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Veterans of Foreign Wars

Remarks as delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C., Tuesday, March 11, 2003.

Thank you, Ray [Sisk, VFW Commander in Chief].

That was a very generous introduction. I almost think I should quit while I am ahead.

It's a real honor to be here and to be invited to address this distinguished organization. There are some important issues on everyone's minds these days. And I appreciate the opportunity to speak about those issues, especially with this audience.

For more than a century, the VFW and the VFW Ladies Auxiliary have done vital work for our nation -- supporting the men and women in uniform, assisting veterans, cultivating civic responsibility among young people, and (perhaps most importantly of all) keeping alive the memories of how and why the United States of America has been involved in wars that were waged on soil far from our own shores.

You, the members of the VFW, are the best-qualified people to keep those memories alive. You served in those wars. You served honorably and bravely -- from the beaches of Normandy and Iwo Jima, to Inchon and Pork Chop Hill, to Khe Sanh and the Ia Drang Valley, and a thousand other places where Americans

have fought and sacrificed in defense of freedom.

In those conflicts, you faced different enemies and different circumstances. But one thing was constant: You did not fight for love of war or of conquest. You fought to free people from tyranny and to restore peace to the world. [Applause]

You fought in far-away places because it was the best way to protect America and the people back home. And thanks to your efforts -- and the sacrifices of hundreds of thousands of other Americans like you -- our country was spared the devastation suffered by so many others during the 20th century.

And every time, when the dust settled and the guns were quiet -- as Secretary of State Colin Powell put it so eloquently -- "the only land we ever asked for was enough land to bury our dead.... That is the kind of nation we are." [Applause]

Today, we are engaged in a new kind of struggle. Today's enemy does not arrive with flags flying and bugles blaring. He does not announce his plans, or when and where he will strike. Today's enemy is found in shadowy terrorist organizations and among the outlaw regimes that harbor them, that provide them training, and that supply them with weapons and money. If their objectives seem unclear, you cannot say that about their hatred. They hate us and everything that we stand for. And this enemy poses a mortal threat to the American people -- as the whole world learned on September 11, 2001.

In the aftermath of that shocking event, President Bush pledged to destroy this terrorist network and its sponsors, beginning with al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. And thanks to the brave men and women of our Armed Forces -- and the extraordinary capabilities of the U.S. military today -- the people of Afghanistan have been liberated, and the terrorists have been deprived of one of their most important sanctuaries.

A new government that represents the people of Afghanistan has taken office, led by President Hamid Karzai. They are working to rebuild that devastated country, with the help of the United States and a coalition of 49 other countries from around the world.

Our military success in Afghanistan has contributed to other successes in the war on terrorism, in places as far removed as Singapore and Chicago, Illinois. A Moroccan detainee, for example, who was captured in Afghanistan and interrogated in Guantanamo, led us to three Saudis planning terrorist attacks in Morocco -- all of whom were subsequently arrested, including one top al Qaeda operative. Another example was the discovery of a videotape in a safe house in

Afghanistan, which led to the arrest of an al Qaeda cell in Singapore that had been planning to attack a U.S. aircraft carrier and U.S. personnel in that Southeast Asian country.

Indeed, the loss of their sanctuary in Afghanistan has made it possible for us to capture several of Bin Laden's key lieutenants who fled to neighboring Pakistan. One of the first was Abu Zubaydah, whose capture last year led to the detention of Jose Padilla, who had come into the United States with the intention of planning and coordinating terrorist attacks in his own country.

More recently, two key figures in the September 11 plot were captured, Ramzi bin al-Shibh and, most importantly, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Mohammed's capture just ten days ago is a huge blow to al Qaeda. He has been called "the Brain" of al Qaeda, and he was the mastermind of the September 11th attacks. Moreover, he was a busy man. He was busy organizing new attacks on us and on our friends. By getting him out of circulation, we have undoubtedly prevented some other attacks. And we have new leads that should help us to disrupt and destroy the al Qaeda network even further.

So the global war on terror goes on. But it will be a long struggle -- because it is not just about one man or one terrorist network. It is about intersecting networks of terrorists and the support that they get from terrorist states.

Our successes in recent months in capturing terrorists demonstrate clearly that the effort we have mobilized at the same time to disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass terror has not distracted us from the hunt for Al Qaeda. But make no mistake; these are not two separate issues. Disarming Saddam's weapons of mass terror is a second front in the war on terrorism.

We know that terrorists are plotting greater catastrophes than the attacks we saw on September 11th. And we know that they are seeking more terrible weapons -- chemical, biological, and even nuclear weapons. In the hands of terrorists, these so-called "weapons of mass destruction" might better be called "weapons of mass terror." They present us with a threat that could be orders of magnitude worse than September 11th, involving tens or even hundreds of thousands of casualties.

The diplomatic debate centers on Iraqi non-compliance with 12 years of U.N. resolutions -- 17 of them by now -- that have required Iraq to eliminate its weapons of mass terror and abide by the agreements that concluded the Gulf War in 1991. In the years since, there has been no real compliance by Iraq and no genuine cooperation. Instead, we have had delay, dishonesty, and deception.

Some people may be impressed, but we are not. We know what real disarmament looks like. In recent years, the United States has assisted other countries – including several former republics of the Soviet Union -- that wanted to eliminate their nuclear weapons. Those governments took the initiative. They were cooperative and helpful. That has never been the case with Iraq.

Instead, U.N. weapons inspectors have been thwarted at every turn. They have been forced to play a game of hide and seek in a country the size of the state of California, chasing after mobile biological labs that were designed to be hidden, and seeking weapons hidden in chicken farms and garages. The inspectors have been subjected to intimidation. And perhaps most important, they have been denied full and free access to Iraqi scientists, who know where the weapons are, but who have been threatened with death and worse, if they cooperate with the inspectors.

Resolution 1441 gave the U.N. inspectors powers that previous inspectors did not have – the power to take Iraqis and their families outside of the country so that they could be interviewed free of intimidation. The U.N. inspectors have never exercised that authority. To the contrary, in the face of the refusal of any Iraqi scientist to be questioned in "private" interviews in the U.N. offices in Baghdad, the inspectors agreed on January 21st to hold interviews instead at two hotels in Baghdad, the Al Hayat and the Rimal.

That is a kind of cruel joke. No one who understands the way that the Iraqi people are intimidated into silence could possibly think that any Iraqi could speak free of intimidation when their families are still inside Iraq.

But you would have to be exceptionally gullible to think that interviews conducted in a Baghdad hotel are private and not monitored. Certainly every one of the Iraqis who was interviewed in those hotels would assume that every room was bugged and monitored by Iraqi intelligence.

I said earlier, "punishments worse than death." Americans may have difficulty comprehending what it means for these men to be interviewed in circumstances where they had every reason to expect that the slightest misstep on their part would be picked up by Iraqi intelligence agencies. The possible consequences are unimaginable, thank heavens, to us.

Saddam Hussein heads a regime – to name one example -- that forces doctors to cut off the ears and sometimes even the tongues of people who have disobeyed the regime or spoken out against it. They don't merely punish individuals; they punish their families. There are credible reports that the families of Iraqi nuclear

and chemical and biological scientists have been moved to special locations to ensure that their knowledgeable relatives are intimidated into silence.

To put it mildly, these are not the actions of a regime that is actively cooperating with the requirement that it disclose all of its weapons of mass destruction. More important, these are not the actions of a regime that has any legitimate claim to be ruling the Iraqi people.

The fact is, that while people march peacefully in Europe and here in the United States and elsewhere against war, and while diplomats speak in the Security Council about their desire to avoid war, Saddam Hussein is waging war on his own people. He has been doing so for decades, sometimes on a large scale, sometimes on a smaller scale. But if it becomes necessary to use force to remove his regime, it will not be a war against Iraq, it will be a war to liberate Iraq. [Applause]

As events have unfolded, our President has not flinched. He has been a model of moral courage. During his press conference last week, he was crystal clear: "The only acceptable outcome," the President said, "is the one already defined by a unanimous vote of the Security Council: total disarmament."

The choice is not ours. It is Saddam Hussein's. If he will not disarm voluntarily, we will do it for him by force, and his regime will join the Taliban in the dustbin of history. [Applause]

As we sit here, a quarter-of-a-million U.S. and coalition troops are on the scene and ready to get the job done. They are prepared to demonstrate once again that America's greatest asset is what General George Marshall called "the best damned kids in the world." [Applause]

In the event that force must be used, our deployment will have the support – in one form or another -- of a formidable coalition. The number of countries involved will be in the substantial double digits. I might say that some of them would prefer not to be named now, but they will be known with pride in due time.

No doubt you have heard a great deal about governments that are NOT part of our coalition. We still have hopes that they too will finally realize what is at stake and that time is of the essence.

But whether those countries join our coalition or not, they should understand one thing: The United States of America has the ultimate responsibility to act to ensure the peace and security of our country and our people. [Applause]

Vice President Cheney spoke to your convention last summer, and he said, "The entire world must know that we will take whatever action is necessary to defend our freedom and our security."

Of course, we would like to have the unanimous support of all nations of good will. And it is important for the United Nations to demonstrate that it means what it said when it passed Resolution 1441 – its 17th resolution on Iraq since the Gulf War. We do not want to see the credibility of the U.N. go the way of the League of Nations, which failed to act to stop the slide into World War II.

Many of you served in that terrible war. You know firsthand what it cost the U.S. in terms of lives and treasure. You saw what it cost others around the world ... 40 to 50 million dead ... cities destroyed ... great nations laid waste Near its conclusion, President Roosevelt asked Winston Churchill how the Second World War should be remembered. Churchill replied that it should be called "the Unnecessary War."

Unnecessary, Churchill explained, "because there never was a war more easy to stop." For years, the world had allowed the Nazis to build a war machine – in direct violation of international agreements. For years, nothing was done – despite the warnings of Churchill and others, and in spite of the fact that courageous leaders could easily have put a stop to that threat when it was still small and building.

Of course, there were those in the 1930s who – fearing war, as any sensible person must do, and eager for peace -- opposed taking a firm stand. Tragically, their actions paved the way to a much larger war.

Today we hear calls to give Saddam Hussein more time. But we should ask: How long should we wait? And what are we waiting for? Should we wait until the frontline members of our coalition are breaking under the strain of standing up to Iraq? Should we wait until the people inside Iraq who are ready to help us give up hope? Or should we wait until Saddam Hussein finishes preparing weapons of mass terror -- weapons that will further endanger our troops, or which he can use on the Iraqi people as he has in the past?

Those very weapons are the source of our concern. The issue is not about Iraqi oil. If the United States had wanted access to Iraqi oil, we could have dropped our whole policy 12 years ago, lifted the sanctions, and let Saddam Hussein keep his weapons of mass destruction.

No, if there is going to be a war, it will be a war to disarm Saddam's weapons of mass terror. But it will also be like wars that you've fought in, a war of liberation, a war to secure peace and freedom not only for ourselves, but for the Iraqi people who have suffered so long under one of the world's most brutal tyrannies.

Two weeks ago, I was privileged to spend an afternoon with hundreds of Iraqi-Americans in Dearborn, Michigan. I wish you could hear some of their stories, so you could appreciate what those people and their families have gone through and how much they and their relatives back in Iraq want to be freed of Saddam Hussein and freed of the offensive weapons that threaten to terrorize the Middle East and the world.

Over and over, we hear reports of Iraqis here in the United States who manage to communicate with their friends and families in Iraq, and what they are hearing is amazing. Their friends and relatives want to know what is taking the Americans so long. When are you coming?

In a meeting last week at the White House, one of these Iraqi-Americans said: "A war with Saddam Hussein would be a war for Iraq, not against Iraq."

Another leader at that same meeting, Emad Dhia, told us, "Please stop the war that is going on inside Iraq – the war that Saddam Hussein has been waging against the Iraqi people for years!"

His plea reminds us of something John F. Kennedy – another VFW member and a hero of World War II – said: "The mere absence of war is not peace."

The Iraqi people understand what this crisis is about. Like the people of France in the 1940s, they view us as their hoped-for liberator. They know that America will not come as a conqueror. Our plan – as President Bush has said – is to "remain as long as necessary and not a day more."

The Iraqis also recognize that the economic and political reconstruction of their country will be difficult. It will take their best efforts, with the help of the United States and our coalition partners. But they are driven by the dream of a just and democratic society in Iraq.

In conclusion, I would like to ask for your continued support. The war on terrorism is a tough and dangerous business. It is a war we did not seek, but it is also a war we cannot avoid. I would ask you to keep our men and women in the Armed Forces in your prayers. You have been there. You know the risks. You also know the stakes.

Winning this war will require courage on the part of many. Courage is a virtue that enables some people to go above and beyond the call of duty – the courage to act without regard to one's own safety, even in the face of mortal danger.

General Omar Bradley described it as "the capacity to perform properly even when scared half to death." In truth, as you know much better than most, courage is the capacity to overcome fear, not the absence of fear.

And I can tell you this: The young people in the U.S. Armed Forces today are as courageous and dedicated and well trained as any men and women who have worn the uniform of the United States.

I want to assure you that, like the predecessors they admire -- namely many of you – they are prepared to act with extraordinary courage. They showed the world what they are made of in Afghanistan. If asked, they will take the fight to Saddam Hussein. They will get the job done.

I would ask you and all Americans to give them your full support and let them know that the people of the United States are with them, today and every day. We owe it to them. And as you know from your own days in uniform, they need to know the country is behind them.

I thank each of you for what you have done in the past and for being here today in a show of solidarity. May God bless you. May God bless our men and women in uniform. May God bless America. Thank you. [Applause]



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