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Presenter: Lawrence Di Rita, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs

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EDT

Congressional Delegation Returning From Trip to Iraq

Mr. DI RITA (Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good morning. Please join us.

I'm just going to introduce quickly. We were very fortunate to have this morning members of a congressional delegation that just returned from Iraq. And they came and had breakfast with the secretary. They had a good discussion. The delegation was led by Mr. Upton of Michigan, Mr. Saxton of New Jersey, and Mr. Turner of Texas were with them as well as Mr. Kline from Minnesota and Mr. Houghton of New York. They peeled off, so they're not with us right now, but they did join the secretary for breakfast. And with that, I'll turn it over if you have a few things you want to say, and then we'll take some questions.

REP. SAXTON: This podium reminds me, Dick Cheney came to New Jersey to campaign for me one time, and --

REP. UPTON: Do you need a chair, Jim? I'm going to get a chair.

REP. SAXTON: And we were asked to stand on the landing of the stairs, which had a high railing, and we were both trying to see over. So, hi, guys, ladies. (Laughter.)

We just spent an hour breakfast with the secretary, basically conveying to him what we saw when we were in Iraq. I went two weekends ago. Freddy and his delegation went, I believe, three weekends ago.

REP. UPTON: Well, just literally the day or two before you got there.

REP. SAXTON: And quite frankly, our impressions of having been there in the country for two days and on the entire trip in the region for eight days, we saw a lot of things that are very, very positive. We, of course, talked to Ambassador Bremer, who told us positive things, but then we went out and saw them for ourselves.

We went to schools and saw enthusiastic teachers, saw enthusiastic students. We happened to be there when dismissal time came; we saw enthusiastic parents all wanting to assure us of two things: one, they were glad we were there; and B, please don't leave until this job is finished. And it was an uplifting experience to drive away from that school and see people waving at us and acting like they were really glad we were there.

We also were able to see Ambassador Bremer's -- the evidence of Ambassador Bremer's statements that the electricity was back on. As Jim and I -- Jim Turner and I flew from Baghdad the first night back to Kuwait City, where we stayed, the lights were on all across the country. It was a good feeling to be able to fly south over Basra, know that our British friends were there and know that the folks on the ground had electricity again at pre-war levels and above.

We also were very pleased to meet with General Petraeus in the northern part of the country, at Mosul, and to see the great experience that the people in the northern part of the country are having by establishing democratic organizations, electing elected officials.

Mayors of the towns had already been elected; we met them, we talked with them, we saw their level of enthusiasm. We saw the level of enthusiasm of the security forces that have been put in place, over 1,500 people to act as border guards along the Syrian-Iraqi border. And to see these men and women stand up and tell us how proud they are to be able to do something for their country for the first time in their lives because they volunteered to do it, not because they had to do it, was very uplifting to us.

The kids across the northern part of the country are in great shape. They passed out thousands of soccer balls that say "101st Airborne Division" on them, and the kids love the soccer balls and are loving the opportunity to experience freedom for the first time in their lives.

I could talk for the rest of our time here about all the things that I saw, but let me ask our friends, Freddie and Jim, who traveled -- Jim traveled with us in our group.

REP. TURNER: I think the impression I was left with, in spite of the fact that, you know, terrorist activity is still a serious problem, is that when you get out to visit with the people, there's much progress being made. And you know, when you visit with the Iraqi people, they're educated by and large, they have dreams and aspirations. Just like any other families across the world, they want a better life for their kids. We had a chance to visit with a group of teachers in a school that we had recently refurbished; painted the walls and got them new desks. They were very appreciative of that. And these teachers, they wanted to be sure we all understood that all Ba'athists weren't bad; they had to be a Ba'athist Party member to be a teacher.

But the clear indication that I got from visiting there on the ground is that the Iraqi people have the full capability to establish stability and establish a solid functioning government. There are factions, obviously, in the country that have been out of power; people who want to have their say in the formation of new government. But I think that process will move forward. And I think what you'll see is even though there may be continuing efforts by a small group within the country and some from the outside to commit terrorist acts to basically disrupt the progress, the vast majority of the people are going to want the effort to reestablish a government, a stable government, to be successful. When we visited in the north, we had a chance to visit with some of the newly-elected mayors from some of the areas in the northern region. General Petraeus has led the effort up there to have elections in many of these communities, and we talked to some of these mayors-- very articulate, very intelligent, very capable people, who I'm confident will be able to lead their communities to stability. We talked to some of the folks who work in the newly-formed Iraqi security forces: facilities protection forces, the fire departments; men who had gotten new uniforms and who seemed very proud not only to have a job, but to be contributing to the creation of a stable Iraq. So, when you get down deep into the country, there's great hope there, and I'm confident that we will see stability achieved there.

I don't want to minimize in any way the seriousness of the loss of life. When we were coming back from Mosul into Baghdad, it was the day that the bombings occurred in front of the Baghdad Hotel; several lives were lost. But it was interesting to note that that was the first occasion when we'd seen Iraqi facility protection service members engaged in the fight against those terrorists. And they, in fact, interdicted the vehicles before they actually reached the very front of the hotel where they intended to detonate their explosives. So, I'm confident that if we stay the course, we'll achieve the desired goal, and we'll see stability in Iraq.

REP. UPTON: I'm Fred Upton from Michigan. I led a bipartisan group. We left, I guess it was, two Mondays ago, and came back the previous Friday. We had eight members. We welcome the opportunity to come have breakfast this morning with the secretary and General Myers to hear our impressions of how things were going.

For me, it was my first visit to the Middle East, that region of the world, ever. And we visited a school. We visited with the Governing Council. We went to an electric plant. We talked to teachers, students, parents. We went to Mosul -- in fact, right now, as you may know, Deb Pryce is leading a bipartisan delegation there. I urged her strongly -- in fact, she changed her plans -- to get to Mosul to see a real success. She'll be meeting with General Petraeus within the next couple of days, I know, during her trip there.

But we found a lot of positives. And I would say to a person on our trip, we felt two things: one, that the aid package was important, because that would send the right signal not only to our troops and morale at home -- at home in Iraq, but also the people of Iraq; that in fact, we wanted to turn the government back to the people of Iraq; and second, obviously, the security needs, as well. It's very important that there are now nearly 100,000 Iraqis involved in the security contingent, both in their military and in terms of their police force, and we're looking to see that double within the next number of months. And when those steps are taken, we can, in fact, see the sovereignty of Iraq returned to the people that are there and we can begin to withdraw our troops and get them back home.

But we'll be glad to answer -- we can talk for a long time. We'll be glad to answer your questions on whatever it might be. Go ahead.

Q I'm not looking for the negative, but you all did mention visiting Mosul and you spoke highly. That was a pretty organized area before the war, even, and you know the Kurds have been pretty much in control of that area. Did you visit Tikrit or Fallujah?

REP. UPTON: I did. Yes, I did.

Q Did you find similar positive things in the triangle area?

REP. UPTON: We went to Tikrit, although we were behind in our schedule, and in fact it was the same day as we had been in Mosul. And I wanted -- because it was so dark -- we got very behind, hours behind. I can't say for certain that we actually left the palace. The palace grounds are enormous, 114 buildings, and we went in there by helicopter.

We had dinner with the troops. We had a very good discussion with General Odierno, who was there. They had, just two days before, had a raid for Saddam. We got a good impression. We talked to our troops. But we didn't get out into the streets as we were able to do in Mosul, as both of our CODELS did when we went down to literally the center of Mosul. We met with the vice governor of the province as well as some of the mayors. You met with more of the mayors, I think --

REP. SAXTON: Mm-hmm.

REP. UPTON: And some of the local police. And we were there at market time, so we were there during the busy rush hour, where the streets were absolutely jammed with people. And one of the things we mentioned this morning at the breakfast: General Petraeus -- again, a different situation than further south, for sure, but they were able to establish elections, local elections, literally within 10 days of being on the ground and the war being over. So that was a real plus, and that was something that our delegation urged, has been urging the administration to follow through on exactly the example of what's happened in Mosul as you look at the rest of the country.

Jim, go ahead.

Q (Off mike) -- Fallujah?

REP. UPTON: We did not go to Fallujah.

REP. SAXTON: We -- our delegation was in Baghdad and Mosul. The Baghdad experience was certainly somewhat less positive than Mosul.

As you point out correctly, the population in Mosul is perhaps the less threatening, if you will, or the easier to deal with. But I will say that the school that we went to visit in Baghdad and the various neighborhoods that we rode through were -- it looked like life was going on as close to normal, I guess, as you could expect it to be. Shops were open, traffic was flowing. It didn't look to me like the people felt threatened. I mean, you'd see people standing on the street corner in groups talking to each other, drinking coffee. You'd see --

REP. UPTON: With their AK-47s? No. (Laughs.)

REP. SAXTON: No, no.

Q (Laughs.)

REP. SAXTON: No. We'd see little shops and stores open along the -- open-front stores, people going in and out. Talked to the teachers in the school, and they had questions like teachers and schools in Bordentown, New Jersey, in my district: "We need more materials," "The kids are eager to learn, but the material that we have is outdated." And the boys and girls are both going to school; their parents come to pick them up --

REP. UPTON: We looked through the backpacks of the kids. They were proud to show us the books that they had in their backpacks. I mean, they were taking English. We met with a number of sixth-grade girls that were there. So, it was -- I mean, talked to parents.

REP. SAXTON: Sir?

Q You obviously, I would think, met with some of your constituents who happen to be over in Iraq. What did the soldiers, and Marines, and sailors and airmen tell you about conditions there and their mission there?

REP. SAXTON: I would characterize it in a couple of ways. First of all, there are strikingly different missions of people who we visited in theater. We visited Special Forces people. We visited members of the 104th Airborne Division. We visited members of the 4th ID. And the people who are in-country, by and large, are there to carry out a mission, and they're enthusiastic about carrying out their mission. Now, if we asked someone, "Would you like to go home?," their general attitude was, "Of course we'd like to go home, but we've got a job to do before we go there." And so, we found in Baghdad, in the country, wherever our travels took us, an enthusiastic group of armed services personnel who are there and committed to carry out their job.

Now, when you move outside the country, you find folks who aren't as busy or with the same intense kind of mission to do that the folks in Iraq are engaged in.

And we'd run into folks that would grumble about the PX not having enough supplies, and by the time they get to the PX, the goods are gone and there's nothing for them to buy; and we'd run into folks who would say that they don't have enough access to telephones; and we'd run into folks that -- those kinds of things because, frankly, we've reached the point in this process that everybody is not as busy or as involved in what they were doing as they once were, so they've got spare time on their hands, and some of that spare time goes into wondering "what I can do to keep myself busy." And so there is that element that is there, but by and large, everybody that we talked to, both from Qatar to Bahrain to Kuwait to Iraq, were on the positive side, doing their job, people that are proud of what they're doing. And frankly, they made us proud as well.

REP. TURNER: You know, I was very impressed with the Guardsmen and Reservists that we met, because we all know that many of our Guardsmen have had long deployments and there's been some uncertainty about the length of deployments. And those of us in Congress have expressed our concerns about overtaxing the Guard and the Reserves, and that we need to be careful that we're not relying too much upon those patriotic Americans who serve in the Guard and Reserves. But when you talk to the Guardsmen and Reserve members who are there on the ground, many of them flying our C-130s, we were on, many of them there doing the specialized tasks that are required in the nation-building that's going on in Iraq, what you find is very upbeat, very positive attitude. And I think what it reflects is that in the Guard and Reserve you find, as a general rule, an older soldier, one who has, you know, stayed in the Reserves or joined the Guard because of their spirit of patriotism, and they very much understand the nature of the mission they're involved in and they are very committed to it.

And so it was -- you know, I don't think anyone can go to Iraq and visit with the troops and not come back very proud of the service that the men and women in uniform are giving to our country.

Yes?

Q I'm sure you three gentlemen know that Senator Warner appeared on the floor of the Senate late yesterday and recommended -- to use his word -- that General Boykin be -- temporarily step aside from his job, be reassigned while the IG investigation is going on. What's the mood in the House regarding the Boykin situation? What's the opinion of you three gentlemen?

REP. TURNER: Well, I certainly can't speak for any of my colleagues or any other members of Congress. I do think that it is very important that the administration and the department take very seriously General Boykin's statements.

They clearly do not reflect the attitude of the Congress in terms of our view of what the war on terror is all about. I think the president has made it very clear that the war on terror is not a war against Islam. And any suggestion to the contrary by anyone, particularly in uniform, is wrong. And we certainly need to have a clear acknowledgement of that.

With regard to his current status, of course, I would leave that to the department. I think it might be appropriate that he -- if not be temporarily reassigned, at least have some status different from the status quo, simply to send the message not only to the people of our country, but around the world, that we are firmly in accord that the war on terror is not a war against Islam.

Q The other two gentlemen, please.

REP. UPTON: I would agree with what Jim just said. I was not aware, until most the time of your question, that Senator Warner made that statement on the floor. It did not come up at our breakfast at all this morning.

REP. SAXTON: I'd just like to, I guess, add my agreement with Jim Turner's statement, and to just say that the -- apparently, from what we heard a few minutes ago -- and, frankly, I don't think a lot of people on the Hill are all that tuned in on this issue yet, other than perhaps Senator Warner and maybe a few other people. The department has apparently taken the general up on his request to be investigated, and that is underway. And I think we should not jump to conclusions and see what this investigation turns up and see how this situation evolves before we make any rash judgments.

Yes, sir?

Q Sir, getting back to Iraq, two points --

Q Just to follow up on this. Sorry. Do you think he should step aside temporarily while this is being conducted?

REP. SAXTON: I wouldn't want to make any suggestions like that. I think that the secretary and others who are involved in the situation are getting a handle on it, and I think we should follow their lead.

REP. TURNER: I would say that I think the important thing is for the administration and the Department of Defense to make it very clear their disapproval of the comments that the general made.

And when we talk about the nature of the war on terror, the CODEL that was led by Chairman Saxton that I was a part of, we also had the opportunity to visit some of the Arab neighbors around Iraq.

We went to Turkey; we went to Bahrain; we went to Saudi Arabia. And without exception, the leadership in those Arab countries are partners with us against terrorism. And it's very important, in order to have a strategy that will achieve ultimate victory over terrorism, to understand that our Muslim and Arab partners in the war on terror are key to our success and to our victory. And so, any suggestion that the war on terror relates to a war against Islam is counterproductive, is wrong, and it certainly needs to be condemned.

MR. DI RITA: I think we have time for maybe one or two more -- (inaudible).

Q Getting back to Iraq, I haven't heard health care mentioned. Secondly, also, in the general sense, what is the greatest unfilled need now?

REP. UPTON: Well, we did meet with the health minister of Iraq one of the nights that we were there. We also met with Jim Haveman, who is from Michigan, who has helped put their health care situation back together again. He told me that 80 percent of the hospitals are back up and running, and they expect to have 100 percent before the end of the calendar year. With regard to unemployment and the job situation, that's certainly something that we saw a lot of folks on the streets in different communities that we were in. The estimate, I'd have to say, is probably an unemployment rate of close to 50 percent, though they don't know for sure. There is no Bureau of Labor statistics. There is no census that's been taken.

Tomorrow, I'm going to be meeting with a number of Iraqi women leaders very high in the new Department of Labor. They're here for about two weeks, I believe. I met with them briefly over the weekend. They have a number of things that they're looking forward to doing, job training. And I'm looking forward to hearing more about that tomorrow. But clearly, that's a big thing that has to happen. We talked a little bit about it with the secretary today in terms of seeing maybe some of the oil revenue used for jobs to get some of that idleness off. It's important with the schools, as well.

We both, Jim and I -- I think we visited different schools that were there, but you know, we've seen 1,500 schools reconstructed, from all the windows and walls gutted to actually being very proud of those facilities; and some very eager learners at all grade levels that we saw, and great parents, who waited literally an hour and a half after school was supposed to be out for us to continue to visit with their kids.

REP. SAXTON: Here are just a couple of facts on health care the secretary gave us this morning. On October the 3rd, we had achieved 100 percent of pre-war level of health care throughout the country. Obviously, Iraqi health care was not what the Iraqis or we would like to see it, and so it is the hope that in fiscal year '04, or the goal of fiscal year '04, that we update medical technologies and fix the infrastructure and equipment further.

And I might add that we were surprised to learn when we were in Saudi Arabia that the Saudis, through the Red Crescent, have sent a field hospital into Baghdad to help with this effort. So we have an international partner there in kind of a different, humanitarian way.

REP. UPTON: And I -- in a humanitarian way as well, I've had an offer that's been made to me to provide 5,000 free wheelchairs for Iraq. And the military has been terrific. We're working to transport them on military aircraft to Iraq and try to get it done, again, before the end of the calendar year.

MR. DI RITA: Thanks very much. The last question and I think we're done, unless the members have time.

Q I have a really basic question here; just, where did you stay -- (off mike)?

REP. SAXTON: Kuwait City. Radisson Hotel and --

REP. UPTON: We were two nights in Kuwait City at the same place, and then we spent one night in Baghdad because our plane had broken down.

MR. DI RITA: Thanks very much, folks.

REP. UPTON: Thank you.

REP. SAXTON: Thank you.

Q He had indicated that he'd answer our questions, and this was a real quick one.

Sir, I just wanted to ask you about the USA Today report about Rumsfeld's memo, where he said --

MR. DI RITA: Oh, this is a quick one?

Q No, no, I didn't say MY question was a quick one.

Q THAT was a quick one.

Q THAT was quick.

The USA Today article about Mr. Rumsfeld's memo talked about the mission in Iraq being a long, hard slog. Do you think that Congress is prepared to wade in with that long, hard slog, in terms of the money, the resources, the kind of things that the nation is going to have to put up? And do you agree with that characterization?

REP. SAXTON: Look. We recognize -- and one of the reasons that we went to Iraq was to see for ourselves so that we could talk about the progress that we see being made, because we all know that the war on terrorism is going to be a long, hard slog, but from what we were able to see and the measurement of progress that we were able to see in Iraq, Iraq doesn't necessarily have to be considered to be a long, hard slog. We have done in -- from what we can see, we have done in months in Iraq what has taken years to do in other countries, such as Japan and Germany, after similar kinds of conflicts. And so we are very optimistic that we will be able to move forward with the war on terrorism, which we believe will be a long time in concluding.

And the Iraq piece of it we hope will -- and believe will be a much -- a shorter period of time.

Jim?

REP. TURNER: Well, the secretary gave us each a copy of his memo this morning at breakfast, and I've read it. I think it was mischaracterized in the USA Today article when it labels it a grim outlook.

What it appears to be, and clearly is on its face, is a memo to some of the leadership here in the Pentagon asking the tough questions that we all need to be asking, and that is: Are we doing enough to win the war on terror, do we have a long-range strategy to accomplish that, are we structured in such a way that we can be successful in the long term?

This is a document that's designed to provoke longer-range thinking on the part of the leadership

here. It's the kind of questions that I'm glad to see that are being asked in the administration, and we certainly are asking the same questions on our Subcommittee on Terrorism, led by Chairman Saxton in the House.

REP. SAXTON: We are asking the same questions. Let me just try to put this into perspective. One of the paragraphs in the memo talks about whether our military is configured properly to face today's threat. And just in '04 itself we recognize that, and we followed the secretary's request to plus-up the funding and the end strength of the Special Operations Forces.

So, this question -- this part of the memo that questions our military configuration is a question that has been ongoing in many of our minds for a long time. And we are making changes every day in the Cold War structure that we're changing from, to a new configuration that will be able to meet the new threat vis-a-vis the kinds of things we're involved in today in Iraq.

So, I commend the secretary for carrying out this leadership role. And this memo, that has become, I think, mischaracterized as well in USA Today, is a part of that effort.

MR. DI RITA: Thank you very much.

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