are being handed in at the very last second right now.

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

Q You don't agree?

MR. GIBBS: Look, again, I think we're very proud of what we've accomplished in the last two or three weeks. I don't -- I think the notion that somehow all of what we've accomplished in the last two years has been done in the last two or three weeks is to forget a lot of things that got accomplished.

Q What is the President doing today? Is he still working --

MR. GIBBS: And I'm a Cowboys fan and I'm not rooting for the Eagles, just for the record.

Q Is the President still --

MR. GIBBS: Anybody a Redskins fan here? (Laughter.)

Q No, this is Washington. (Laughter.) Is the President working the phones today --

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q -- and does he believe he's actually changed minds on this?

MR. GIBBS: I believe the President has made calls, and made calls over the weekend on START, on "don't ask, don't tell," and on the DREAM Act; that actually goes back more than just the past weekend. Again, I think the President believes that -- obviously that he can make a set of arguments around those issues that are why they're important for our country to get them done now. And obviously if there -- as I said earlier, as it relates to START or other things, if there are issues in which people have questions, we are certainly happy to provide answers either through the President or the President could have other people call them.

Q Are there any Republicans he has spoken to who at the end of the call have said, okay, you've got my vote?

MR. GIBBS: I'm not going to get into that but we may share that at the end.

Q Can you say who he is calling on START today?

MR. GIBBS: Senators. (Laughter.)

Q You're sending us a hint, though, that he has actually changed some minds. I'm not as dumb as I look.

MR. GIBBS: Senators. (Laughter.)

Q Okay. One last question. On the question of whether this is -- whether the Republican motivation here is political, how do you respond to Lindsey Graham's contention that the entire lame duck has been poisoned, and did that suggest to you that he has a political motivation for opposing this?

MR. GIBBS: Opposing START?

Q Yes.

MR. GIBBS: Again, I think each person should make up their mind and base their vote on the merits of each of the individual issues, whether it's the tax agreement as we spent a couple of weeks debating, whether that's the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell," whether that's the ratification of the START treaty -- all of which I think you can see there are enormously compelling arguments for.

Obviously, the tax agreement preserved tax rates for middle-class families. "Don't ask, don't tell," as we've talked about here on a number of occasions -- and I think very importantly the argument that you heard from the Joint Chiefs and from the Secretary of Defense, which is the notion that either Congress or the courts, one of those two institutions was going to overturn this policy. And the question about how it was going to be overturned and the implementation of that new policy was very much determined by who overturned it. And that's why the President and the Secretary of Defense and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs believe that doing that through a legislative body, rather than through a court, was an enormously important.

And as it relates to the START treaty, you have the secretaries of state -- the last five for the last five -- the last five secretaries of state for Republican Presidents who have come out in favor of this, people across the political spectrum who believe this is simply the right thing to do.

So our hope is that everybody will make the determinations on each of these -- on each of their votes on each of these issues individually and on the merits.

Wendell.

Q To continue this football metaphor -- (laughter) -- do you think the Republicans are basically trying to run out the clock until they have more members of the Senate next year to deal with START?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, this is a -- I don't think they -- START is going to be voted on before Congress leaves town. And this is a treaty that has -- that was negotiated over the course of many months, signed in April in Prague by the two Presidents, and up for review and inspection since then -- not to mention the debate that has been had on the floor exceeds the time of debate for many treaties in the past.

Plus, it's a little vexing to figure out how somebody can say in largely the same breath that they're concerned about what the preamble does to missile defense, but they haven't had enough time to look at the treaty. I mean, it's either one or the other, but it can't be both. That doesn't make a ton of sense.

I think that -- again, I think because of the importance of getting this done, the importance to our foreign policy and to reducing the number of deployed nuclear weapons that each of these two countries has pointed at each other, it's important to get this done now.

Q See the President on Air Force One after a Wednesday signing ceremony?

MR. GIBBS: I don't know if it's Wednesday or Thursday. Sometime around then is my guess. But I would not at this point harbor to make that any more specific than probably one of those two days.

Q And will he likely -- will we be able to see him before he --

MR. GIBBS: It is entirely possible.

Yes, ma'am.

Q No football metaphors. (Laughter.) You seem to be stopping short of saying that the Republican opposition on START is political, and yet you're also saying that all substantive objections have been met with an answer. So if you think it's political, why not come right out and say it?

MR. GIBBS: Well, no, no -- look, there can be substantive disagreements. My point is simply that if I had a question about our posture on -- or the impact of any language on START, the person that I would want to talk to would be the person in charge of missile defense for the United States. In that case, that's -- the preeminent expert on that in the Joint Chiefs is General Cartwright, and I think he was powerful on -- and has been for many months -- on what the language in the preamble does and doesn't do.

Q You deny this notion that Republicans just want to deny the President a victory?

MR. GIBBS: Look, again, that's for them to decide what their opposition is. Again, I think there's an incongruence with some that have said that they oppose the treaty because they haven't had enough time to debate it, which I don't think is matched by the facts of either how long -- how many hearings have been had, how long it's been on the Internet, how long it's been debated on the floor.

Those are the same people that are making the arguments also that -- even in some of the same statements -- that they have concerns about missile defense. And it appears incongruent to me as to how one could determine if they haven't had enough time, how they've determined that missile defense is the problem.

Q I'm just curious, why did the President not come out on camera on Saturday after the vote to repeal "don't ask, don't tell"?

MR. GIBBS: He I think was busy probably in the Oval Office working on calls on START.

Q He just couldn't spare five minutes? I mean, I just wonder if there was any sensitivity to Republican concerns about "don't ask, don't tell," and also in the context of START. Was that any reason why he didn't --

MR. GIBBS: No, again, as I said earlier, I think -- and the President believes that individuals -- senators should make determinations on the issues and the merits of those issues alone and not -- not as a group of issues.

Jonathan.

Q Some Republicans like Senator Corker have suggested -- have proposed creating a date-certain, early next year, say, in February, for a START vote and said that that would satisfy a lot of the griping about process and the lame duck. What do you think about that?

MR. GIBBS: Again, Jonathan, the time that has been allotted to debate this treaty exceeds the most previous treaties that have been on the floor of the Senate. It's been something that's been up on the Internet for eight months. I don't think there's a lot of credence to the arguments that there isn't enough time to get this done.

Q But given their anger about lame duck consideration and the danger of having a treaty rejected on the Senate floor, are you --

MR. GIBBS: I don't think -- I don't think it will be rejected.

Q Okay. You mentioned the President making phone calls. Can you say if there are any other efforts being mustered from the White House, perhaps from Department of Defense, from General Cartwright again or --

MR. GIBBS: Let me check in and I'll send that around.

Q And finally, on the CR, are you guys seeking -- even if it's a short-term CR, are you going to be seeking money for implementation of health care and Wall Street reform in that?

MR. GIBBS: Let me get some guidance from Legislative Affairs on that.

Yes, sir.

Q Robert, when you answered Wendell, were you answering in the idea of a news conference this week before he leaves? Is that what you said --

MR. GIBBS: That's certainly possible.

Q Certainly possible. Did he cancel plans to go to the Wizards-Heat game on Saturday?

MR. GIBBS: He did.

Q Why?

MR. GIBBS: He was -- he spent most of Saturday in the Oval working, and continued to do so in the evening in the residence and thought it was -- despite being a really good game -- a better use of his time.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Is the administration concerned that the Census report shows a very significant population shift from Democratic-leaning, Rust-Belt states to Republican-leaning, Sun-Belt states? Is there a concern about how this will affect the President's reelection? You stand to, with the Northeast and the Midwest, lose --

MR. GIBBS: I have not seen the exact numbers, but I think the electoral vote shift is -- I heard somebody say, six, right?

Q Well, they could lose up to 10 seats in Congress, the Midwest and the Northeast. Is that --

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, let me -- I guess let me rephrase my question. Are you looking for the congressional impact or are you looking for the presidential electoral impact?

Again, the Census determines -- the Census based on obvious population shifts determines reapportionment and representation in Congress. I think the notion that somehow -- I think it's six electoral votes that would have been different in 2008 if the same states were won in 2012 doesn't mark a dramatic shift that would be anything that anybody would be even remotely fearful of.

Q But even 10 seats in Congress wouldn't worry you?

MR. GIBBS: Well, again, it's a little bit like worrying about the weather. Again, the Census determines -- where people live determines that number of seats that represent them. That is -- that's the way the law is written, and I would say I don't think that shifting some seats from one area of the country to another necessarily marks a concern that you can't make a politically potent argument in those new places.

Q And did North Korea restrain itself more than or less than the White House expected?

MR. GIBBS: All I'll say on the exercises by the Republic of Korea is that they are our strong allies and we support them.

Q How does the failure of the DREAM Act affect the President's desire to bring up broader immigration reform next year?

MR. GIBBS: It doesn't impact that. Obviously, the President, as I said earlier, is disappointed that this was a piece of legislation with bipartisan support and with more than a majority. But because of Senate rules is not something that will be passed in this Congress.

Q Does he still think something broader is achievable?

MR. GIBBS: It is because we have to deal with this problem. We have seen the legal effect of states trying to write their own immigration laws -- that the courts don't find that compelling. They find that appropriately -- the appropriate venue for that to be the federal government. And the only way we're going to solve the many vexing issues out of immigration is to deal with it at a federal level.

Q Also does the President have a view on whether and how same-sex spouses of LGBT service members should be recognized by the military?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I think there are a series of implementation issues that will be tackled as a result of this.

Q Can I just follow up just I asked about the same thing? Who is tackling these issues? Is it just the Pentagon or is it --

MR. GIBBS: No, I think it's -- as I said -- I think my answer -- I said these issues are being looked at by lawyers in Pentagon, Justice -- some lawyers here, obviously.

Q Is there a task force? Is there an implementation --

MR. GIBBS: Let me check on that.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Jimmy Carter thinks America is ready for a gay President. Does President Obama think America is ready for a gay President?

MR. GIBBS: I haven't asked him.

Q And also on the gay rights issue, the President said recently that "attitudes evolve, including mine" -- he was referring to gay marriage. Is he laying the groundwork in some sense for taking a different position than he has in the past on gay marriage?

MR. GIBBS: Sheryl, I don't -- I would -- I think we had a fairly extensive conversation about this around -- in the transcript around that interview and I'd point you to that.

Q Robert --

MR. GIBBS: And I would say this: I think the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" is a significant accomplishment for many that had sought for more than a decade to repeal a policy that they, like the President, believed was unjust.

Q And just to follow, so does the legal -- does the vote on Saturday make the President think in any way that the country is perhaps more ready for gay marriage, or for a gay president, for that matter?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I have not talked to him about the -- how the vote on Saturday impacts that. I think it is -- I think if you -- I mean, clearly if you look at -- on the issue of repealing "don't ask, don't tell," there is clearly a shift in voter attitude, was broad bipartisan support in public polling for the repeal of a policy that didn't make any sense, and on Wednesday it will no longer be the law.

Q And you mean to tell me that nobody talked to the President here about Jimmy Carter's comments? Hasn't come up?

MR. GIBBS: I mean to tell you that nobody that I know of has talked to the President about Jimmy Carter's comments.

Q Merry Christmas.

MR. GIBBS: Happy New Year.

Q I have just two questions. The Center for Immigration Studies reports that in 2008 and 2009, 2.4 million immigrants, legal and illegal, arrived while U.S. citizens were losing 8.6 million jobs. And the question: Why are we importing a million workers a year when 17 million Americans can't find work?

MR. GIBBS: Well, Lester, as you point out, we have a policy problem that has to be dealt with through comprehensive immigration reform, and that's the only way we're going to deal with it.

Q Second question: The Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson wrote -- and this is a quote, and it's his quote, not mine -- "Press Secretary Robert Gibbs picks fights with both conservative talk radio hosts and 'the professional left,' which uniformly backfire." Do you believe Gerson is wrong? (Laughter.)

MR. GIBBS: I think maybe I should try out for speechwriter.

Yes, go ahead.

Q You're clever. (Laughter.)

Q Robert, on the CR -- on the CR, Republicans not only don't want any new spending, they want to go back to 2008 pre-Obama levels. Is that a dealbreaker for the President? Is that totally unacceptable?

MR. GIBBS: I don't know what the -- you're not suggesting that -- to make sure I understand -- not that the 2008 levels are in the current CR, right? I mean, look --

Q They want to go back before that.

MR. GIBBS: Right. Look, I think that the -- not surprisingly, we would have grave concerns, if you look at some of the aspects of what you're talking about. Making some huge cuts in things like education at a time in which we have real competitiveness issues in this country and throughout the world. Now is not the time to do some of those things.

Obviously we have to make some and are going to have to make some very tough decisions to get our fiscal house in order. That's why the President outlined a three-year spending freeze on non-security items in the budget. And I think we're going to have to make some of those tough decisions, and I think over the course of the next couple years we're going to have a debate about -- a further debate about, for instance, tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires, which comprise a level of funding greatly in excess of the difference between 2008 levels in spending and the CR.

Q Robert, questions on two terrorist events. The stabbing of the two women Christian missionaries in Israel -- is the U.S. involved in looking into that situation?

MR. GIBBS: On that I would -- I don't have any information on that. I would point you over to the State Department on that.

Q Statement of condemnation or --

MR. GIBBS: Again, I don't know the specifics of it. Again, I'd point you over to State on that.

Q The roundup of suspected terrorists in the United Kingdom, anything on that?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, we have -- obviously we are in constant contact with our allies in the United Kingdom and have -- we do not know of any connection with something that might be going on here as it relates to those arrests, but we continue on a daily basis to communicate with and share information between these two governments.

Glenn.

Q Robert, my assumption is Governor Richardson is not choosing Pyongyang as a vacation spot. He cleared his trip with the State Department before he went. Is he going to give sort of a debriefing on his --

MR. GIBBS: Not that -- I know of no plans to do that. Again, Governor Richardson is traveling as a private citizen.

Q So did he have any -- he cleared this with the State Department before he went. Did the State Department --

MR. GIBBS: I would refer you to the State Department on that.

Q On some of the START calls, are you getting -- are you speaking with some -- any reluctant Democrats or is it mostly Republicans?

MR. GIBBS: He's made calls to both parties, but I would say that most of his focus is on Republicans.

Q And how many --

MR. GIBBS: And I -- you know, I do not know -- I know that also the Vice President has been tasked to do a number of -- head up the passage of START, so I don't know who -- all who he's been calling, but I assume a lot of it is Republicans too.

Q Well, apart from General Cartwright, the President and the Vice President, what other administration officials have sort of been conferring with the senators?

MR. GIBBS: On START? I know that on certain occasions, as I've said before, Director Clapper has answered questions on these. Obviously Secretary Gates has been involved in this. The Secretary of State has been involved in this. This is a priority that -- of not just the President's, but of all those that have equities in our country's foreign policy.

Q Has he prevailed upon any of the former secretaries of state and national security advisors to make calls?

MR. GIBBS: They have -- I've been told they have -- they were making calls before the President and Vice President met with them. And I understand it, they continue to do so.

Q Is the President unhappy with Governor Richardson's trip? Did he ask him not to go? Does he feel it's counterproductive?

MR. GIBBS: Again, I'm not going to get into his trip.

Q Robert, back on "don't ask, don't tell," you mentioned the implementation process that is underway. And there's a provision in the law that states that repeal won't take effect until the President, the Defense Secretary, and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff certifies the U.S. military is ready for repeal. During this interim period, is the administration at all open to the possibility of issuing some kind of executive order to stop further discharges until repeal takes effect?

MR. GIBBS: Again, as I said earlier in this session, there are a host of implementation and legal issues that are being studied throughout the government.

Q Well, what do you say to a service member who is discharged under "don't ask, don't tell" between now and the time that repeal actually takes effect? What would you say to them?

MR. GIBBS: By the time it's signed into law or when it takes effect?

Q The time between then and the discharges stop.

MR. GIBBS: Again, there are -- I would say to that person right now that there a host of lawyers looking at all of these legal issues. But I would also say to that person that when the President walks into -- the President will sign into law the repeal of that policy on Wednesday.

Q One more question on this topic really quick. How long do you anticipate it will take until that certification takes place?

MR. GIBBS: Again, that is -- I don't think -- again, I think that's -- that is part of what groups of people are going to be working on. But I would say this. We know that because of the attitudinal studies that the Pentagon conducted, we know that the vast majority of those serving in our military don't believe this in any way will be disruptive. And I think that points to an implementation process that won't be overly burdensome.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you, Robert. Going back to START, I'd like you to address one of the concerns that's been raised in the twilight hours of the debate on it, and that is, were the Russians to pull out of the START agreement over missile defense, would the U.S. still proceed, in Senator Kerry's words, within the parameters of START? Would they still honor their side of the agreement?

MR. GIBBS: Let me get some guidance from Cartwright on that.

Q Will you?

MR. GIBBS: Yes.

Q Thanks, Robert. There's a lot of tensions in Africa inside the Ivory Coast. President Gbagbo (inaudible) after election laws. What's the White House message to President Gbagbo? And could you consider a military option with the French?

MR. GIBBS: I would say that, as it relates to the election in Côte d'Ivoire, that the -- President Outtara was the rightly and justly elected President, and that we stand ready to impose targeted sanctions individually and in concert with our partners around the world on President Gbagbo, on his immediate family, on those that are associated with him, and who continue -- those who continue to cling to power illegitimately. That election was clear. Its result was clear. And it's time for him to go.

Yes, sir.

Q What is your response to critics of the 9/11 First Responders Bill who say the \$7 billion contained therein has not been closely scrutinized enough and that it should wait until the next session of Congress?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, the administration endorsed the 9/11 bill in mid-August. We put out a statement of administration policy before the House vote and we did so before the Senate vote. I think there are plenty of safeguards to ensure that that money isn't abused. But what's important is that we ought to take care of those who took care of us. That's why every Democrat in the Senate voted to move that legislation forward. I can't speak to why every Republican opposed it.

Sam.

Q Back on START. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about just how personal this issue is to the President. I mean, nonproliferation has been a big issue of his going back to the Senate. I mean, is this -- clearly he wants this as part of his legacy as he's forming it. Can you just tell me about -- a little bit about how personal it is?

MR. GIBBS: Well, look, obviously this is an issue that goes back to, as you mentioned, even before he was sworn in in the Senate, having conversations with Senator Lugar, who, I would point out, along with Senator Kerry, have been great champions of both this issue and this treaty. And I don't think we would be where we are on getting it passed without both of those two leaders.

I think, though, the President is less concerned with his legacy and that sort of thing that he is with, first and foremost, the reduction of the risk, the -- both the risk of having too many weapons and the risk of those weapons falling into the hands of somebody that seeks to do great harm to millions of innocent victims.

It's important for -- it's important we have a verification regime. It's important that we continue to have a productive relationship with Russia.

Q Is this personal for the President?

MR. GIBBS: It's personal but it's far greater than that. It is, as he and virtually every --

(Cell phone rings.)

MR. GIBBS: Who was that? I just have to know who --

Q It's usually on vibrate. I don't know how it got there.

MR. GIBBS: You can change that, Mike. (Laughter.) It's not the vibrate I meant -- you can change the ringtone. (Laughter.)

Q Only his son can do it. Only his son can do it, and he's not here.

MR. GIBBS: Yes, I was going to say. Yes, Mike's son, please put it on something cool tomorrow and call him around this time.

No, I think this is an issue that's far greater -- of far greater importance to the nation and to the world than it is to him personally. That's not to say that it's not important to him personally. It just demonstrates just how important and vital this is for our relationship.

Q Thank you, Robert.

MR. GIBBS: Bill, and I'll come back to you.

Bill.

Q Robert, can you give us a quick readout on the labor meeting Friday?

MR. GIBBS: Nothing, honestly, more than the written readout that would have gone out from that.

Q One of the complaints that I heard from a couple of the presidents before they went in was that there were not clear lines of communication between the White House and the labor unions. Was anything set up, a liaison or --

MR. GIBBS: Let me check on that. I think there's pretty clear lines on that, but I will check and see if that was -- to what degree that was brought up and discussed.

Yes, sir.

Q Robert, Vice President Biden said that U.S. troops will be out of Afghanistan by 2014, "come hell or high water." Is that U.S. policy?

MR. GIBBS: Well, I think I would point you to what was decided in Lisbon just a few weeks ago, that we will, much like we have in Iraq, transfer primary security of Afghanistan to the Afghans, as NATO and ISAF agreed, by the end of 2014, which would end our combat commitment in that country.

Q That's different than being completely out, though, by 2014.

MR. GIBBS: Again, I think we've -- I think what the Vice President was discussing was our combat role.

Q Last question on that. He said also that the July 2011 withdrawal would not be a token withdrawal. How does he know that, given that that -- the size of that withdrawal is supposed to be based on conditions on the ground?

MR. GIBBS: It will be determined by conditions on the ground, but I think that the Vice President knows, as many do here, that the President made -- the President, in conjunction with the military, worked through a plan a year ago that they think is achievable to meet the date of July 2011.

It is -- there are many that believed that we would not meet our dates in Iraq, and we did.

Thanks, guys.

END

1:28 P.M. EST