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# News Transcript

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**Presenter:** Assistant Secretary Of Defense For Legislative Affairs, Powell Moore

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## Senators in DoD Briefing Room Discuss Recent Congressional Delegation to Iraq

Moore: Good morning. I'm Powell Moore, the assistant secretary of defense for legislative affairs. Secretary Rumsfeld had four United States senators as his guests for breakfast this morning: Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Senator Larry Craig of Idaho, Senator Craig Thomas of Wyoming and Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island.

At the breakfast, in addition to the secretary, was the deputy [DepSecDef Paul Wolfowitz], the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [Gen. Richard Myers], Undersecretaries Dov Zakheim [Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)] and Doug Feith [Under Secretary of Defense (Policy), Tom Korologos and myself.

We continue to encourage members of the House and the Senate to visit Iraq and Afghanistan. So far, we've had 74 members of the House, 25 senators who have been there. So this continues to be our policy, to encourage that kind of participation and visiting the troops.

Incidentally, we've had three members of the House who have been there two times. So we've had over a hundred visits to the region.

And with those comments, I'll call on Senator McConnell, who will introduce his colleagues.

McConnell: Come on up.

The senators that Powell was just talking about and Senator Conrad Burns of Montana were in both Iraq and Afghanistan last week. We had a chance to talk to the secretary this morning about what we found, and we thought we would share some of that with you.

First, I know that all of you must have been taught in journalism school that only bad news is

news. But I would argue that in Iraq, good news is news, because if you were there for the last 35 years, you saw nothing but atrocities. Saddam Hussein, as you well know, murdered 300,000 of his own citizens. And if you're an Iraqi, you're probably living in a safer environment today than you were during that period, particularly if you've made a mistake and uttered your opinion on something.

We visited schools. We saw youngsters in the street, who couldn't have been programmed, who were waving at us and giving thumbs-up.

We saw shops springing up all over in Baghdad and in Mosul. We visited with a local council up in Mosul, a provincial council that was actually elected since the fall of Saddam. The commander of the 101st [101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, U.S. Army] up in Mosul said that we had made more progress in Iraq in six months than we'd made in six years in Bosnia. He had also been in Bosnia.

So I think a lot is going in the right direction in Iraq. Security is obviously still an issue, no one denies that, but this country is well on its way to getting on its feet, with American help.

And as you know, the pending business in the Senate today, as it has been for the last week or so, has been that help, both in terms of military assistance and also, extremely importantly, the reconstruction package of \$20 billion, which, of course, is the key to getting the troops home. And the way to get the troops home is to help Iraq get up and get on its feet. In our judgment, that is not by sending them a bill for that. And that will be, of course, the biggest vote we have on this measure, the question of whether it's a loan or a grant, the \$20 billion. We've not yet had those votes. We expect them to be close. But in the end, I hope and expect that this will be a grant, and hopefully, the last grant that we have to make for Iraq.

With that, let me call on my colleagues for some observations and then we'll throw it open for whatever you'd like to talk about.

Senator Craig.

Craig: Well, I will only echo what Mitch McConnell has said. The lights are on in Baghdad. The schools are open. The bazaars are bustling with people doing commerce. There are now traffic jams in the city and across that region. That doesn't speak to a beleaguered situation, it speaks to a people who are now free and wanting to thrive doing the very kinds of things that we take as normal in this country.

And as we saw all of that happening, we were still very sensitive to and aware of the security issue. That situation in Iraq will only strengthen with the increased stability and the increased security. Iraqis are now out policing. They were the police at the hotel the other day. They were the police at the Turkish embassy. We met with those Iraqis who are now in the police force. They're called "the blue shirts" over there. And they're all over and they're very visible, and that's very important because Iraqis in the end clearly want their own people administering the civil justice that is important in that country. I came away from it feeling very positive about a very difficult situation.

Thomas: I guess we all had visions of where we -- what we were going to see, from what we've heard. And I had heard a lot about that there was no plan for after the combat and after the war. The fact is, there is a plan. There was a plan on the minds of the military commanders up in northern Afghanistan, and they were out working with schools, and they were working with hospitals, and so on. There is a plan in Iraq to have a constitution and to have a government, and they have the ministries in place now, and so on. Interesting. And they have advisers over there doing -- one from Cody, Wyoming, was over there doing the -- with the energy, seeking to get the petroleum going again.

So, there is a plan. They're making good progress on that. And I'm very excited about it because the sooner we can get them have their own government, have their own economy, the sooner we can be out of there, and I think that ought to be our goal.

Chafee: Thank you. We had a terrific trip, Senator McConnell hosting us on the trip. And just the fact that we were able to go to Baghdad and to Mosul says a lot. In fact, the secretary of defense was urging us to tell our colleagues to also go, make the effort to go to Afghanistan, go to Iraq. And overflying in helicopters the Ba'athist stronghold of Mosul says a lot by itself.

I was also struck, as an opponent of the war that the people that we did meet with are happy to get the heavy boot of Saddam Hussein off their necks, and that came through very strongly. However, it's all still not a bed of roses. Somebody is still killing us over there. And I think if we're going to turn the corner, as Ambassador Bremer says, we count on human intelligence, and that's a big word for they got to -- the Iraqi people have to rat-out the bad guys. And that's -- I think if we're going to turn the corner, we have to continue to invest in Iraq so that we can count on that human intelligence because that's going to make the difference.

McConnell: Any questions, anyone?

Q: Senator McConnell -- and maybe all of you can respond to it -- Stars and Stripes, the Pentagon-funded newspaper, did a survey of troops in Iraq, and they say that, clearly, half of them have a very low morale. They also go on to say that groups of diplomats and VIPs that go touring in Iraq are basically given a dog-and-pony show; that many troops are not even allowed to talk to you guys as you go out there.

What are your impressions? Did you get a chance to feel the problems that some of these troops are encountering and talk to them on a one-on-one basis? And did you feel that this was in fact somewhat a dog-and-pony show?

McConnell: I didn't see the article, and I'm unaware of the study. But there were at least three things that happened that couldn't have been programmed by people from above.

Number one, they couldn't have programmed the creation of all these businesses springing up in the streets. Number two, they couldn't have programmed all of these kids seeing American military go

by, escorting us, doing thumbs up and waving and smiling. And number three, I don't think they could have programmed every single Kentucky soldier that I met to tell me something that would fit the pattern the leadership wanted.

I thought the morale was extremely high. I met a lot of Kentuckians. For some reason, a lot of Kentuckians volunteer for the military. There were big groups of Kentuckians at every stop. And the only complaint I heard were from a few reservists -- and I'm sure this will probably be the only thing I said that you write -- but a few reservists who were concerned about when were they going home. But not a single one complained about, believe it not, the food. In fact, there was one soldier in Afghanistan who says it's terrific food. Or the kind of things that you would expect. And no one said we shouldn't be here; this is not -- what we're doing is not important.

I thought the morale was exceptionally high among all the Kentuckians that I met with, and I met with a lot of them. And I want to repeat: There's no way all of those people could have been programmed to give me an optimistic view, if they didn't hold one.

Craig: I'll react in a similar fashion. Idaho is not a very large state -- 1.2 million people. I met with 35 Idahoans that are over there, and the only concern I heard was an issue of rotation.

Now, we did get into a discussion on who was hoarding the Starbuck[s] coffee. And one of the guys in Kandahar had a supply of Starbuck[s] and he was not sharing it with any of us. (Light laughter.)

The new Brown & Root [Corporation] food service in Mosul, that's now just up and running -- remember, a lot of these facilities and, therefore, creature comforts, if you will, are just coming online. But the significance about that is that good hamburgers and fries are being served there now, and they're Idaho potatoes. (Laughter.)

Q: Senator Chafee, what was your impression?

Chafee: Yes, I'd like to answer that because I did go there remembering, for us political trivia buffs, what brought down Governor Romney in 1968 --

McConnell: He said he'd been brainwashed. (Laughter.)

Chafee: He said we've been brainwashed -- one word, and it was the end of his campaign. Because he had done to Vietnam back when he was governor and said everything's fine, and it was coming back to haunt him. When they asked him, "How come you didn't know more when you went?" that was the poor choice of words he used. So I had that in the back of my mind; when we go, we're going to get a certain picture.

And you have to work to get beyond that picture. And I can honestly say, as Senator McConnell says -- the first time I saw a bus went by our convoy, we're going in one direction on the road in Baghdad, and a bus full of Iraqis went by, and a hand stuck out the window with a thumbs-up. And with

my neck I did a swivel, and said, well, maybe that's a middle digit in Baghdad, I don't know, but it looks positive! (Laughter.) But then that was repeated over and over again as we -- actually, we got lost going to a school. I think we were lost, anyway. (Laughs.)

McConnell: We were lost. We were lost.

Chafee: We couldn't find the school, and the children coming out. And so that was the strong impression I got. That we can't underestimate the brutality of the Saddam Hussein regime. But there's other issues as to what we voted on, but that -- I'm speaking to that issue.

Q: Just to follow up on that, if you all met with large numbers of your constituents, that would seem to imply that the troops had been in some way screened, since if you would walk into a random group of troops, they would come from 50 states and elsewhere. Did you get a sense that you were getting honest answers from the folks?

Thomas: Oh, I think so. Of course, we didn't spend our time out at the camp, you know, looking at everybody on the street, but they brought in some folks. In my case, from Wyoming, they were young kids, most of them, 18, 19 years old. And they were committed. "We're here to do something, and by golly, we're going to do it." Now, we didn't go out and talk with 10,000 troops. But I tell you what: it's awfully hard to go away from the leadership and the ones we did meet without knowing that these guys are committed to what they're doing. Of course it's not fun to live in a tent for a year, but nevertheless, we didn't hear one word from our folks except that we're here to do our job and we're proud to do it.

Q: There has also been -- well, increasing security problems, a lot of car bombs and that sort of thing. Did you get a sense from the commanders that that is a problem that is growing or something that they have a handle on?

McConnell: Well, let me point out what I think you all have already reported and Senator Craig, I believe, has already mentioned here this morning, that both the attempt to bomb the Baghdad Hotel and the attempt to bomb the Turkish embassy were thwarted by Afghan -- by Iraqi security. Yeah, the bombing was attempted but in many respects was largely unsuccessful. And the security for that was being provided by this growing number of Iraqis who are in this force. No one is denying that this is a problem, but I think the -- they're doing a pretty good job of thwarting those attempted attacks.

(Cross talk.)

Chafee: Could I answer that?

McConnell: Yeah, Lincoln.

Chafee: We did get, while we were there -- the day after there had been a protest against army pay by Iraqi army people, and what was a little bit alarming to our occupational forces there was the coordination of it. This protest happened within 20 minutes of each other all over the country. These --

they couldn't have been spontaneous, because they were within -- we said there was a theory that they were within 20 minutes of each, these protests against some kind of pay issue.

And so there is some concern about increasing sophistication of the opposition. And we're made aware of that.

McConnell: All that issue, though -- I mean, how healthy is that? In a free Iraq, having a protest because you're not being paid enough -- that certainly would have never happened in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. They feel they can go out and complain about pay. That sounds like the United States to me.

Q: Senator McConnell, could I ask you and the other senators to address a different question about Iraq? Lieutenant General William Boykin, the deputy undersecretary, I guess, for Intelligence -- last night tapes were broadcast of speeches that he has given to church and prayer groups. And as I say, the tapes have been broadcast.

He has been seen, in uniform, making these following comments, so there's no question that he -- about him making these comments. He has spoken to a number of church and prayer groups, speaking about his views about the war and his religious views.

He speaks of Muslims. He says, quote, "They're after us because we are a Christian nation." He speaks about his conversations with other -- with Muslims, and he speaks of one where he says, quote, "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol." And he also says, quote, "God, not the voters, chose President Bush."

Since the Senate confirmed him in his position -- and let me digress. He also apparently has now said that he will cut back on making these religious speeches. Nonetheless, as an active-duty military officer and confirmed by the Senate in this role that he has, do you gentlemen feel that it is appropriate for him to make these religious remarks? Do you support the remarks that he has made?

McConnell: I really have not known anything about this before you brought it up. And since I'm really not aware of what he said in detail, I really don't have an observation about it today.

Q: Any of you others? None of you were aware of the comments he's made?

Thomas: No.

Craig: No.

Chafee: Sounds deplorable, though.

Q: Excuse me. Could you please -- we've made a comment, and we'd appreciate it in front of the microphone, sir

Chafee: I'll have to learn more about it, but from what -- if you are reporting -- if that's accurate, to me it's deplorable.

Q: Senator McConnell, yesterday NPR [National Public Radio] had a story that gave the impression that Democrats were somehow being edged out of these trips to Iraq. Can you talk about the process and why there weren't Democrats on this trip?

McConnell: Three Democrats were invited to go with us. Two declined; one accepted and then pulled out right at the end. So we certainly would love to have had them go along. But on the issue, we had a pretty diverse group. Senator Chafee had opposed the war resolution a year ago. And we're sorry they didn't go. We invited them. We wish they had joined us.

Q: All these good things that you say are happening over there, do you think this justifies this kind of use of American military force, to remake another country? And do you think this would be a viable use of American military force in the future?

Thomas: Well, I think certainly the war that we went over there to engage ourselves in is not over. And they're making a transition at the moment. And the element that's most likely to help with the transition happens to be the military. And we're putting our civilian people in there, with Bremer [Ambassador Paul Bremer, coalition Provisional Authority] and others, very quickly. As soon as they're prepared and as soon as we've been able to continue to help the Iraqis -- they now have 40,000 police, they now have their hospitals and their schools, they're doing their military. As soon as it's possible, then our military ought to come home, but until they're able to shift that responsibility to somebody else, they're important to be there.

Craig: I guess my reaction to what we saw and what you've just commented is I'm not sure that we develop a standard policy for all situations. I think we attempt to effectively examine the Iraqi situation, as I think we did, and we apply the resources we have that fit that situation.

Clearly, the Iraqis are nervous about other Muslim nations coming in. You can see the transitional government's reaction to the Turks. And we're going to have to work our way through that. And we think other countries will be coming in now to help us and to help the Iraqis get themselves stabilized.

But clearly, when you have those kinds of resources on the ground -- we've seen some remarkable examples of recovery over there that have been administered by our military. And again, I think you examine all situations in the circumstance of the moment and the time, in relation to the politics of the area, the region, the bordering states -- all of that has to be put together in one. One size does not fit all.

Lt. Col Keck: Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry, but this is all the time we can allow for these gentlemen today because they are very busy. Thank you for coming.

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