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Speech

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Remarks to a Delegation of Iraqi Women

Remarks as delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, to a delegation of Iraqi women leaders who were in the U.S. for practical training in the workings of democracy. Mr. Wolfowitz spoke in the Indian Treaty Room of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, Washington, D.C, Monday, July 19, 2004.

If I can comment on a couple of interesting points that I heard before, I think -- when Margaret [Spellings, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy] mentioned the President is used to being surrounded by strong women -- I think we go back to his birth. Barbara Bush, the wife of the first President Bush, is someone who is enormously admired in this country as a woman of very strong character, and obviously a woman who knew how to raise children.

And that is a very important part of what women contribute, I think, uniquely, as well as being in public life. I know it's a special challenge.

Karen Hughes, who was one of the President's closest advisors since the beginning of his political career, spent two years with him here in the White House. And we all miss her. But she made a sacrifice to take her son back to Texas. And that's a challenge, I think, that hits women harder than it hits men.

I'd also agree with what Dina [Powell, Assistant to the President for Presidential Personnel] said. I think women have a special contribution to make, particularly in the Middle East and the Muslim world, both in terms of what I think you probably on average understand better than the average man, but also in another respect -- which is, I think, the test of whether men are ready to face the modern world and ready to truly be participants in a free and democratic society.

The issue is how they treat women. And unfortunately, so far, most of the predominately Muslim countries are not distinguished -- I am being charitable -- in the way they treat their women.

I think the ones that have progressed the most are the ones that have done best. It's not an accident that in Turkey, women have achieved an extraordinary degree of equality. And in Indonesia, where I was lucky enough to be ambassador for three years, women have achieved a remarkable degree of equality.

And I think, as Dina said, the whole world is watching you and watching your country, and I think the role you perform in how Iraq treats its women is going to be crucial going forward.

I feel this afternoon a little bit like I did when I was a professor on the last day of class. And you feel there's nothing left to say, but you hate to see the students leave, and you can't let them go without a few last words of advice.

So let me try a couple. You've met a lot of different people during this week, an extraordinary number, a lot of conversations. I think this was time well-spent. I hope you would agree. Above all, we hope that you're ready to return to Iraq now, to share what you saw and heard about American democracy, and to help build a free and democratic Iraq.

But before you go, I want you to know that you aren't the only ones who benefited from your visit. Everyone that I know who met you was touched in some way. A few days ago, at one event, an American woman said that, after meeting all of you and hearing what you had to say, she believes that you really will succeed in building a new Iraq.

She was very impressed. We all are. We've been inspired by you, by your courage, by your obvious skills and talents and willingness to speak up, by your determination to live in peace and freedom.

You also reminded us of how lucky we Americans are. We've inherited, after two centuries, a remarkable political system, built on the most basic human rights. The ones that Thomas Jefferson talked about in our Declaration of Independence — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

And you gave us an opportunity to think once again about our remarkable Constitution and the importance of our Bill of Rights and what it means to be lucky enough to live in a country, as Abraham Lincoln called it, with government “of the people, by the people” -- and above all -- “for the people.”

It may surprise you, but I'm afraid sometimes we Americans take these freedoms for granted. You reminded us of how lucky we really are.

I don't know whether any of you noticed, but at the press conference at the Capitol Building on Thursday morning, we stood in a hallway between two doors. And over each of them, there was an important quotation.

The one on our left was from the third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson himself. It said, “Man is not made for the state, but the state for man. And it derives its just powers only from the consent of the government.”

And to our right, over the door to the room where we had breakfast, the inscription is from our first President, the father of our country, George Washington. And it reads, “this government, the offspring of our own choice, has a just claim to your confidence and support.”

And as you go back to Iraq, I hope these two inscriptions can contain our best wishes for you -- that the Iraqi people themselves will not forget that they are not made for the state, but the state is made for them, and that their government will remember that it receives its powers from the consent of the people and from them alone. And second, that your government will indeed be (in Washington's words) "the offspring of your own choice," and that it will retain a just claim to the confidence and support of the Iraqi people.

These are fundamentals of democracy. With them, with the kinds of skills you were learning here this week, I think Iraqis will succeed in building the society that we've all hoped for.

We've been honored to share this week with you. I personally look forward to seeing all of you again in Iraq.

But now I'm going to introduce to you four very special heroes who were wounded in the war to liberate your country. They're here today from the hospital with some of their family members.

We were all very moved on Thursday morning, the members of Congress particularly, by what many of you had to say about the importance of what had been accomplished. And I thought the people who most needed to hear it were the soldiers themselves who participated in that liberation. We have four of them here with us today. [Interruption]

They're already over there [in the Oval Office]. Okay, you'll meet them there. We need to move is what I'm being told. When you're over there, I would encourage you to meet them, to talk to them. They've lost arms and eyes and suffered very serious wounds in Iraq.

Two of them will have their mothers there also. Mothers suffer, as you know. And if any of you can get a chance, either in a large group or privately, to go up and say thank you, it means an enormous amount. I think you know that.

Let me say thank you to all of you: "Shukran jazeelan."

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