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Memorial Service for Ayatollah Muhammed Baqir Al-Hakim

Remarks as delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Arlington, Virginia, Saturday, September 27, 2003.

Dr. Ali Al-Attar: Today we are honored to have with us a senior member of the Bush Administration, Dr. Wolfowitz, who joins us to honor the memory and vision of Ayatollah Al-Hakim for a free, just, and independent Iraq.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it's a privilege and a great personal honor to introduce to you the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Dr. Paul Wolfowitz. [Applause]

Wolfowitz: Thank you, Dr. Al-Attar. After so many distinguished speakers have spoken, and with the hour late, perhaps I should simply sit down. But I wouldn't do that because I feel it's very important to speak here on behalf of President Bush and the government of the United States and the American people. If I may presume -- and if you permit me to begin the way I learned to begin speeches when I was the American ambassador to Indonesia -- Salaamu aleikum warahmat allah wabarakat hu.

I believe on an occasion like this it's also appropriate to recite a beautiful Muslim prayer that I learned while I was in Indonesia, the Fatiha. If you will forgive my Arabic, let me give it a try. I believe it is a sentiment that can be warmly embraced not only by Muslims but also by people of all faiths.

“Bismillaah ah-Rahmani ar-Raheem / Al hamdu lillaahi rabbil ‘alameen / Ar-Rahmani ar-Raheemi / Maaliki yaumid Deen / Iyyaaka na’abudu wa iy yaaka nasta ‘een / Ihdinas siraatal mustaqeem Siraatal ladheena an ‘amta’ / alaihim Ghairil maghduubi’ alaihim / waladaaleen Aameen.”

“In the name of God the most compassionate and the most merciful, praise be to God, the cherisher and sustainer of the world, the most compassionate, the most merciful, master of the day of judgment, thee do we worship and thine aid do we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom thou has bestowed thy grace, thou whose portion is not wrath and who go not astray.”

I feel humbled by the opportunity to join you in honoring the memory of Ayatollah Muhammed Baqir Al-Hakim. I personally feel deprived by his death because I had long looked forward to meeting this man, admired him from a distance over many years by his courageous opposition to the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. And I was pleased in more recent times, but not at all surprised, when he returned to Iraq after so many years in Iran and demonstrated that he was a true Iraqi patriot not beholding to any foreign country.

He was an inspiration, as you've already heard this afternoon, to so many people of different faiths

and different confessions. His family had already suffered so much under the regime of Saddam Hussein and done so much for the liberation of Iraq. As you've heard he became head of SCIRI (the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq) after his brother Mahdi Al-Hakim was assassinated in 1988. And for the Americans who are here or maybe watching this on television, just stop and think for a moment what it means in one family that he was the sixth brother who died at the hands of this criminal regime, and one of 63 brothers and nephews. And unfortunately it is not a unique Iraqi story.

His untimely death deprived Iraq of an important leader at a time when men like him are badly need. We thank God that his brother Abdelaziz Al-Hakim, the last surviving brother, is alive and with us, and leading SCIRI in playing an important role on the Iraqi Governing Council. And I salute him, Dr. Chalabi, and Mr. Pachachi, and Mr. al-Jafari and Mr. Barham Sali and all of the members of the Governing Council, who are risking their lives today in the cause of a free Iraq.

And it's appropriate today also for a moment to honor the memory of many other brave men and women who have given their lives over the years and more recently for this noble cause. Akila Al-Hashimi, who died just two days ago, was assassinated by Ba'athist criminals, a member of the Governing Council who -- in spite of a long career in the Foreign Ministry of Saddam Hussein -- gave her life for the cause of a free Iraq. Mr. Sergio de-Mello of the United Nations who played such an important role in setting up the Governing Council, who gave his life a few weeks ago. For the more than 300 American and British and other Coalition soldiers who've died in the liberation of Iraq, and since the fall of Baghdad through various causes, including hostile action. Most recently in just the last day, Army Specialist Michael Andrade of Bristol, Rhode Island, and Sgt. 1st Class Robert Rooney of Nashua, New Hampshire. And they join the tens of thousands of Iraqis who have paid with their lives for opposing that horrible, sadistic, vicious, and brutal regime.

And yet, as President Bush said in his statement when he heard about the bombing in Najaf, the murder of Ayatollah Al-Hakim, "along with the murder of many innocent men and women gathered for prayer," the President said, "demonstrates the cruelty and desperation of the enemies of the Iraqi people." And if anyone needed proof about the commitment of the Iraqi people -- in particular the commitment of the Shi'a of Iraq -- to a peaceful and democratic Iraq, they had that proof when tens of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of people came out in peace to greet the funeral procession of Muhammed Baqir Al-Hakim's funeral procession. Like them, we say today, "Peace on Hakim's soul," that we should "think not of those who are killed in the way of God as dead. Nay they are alive with their Lord and they have provision." (from Surah 3, the Koran)

Two months ago, I went to Free Iraq myself for the first time in a dozen years. I had the privilege of being in Northern Iraq in 1991. What I found inspired me beyond words.

But one of the highlights of my visit came on a drive through Karbala. We had been cautioned by some, I might say, ignorant people here, that we might not be welcomed entering this holy Shi'a city. In fact, we were not only welcomed, we were greeted warmly. There were crowds of people going about their daily business. And when they saw this American motorcade working its way through traffic, they gave us the "thumbs up" sign. When we came in sight of the gold domes of the mosques of Abbas and Hussein, one member of our party rolled down the car window -- I couldn't do it; it was an armored car -- he heard people shouting out, "Thank you" and "Bush is good" and "Hooray, Marines."

So much has been accomplished in Iraq in so short a time. It is a tribute to the courageous men and women of our Armed Forces and to the Iraqi people and their many martyrs in their thirst for freedom.

A few days ago, my boss, Secretary Rumsfeld, told a Congressional committee about the accomplishments of the free Iraqi people. And he compared it to the situation in Germany after World War II:

- In less than five months since the liberation of Baghdad, virtually all Iraqi hospitals and universities have been reopened, and hundreds of secondary schools are ready for the start of classes.
- A new Iraqi army is being trained, and more than 40,000 Iraqi police are conducting joint patrols with Coalition forces. In contrast, it took 14 months to begin creating a police force in post-war Germany – and 10 years to begin training a German army.
- And as I have pointed out myself to the Congress, those Iraqis now -- just by their numbers -- constitute the second largest member of the Coalition for a free Iraq. And sadly by their casualties, some 50 dead already, they also constitute the second largest member of the Coalition.
- The independent Iraqi Central Bank has been established and a new currency announced in just two months. In Germany, it took three years to achieve that. But in October of this year, a new currency will go into circulation – a currency that will no longer bear the ugly face of the butcher. [Applause]
- The Iraqi Governing Council has appointed an Iraqi cabinet of ministers, something that took 14 months in Germany, and among those ministers is an astounding number of people with advanced degrees. I had the privilege this week of meeting the Minister of Public Works, a Kurdish woman, and meeting the Minister of Electricity, a Sunni man. Well, I must say, neither one of them was eager to be identified as of a particular part of Iraq. They are both Iraqis. And at the World Bank meetings recently in Dubai, I heard the officials of that great international organization said that the Iraqi Ministers constitute one of the most distinguished cabinets anywhere in the Middle East.
- Municipal councils have been formed in all major Iraqi cities and most villages and towns, an accomplishment that took 8 months in Germany. And recently we had the election by secret ballot of a municipal council for the governance of Salah Ad Din, which -- as most of you know, but some Americans may not know -- is Saddam Hussein's own home province.

I saw these achievements coming together when I was in Iraq. And that was wonderfully encouraging. But I saw other things as well, evidence of the incredible crimes of the Saddam regime. I don't have to tell members of this audience how painful that is.

During my trip, I visited the mass graves at al-Hilla. More people were probably buried there than in Srebrenica, which was commemorated recently, and that is only one of dozens and more yet to be found. I went to Abu Gharib prison where we saw what can only be described as an industrial-style execution chamber, where at least 30,000 and perhaps as many as 100,000 people died. I spoke with individual victims who survived, and with families of others who did not.

In the south – in a setting that one of the reporters with us said looks like the landscape of the moon, a desert the size of the State of New Jersey, created by one of Saddam's great crimes against the environment and crimes against humanity. We met with a surviving remnant of Marsh Arabs, a people whose ancient culture and way of life were ruthlessly destroyed and deliberately destroyed when Saddam drained the marshes. Today there are less than 200,000, and perhaps much less than 200,000, of a people that numbered half of a million just 10 years ago.

I saw the cruelty that was visited on Kurds and Turks, Christians and Muslims, Sunnis and Shi'a, in a regime of equal opportunity oppression. All the people of Iraq suffered horribly under that regime.

But I was especially moved by what I observed and heard about the cruelty to the Shi'a, who throughout history had been no strangers to suffering, in Iraq and elsewhere. I was reminded of Imam Hussayn and the sacrifice of his followers at Karbala, and how – more than a thousand years ago – they rose up against tyranny. And I was reminded again of what happened in 1991, and how the Shi'a rose up with great courage against Saddam, and how tens of thousands perished.

The one bright spot I remember from that horrible tragedy of 12 years ago concerned a group of some thirty-to-forty-thousand people, who had sought refuge in the area of southern Iraq occupied by our forces, but who were in imminent danger of being killed when our troops withdrew. When I learned of their plight, I informed my then-boss, Dick Cheney, who at the time, as you know, was the Secretary of Defense. And he immediately directed the U.S. military to intervene and to get those people out of Iraq when we withdrew. Some of them had lived in camps in Saudi Arabia ever since, waiting for the day, this day when it would be safe to return home again.

Others of those same people have been able to resettle in the United States and elsewhere. And I was privileged when I was in Baghdad to meet with one of them, who left a successful business in San Francisco to join our Special Forces on a heroic 2,000 kilometer march through Iraq, capturing many key positions and ultimately occupying the road between Baghdad and Tikrit.

He and others are participating now in the post-war rehabilitation of the country. To call it reconstruction is a misnomer. It is a country that has to recover from 35 years of deliberate and vicious misrule, 35 years of allocating the resources of the Iraqi people not for their welfare, but for torture chambers and prisons, for palaces and weapons of mass destruction. Now Iraqis have a chance to own their own resources and to rebuild their lives in peace and freedom.

Of course, for too many Iraqis, liberation came too late. What can we do for them? What can we do for our own soldiers who died for the liberation of Iraq? What we can do for them and Said Muhammed Baqir Al-Hakim is to honor their memory.

And it is useful on this day to think back to another day in this country just about 140 years ago, when the leaders of the United States came together to remember the sacrifices of thousands of Americans on a battlefield just 100 miles north of here in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In 1863, during our terrible Civil War, during July of that year, Union and Confederate armies fought for three days in what was the decisive battle of the war, although the war went on for another two years longer. More than 50,000 Americans were killed and wounded in those three days. And when President Lincoln went to dedicate the battlefield at Gettysburg, what he said has echoed through the years -- words I still go frequently to the Lincoln Memorial to read engraved in stone in that great building.

Among those famous words Lincoln said: “[W]e cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far beyond our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us,” Lincoln said, “it is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced...” -- words I might say that apply today to the hero that we honor – “that this nation under God” -- and he was speaking out of my own country – “shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

I believe that Lincoln's words are a precise guide for how we can best remember those who died in Iraq and those who continue to risk their lives in Iraq, including Said Baqir Al-Hakim and the many others who died in Najaf. We can honor their memory by completing the task of building a free, democratic, independent Iraq, a country with a government that is of the Iraqi people, by the Iraqi people, and for the Iraqi people.

The late Ayatollah Muhammed Baqir Al-Hakim said -- I read -- “We don't want an Islamic state.

What we want is a democratic state that respects religion.” And he said, unlike Iran, Iraq must have an inclusive multi-ethnic and democratic government. He is an Iraqi, but those are sentiments shared by all Americans.

As President Bush said, “A free, democratic, peaceful Iraq will not threaten America or our friends with weapons. A free Iraq will not be a training ground for terrorists or funnel money to terrorists or provide weapons to terrorists who would willingly use them to strike our country. A free Iraq will not destabilize the Middle East. A free Iraq can set a hopeful example,” the President said, “to the entire region and lead other nations to choose freedom.”

It is a noble goal, a goal of historic importance. And like most such objectives, it will take time. It will require patience. But I have seen with my own eyes that the Iraqi people share this vision. And so do our troops and the British troops and those of our other Coalition partners. They understand that the battle for Iraq is now the principal battle in the struggle to rid the world of terrorism. It is part of a global struggle to build a world in which decent people -- Muslims and Christians and Jews and people of all religions -- can live and work and raise their families without fear, free to study and to worship God, the Father and Creator of us all.

Recently, an American couple received a letter from their son, 1st Lieutenant John G. Gibson, who is stationed in Baghdad with the 1st Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry, 82nd Airborne Division. It was Lt. Gibson’s birthday, and he wrote:

“[T]he hardship endured by myself, my men, my battalion, and this Army are not in vain.... Our work is not done I see things here, on a daily basis that hurt the human heart.... However, I see the hope in the eyes of many Iraqis, a new hope for a chance to govern themselves in a new way of life. I think that they are on the cusp of a new adventure.”

I cannot say enough about the thousands of young American and British and Polish and Spanish and Danish and Italian and many other men and women who, like this writer, have dutifully gone off to war in a foreign country. They are best that the United States has to offer and the best that our Coalition partners have to offer. And they are joined by wonderful, brave, young Iraqis.

Some of them will not be coming home again. But the sentiments this young man expressed are shared by most of his fellow soldiers and by millions of people who will never set foot in Iraq. They know what is at stake.

One of those who fell in battle – a young soldier named James Kiehl -- was buried recently in his hometown of Comfort, Texas. He was 22 years old. He left behind a wife and a little child. But when he was called to duty, he told his father, “I’ve got a job to do, and I’m going to do it. I’m not going to raise my son in fear of terrorism. And this,” he said, “is the first step in eliminating it.”

James Kiehl gave everything he had to that cause. On the day of his funeral, a thousand people in that small town turned up at church. Later, his aunt wrote a letter that described the scene as they left the service to go to the cemetery. She never intended that letter to be seen by anyone but a few friends. But one of those friends posted it on the Internet, and a copy found its way to the Pentagon. And I asked her permission if I could read a few lines from that letter today.

“When we turn off the highway,” she wrote, “suddenly there were teenage boys along both sides of the street about every 20 feet or so, all holding large American flags on long flag poles, and with their hands on their hearts.... It continued ... for two-and-a-half miles.... Some held signs of love and support.... [T]he love and pride from this community who had lost one of their own was the most amazing thing I’ve ever been privileged to witness.”

So as we leave here today, I pray that we will remember the sacrifices of all those – Iraqis, Americans, Coalition troops, and U.N. personnel, and this great leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Hakim – who gave their lives for a free Iraq. And the best way to honor their memory is to finish

their work. It is a great and noble cause.

And let there be no mistake. The killing of Said Baqir Al-Hakim -- and of Akila Al-Hashimi and Sergio de-Mello and Michael Andrade and Sgt. Robert Rooney -- was the work of committed terrorists, who seek to create havoc in Iraq, to destroy every movement forward, who oppose freedom and liberty and would take Iraq back to the torture and killing of Saddam Hussein or some other tyranny.

They will not succeed. Iraqis will not go back. The road ahead is the road to peace and stability. Brutal killings aimed at dividing people will only solidify their commitment to build a better future together.

And in this, rest assured that they have the full support of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair and the United States and the United Kingdom and our other Coalition partners. We and the Coalition are the allies of those Iraqis, the overwhelming number of Iraqis who are fighting for a free and democratic future for their country.

So in the memory of Ayatollah Muhammed Baqir Al-Hakim and all the others who have given their lives for a free, independent, and democratic Iraq, let me close with the last line of Lt. Gibson's letter home, which comes from an old Irish blessing: "May the rain fall soft upon your fields and the sun shine warmly upon your face as the Father holds you safely in the palm of His powerful hands." Amen. [Applause]

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