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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Brig. Gen. Carter F. Ham, commander, Multi-National Brigade, Northwest

Friday, December 24, 2004

Secretary Rumsfeld Greet Troops in Mosul with Brig Gen. Ham

GEN. HAM: [In Progress] Well, the Secretary and I were talking on the way over about what a great honor it is for us to have him here. But what I would say first is on behalf of all the soldiers of Task Force Olympia, first the outpouring of appreciation, prayers, good thoughts and frankly the love of Americans that have come out from across the ocean to the folks here of Task Force Olympia, based on the losses that we suffered a few days ago. It's been truly, truly heartwarming.

We have been the beneficiaries of a very wonderful society. And groups, individuals from all across America have been sending not only their prayers and good wishes, but their cookies and their brownies and their pretzels and potato chips and Christmas cards and it's been a very, very wonderful outpouring. And I just - for all of us to say thank you to all those who have taken the time to share with us, it gives us great strength and courage to know that so many Americans are supportive of all that we're trying to do. So thank you to all of the Americans that have done that.

And mostly today, I'd like to say thank you to Secretary Rumsfeld for taking the time out of a extraordinarily hectic schedule, as you all know, and to come spend a few moments here with us and Task Force Olympia and the soldiers of Multinational Brigade Northwest. Mr. Secretary, thank you, sir, for coming very much. We really appreciate it.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Thank you. [Applause] General, thank you so much. Troops, I am proud to be here and have a chance to look you in the eye and in a few minutes maybe shake your hand and tell you personally how much I and the American people appreciate and value and respect what you're doing. What you're doing is enormously important. It is, of course, in recent days, you've had a terrible attack and tragedy here and the world has watched and seen the speed with which those wounded have been taken care of and taken off to Germany.

Yesterday -- I guess, the day before -- I out at Walter Reed visiting with the families of the troops that are wounded there. None of the folks from here yet have arrived. They'll be arriving, I suppose, in the next three or four days and I'll see them when I get back. But the amazing thing to me is to go into the hospitals, Bethesda, Walter Reed and Brooks or wherever and talk to the wounded folks and their families and their loved ones and see the strength that they have. It is truly extraordinary. It's amazing to see what they say and how they feel about the work that's being done out here, how much respect they have for their sons and their daughters and their loved ones and how proud they are. I never fail to come away with that but what I've been strengthened in

and encouraged and inspired for the tasks that we all face.

When you see an attack like we saw here so recently, and we think it's tough and difficult and one has to ask the question, what's going to happen here in this country of Iraq of 25 million people who've been liberated. And yet, we see this insurgency pressing on and on, month after month. There is no doubt in my mind but that this is achievable. Why would I say that? Earlier this month, I was in Afghanistan. And if you think about it, three years ago, in Afghanistan the al Qaeda and the Taliban were training terrorists and attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and aircraft that crashed in Pennsylvania. That was just three years ago. Shortly after we attacked Afghanistan it was described as a quagmire. The Soviet Union had been in there for years. They'd lost tens of thousands of people. They had 200[000] to 250,000 people in the country and another 50[000] to 100,000 people in neighboring countries and they lost.

And three years later, Afghanistan is not a quagmire. Afghanistan is a country of 25 million people - liberated -- that has had their first free and fair election in 500 years in the history of the country. People said the Afghan people weren't ready for democracy, they weren't ready for freedom and liberation. They suffered terrible droughts, a terrible civil war. They had warlords, they had drugs being grown. They were occupied by the Soviets for years. And here we are, a three years later they have an elected president, Hamid Karzai. They have a cabinet of very responsible individuals. Their women voted. Over 41 percent of the people who voted were women - unheard of. At the inauguration they had kids up on the stage, little boys and little girls dancing and singing and doing things. And of course, that was illegal in that country. You weren't allowed to fly a kite or whistle or sing on the street. Women weren't allowed out alone. And there they were at the inauguration of Karzai on the stage. It was a breathtaking experiencing. I've never been prouder to be American.

I think I brought along what President Karzai said, if I can find it here. He stopped - here it is. If you think about how little noted what happened in Afghanistan is on television or in the press, we don't see a lot of it. We see the explosions here; we see the problems. But shortly before he took office, Karzai met with Vice President Cheney and me and members of our delegation and then he spoke to all the American people. He said to all of us, to you and to your families and to everyone across our country, "Whatever we have achieved in Afghanistan is from the help that United States of America gave us." He went on to say that without that help, "Afghanistan would be in the hands of terrorists, destroyed, poverty stricken, without its children going to school or getting an education. We are very grateful. To put it into simple words we know," he said, "to the people of the United States of America for bringing us that day."

The people who helped in Afghanistan, the people working here, each of you, even to you up there who I keep forgetting to look at, and I want to include because I am deeply grateful to all of you - will look back in 10 or 20 or 30 years and know that you have been a part of something enormously important. When it looks bleak, when one worries about how it's going to come out, when one reads and hears the naysayers and the doubters who say it can't be done and that we're in a quagmire here now, the fact is there have always been people throughout every conflict in the history of the world who said it couldn't be done. And people will be able to look back and know that they've been involved, each of you will be able to look back and know that you've been involved in something truly historic, something truly important.

And I take great heart from the fact that if one looks through history and sees all the difficulties that occurred in major conflicts, in major battles, in major struggles and there are always some people who show resolution and determination and that's been the hallmark of our country. There were doubters throughout the World War II, we lost battle after battle in the early years. There were people in the Cold War who wanted to toss in the towel and say it just can't be won. For a period, Eurocommunism was popular. That's always been the way. But the great sweep of human history is for freedom and that is powerful and that is the side we're on.

And the thought of turning over this country to the people who behead people on television and videos, to the people who consciously, purposefully kill innocent men, women and children would turn this part of the

world and this country back to darkness and we simply can't let that happen. So I am grateful to you. I respect you. I wish you all a Merry Christmas and the very best of holidays. I know that you've got loved ones, but it's not easy being away from loved ones during the holiday season. But know that they're strong and know that they love you and know that they're proud of you. So God bless you, each of you and your families and God bless our country. Thank you very much. [Applause]

GEN. HAM: Would you stay for a bit and do some - let some soldiers takes some pictures with you? Would that be OK?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I would be happy to answer some questions or take some pictures or shake some hands or, you know, you know even climb up the stairs and say hello to you folks.

GEN. HAM. Sir, they're mostly engineers so I'm not sure. [Laughter]

SEC. RUMSFELD: If you have questions or thoughts or suggestions. I suppose I've been out -- over the last three years and had two or three dozen times asked folks to let me know what they're thinking or ask questions. And I find it helpful. We care about what you're thinking and what your hopes are and what your expectations are. So if anyone has questions, sound off. [Inaudible] active force is up to 12 months. And the circumstances from time to time on the ground will require some modest extensions or some over laps. We try to - we've spent a lot of time on deployments and trying to figure out how to do it right. The Army's trying to get out of a shoe box with 3x5 cards and get a set of systems where we can really manage it in a way that is respectful of units, respectful of individuals and Pete Schoomaker and the new Secretary of the Army Fran Harvey are determined to get a system where we have the mechanisms that we can really treat people right and see that they have some heads up as to what's going to happen in their lives beforehand.

During the initial deployments, we found on some of the reserve units, we were notifying them five days in advance and not 30 and that's not fair to the families. It's not fair to their employers. So we've just got to do it better. But on rare occasions, as you can well understand and we're in one, this election overlap period where the commands on the ground said, look, we need 10, 15, 20,000 people extra, so we're now up at 151,000 in-country, whereas we had been around 130[000]. And the election's coming and it's important. And it's important that they get it right. And they've got a very well-organized set of things ready to have it go right. And so, it's hard to have to do that, to sit there and sign that and say, these folks, we told them they were going to be there up to a year and we said in-theater. We didn't say in-country - I misspoke. So most people are not in-country for that period specified, they actually start out in Kuwait and then spend some time. But nonetheless, it's away from home. So we hope not to have to do that often. We haven't had to do it often, but there are going to be times when it's in all of our interests that that happens. So have any of you been extended over the year?

Q: No, but we're doing the math already. For 1st Brigade soldiers, we know that our year will come just prior to next year's elections and so we're already looking at the future at what could possibly happen.

SEC. RUMSFELD: As you know what the goal is here, the coalition forces can't provide security for the Iraqis; Iraqis are going to have to provide security for the Iraqis and in the last analysis. And our task is to get those folks trained up and equipped and organized and give them that responsibility. So we have to put an enormous focus on that piece of it. And that is the only way it will work is if - this is their country. They're going to have to pull it up and make it work.

We've sent the best people in the world over here from a lot of different countries, including ours, to liberate this country and to help them get started and to create an environment that's hospitable for them, to take a hold of their lives and move this country down the path towards democracy that's respectful of the various ethnic groups here and that's at peace with its neighbors. And that's all another country can do. We're not here to occupy this country, we're not here for their oil, as some people run around mouthing inanities. We're here to

see that they have an opportunity to do it and it's up to them to do it and that's what our task is. Question?

Q: Sir, how do we win the war in the media? It seems like that is the place where we're getting beat up more than anybody else? I've been here - this is my third tour over here and we've done some amazing things. And it seems like the enemy's Web sites and everything else, they're all over the media and they love it. But the thing is everything we did good, no matter if it's helping a little kid or building a new school, the public affairs sends out the message, but the media doesn't pick up on it. How do we win the propaganda war?

SEC. RUMSFELD: That does not sound like a question that was planted by the press. [Laughter] That happens sometimes. [Laughter] It's one of the hardest things we do in our country. We have freedom of the press. We believe in that. We believe that democracy can take that massive misinformation and differing of views and that free people can synthesize all that and find their way to write decisions. Out here it's particularly tough. Everything we do here is harder because of television stations like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyah and the constant negative approach. You don't hear about the schools are open and the hospitals are open and the clinics are open and the fact that the stock market's open and the Iraqi currency is steady and the fact that there have been something like 140,000 refugees coming from other countries back into this country. They're voting with their feet because they believe this is a country of the future. You don't read about that. You read about every single negative thing that anyone can find to report.

I was talking to a group of congressmen and senators the other day and there were a couple of them who had negative things to say and they were in the press in five minutes. There were 15 or 20 that had positive things to say about what's going on in Iraq and they couldn't get on television. Television just said we're not interested, that's just -- sorry. So, it is - I guess what's news has to be bad news to get on the press and the truth is, however, it gets through eventually. There are people in the United States who understand what's really going on over here. They do understand that thousands of acts of kindness and compassion and support that are taking place all across this country. They do understand that large portions of this country are relatively peaceful. And something like 14 out of 18 of the provinces had incidents of down around five a day, as opposed to the ones in certain places like Baghdad that are considerably higher.

And the Internet is helping. More and more people are seeing things that are taking the conventional wisdom and critiquing it and arguing it and debating it and that's a good thing. So we are a great country and we can benefit from having a free press. And from time to time, people will be concerned about it, but in the last analysis look at where we've come as a country because we have had a free press. I mean, I've got a great deal of confidence in the center of gravity of the American people.

What hurts most is in the region where the neighboring countries whose help we need are constantly being barraged with truly vicious inaccuracies about what's taking place in this country. And it's conscious, it's consistent, it's persistent and it makes everything we try to do in neighboring countries where we're looking for support, vastly more difficult. And we, as a country, don't do that. We don't go out and hire journalists and propagandize and lie and put people on payroll so that they'll say what you want. We just don't do that and they do and that's happening. And Al Jazeera is right there at the top.

GEN. HAM: Maybe we can take one more question and then get a chance for some photos.

Q: Sir, I just have a comment if that's OK. As an officer who's likely going to come under that stop-loss during his time here, I just want to say that there are people who understand the importance of keeping the integrity of the unit and the stabilization of units is also a very good thing and I wanted to thank you for that...

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, thank you.

Q: ... and that some soldiers do understand that, you know, sacrifice comes with us all.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, God bless you for saying that. As I say, it is no fun for anybody to have to make that decision that they want to extend somebody beyond when they had every reason to expect they wouldn't be extended or to have to impose a stop-loss to maintain unit integrity for the benefit of everyone in the unit and the effectiveness of our force. But we do have to do it from time to time and I thank you for speaking up and for saying that a great deal. God bless you. All right, thank you, folks. [Applause]

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