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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

Friday, December 24, 2004

Secretary Rumsfeld with the 1st Infantry Division in Tikrit

MajGen. Batiste: It is an honor to welcome to the 1st Infantry Division our country's 23rd Secretary of Defense, The Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld. This is a man with the courage and the conviction to win the war on terrorism. He was also the 13th secretary of defense, the White House chief of staff, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, a U.S. congressman, and the chief executive officer of two Fortune 500 companies. Soldiers of Task Force Danger please join me in a warm welcome for our secretary of defense.

[Applause]

SEC. RUMSFELD: Thank you very much. [Laughs] Thank you. Thank you very, very much. And General, thank you for those kind words. Kind of makes me sound like I can't hold a job. [Laughter] I first simply want to say that the reason I'm here is to have a chance to look you in the eye. I hope to have a chance to shake your hands and tell you how much I appreciate what you do for our country, how much your country appreciates what you do. And what you are doing is enormously important. It is important to this country, to be sure, but it's important to this region and it's important to the world.

I think about the lives of the people here. We just flew down from Mosul and you fly over this country in a helicopter and you look at the water and you look at the oil, you look at the wealth, you look at the opportunity and you think that this is a country that the Iraqi people have every opportunity in the world to make a great country. And the task we have is not to make a great country for them, but to create an environment where they can do that for themselves. And I know that you are making a difference in their lives, you're making a difference in the lives of the people of home because you're here on the front lines, defending our country and defending free people from the extremists who are determined to turn this country back to a dark place.

I have had the privilege recently of being in Afghanistan earlier this month. And if you think of Afghanistan three years ago, it had been occupied by the Soviet Union, it had droughts it has not water to speak of, it has no oil. They have had a civil war, poor, neighbors that are difficult for them. We went in there. There were training grounds for the al Qaeda and the Taliban and the coalition forces went in three years ago. Within a matter of weeks, it was described as a quagmire - that there was no way to make it work, that the people weren't ready for democracy, that there were warlords and drug lords. And three years later, we sat there and watched the first elected president in history of that country Hamid Karzai be sworn in with young children, dancing and singing on the stage which was against the rules when the Taliban ruled that country, with an election where 41 percent of the people who voted were women, who weren't allowed to vote or participate in the society and the progress that was made there in three years was just truly breathtaking.

Now why do I mention that? Iraq is not Afghanistan, it's different. And they have an Afghan solution and there will be here an Iraqi solution, not an American solution or a coalition solution, but an Iraqi solution. And I've made a note and quoted [Inaudible] going quote to you what President Karzai said at the inauguration out there a couple of weeks ago in Kabul. Before he took office, Karzai took a moment to speak to the American people. Vice President Cheney and I and the American delegation had just met with him. And he said to the world and to the American people and to us, "Whatever we have achieved in Afghanistan is from the help that the 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 and without children going to school or getting an education." "We are grateful to put it in the simple words we know, he said, to the people of the United States, for bringing us that day."

You are here in Iraq on behalf of our country, the task is to help to organize and train and equip Iraqis so that they can provide for their own security, it's to create an environment so that progress can be made here, as it is being made. They've gone from the Iraqi Governing Council to the interim Iraqi government, to elections coming up next month to be followed by a constitution and there again people are saying it won't happen, that the elections have to be delayed. Well, the elections don't have to be delayed. The elections can go forward. And the people here do have an opportunity. And if one looks at the polls, it's clear that the Iraqi people want to vote, they want to participate in helping to guide and direct this country.

I think that it has to be hard for you to be away from your families, particularly at the holiday time. But I see enough families at Walter Reed and Bethesda that to be able to say to you that they are strong, they're proud of you, and I know you know that from your communications with them. And I must say when I meet those families, I always come away feeling their strength and feeling the encouragement and the hope that they feel and the inspiration that I come away with to tackle the tasks that we all face together. I don't know how long it'll be. It may be - and you're all going to live for a lot of years, but in five years or 10 years or 20 years when you're talking to your children or your grandchildren, you're going to be able to look back on your service here and what's been accomplished in this country with great pride and know that you have been a part of history. The people say, well, how can you be sure of that. Well, I suppose we can't be sure of everything, but if there's one thing that we know from history and from seeing decade after decade, just in my lifetime, I've seen the rise of fascism and the fall of fascism and the rise of communism and the fall of communism. I've seen tyrannies and despots come up and take power in countries and fail and leave and be gone. And if there's one thread that runs through, it is that the great sweep of human history is for freedom. People have a desire to be free, not to be ruled but to participate in guiding and directing the course of their country and we're on the side of freedom and you are on the side of freedom. And that's the side to be on.

So God bless each of you, God bless your families and God bless our wonderful country. And Merry, Merry Christmas. Thank you.

[Applause]

Now I know it's cold out here, but I'm told they're now issuing thermal underwear. Is that right? Well, they didn't issue me any. [Laughter] I expect I can see it. But I'd be happy to answer a few questions and then I'd like to come out and shake some hands and tell you how much I appreciate what you're doing.

We've had - I don't know - opportunities over the past several years since these wars started to hold some 23 or, I guess, two or three dozen visit with folks and answer questions and I always value having a chance to hear what people have to say and to learn what they're thinking and what's going right and what's not going right. So anyone who's got a thought or a suggestion or a question, sing out - put your hand up and someone will walk over with a mike. Here's a hand in back. I always worry about the first question - too eager. Yes, sir. Sing it out.

Q: [Inaudible]

SEC. RUMSFELD: I can't hear. I'm sorry. Here he comes. There we got it. There you go.

Q: Mr. Secretary, with the global war on terrorism well in its fourth year and the deployment demands upon the active Army, reserve and National Guard units still being high, with no relief in sight, at what point would you consider, given our op tempo, the recommendation to expand the size of the Army?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, we've already done it. We've increased the size of the Army by about 30,000. We're moving from 33 brigades in the Army up to 43 or 48. We're rebalancing the active force with the Guard and the Reserve because there have been stresses particularly on the Guard and Reserve in some skill sets that were not existing on the active force and had to. And in the process of changing over tens of thousands of positions that are being filled by military people currently that need not be filled by military people. Replacing them with contractors and with civilian employees.

General Schoomaker and the new secretary of the Army Fran Harvey are having a very aggressive program under way to achieve that. You're quite right - the stress on the force, of course, is clear. The difficulty of meeting each successive deployment, given the activities in Kosovo and Bosnia and Afghanistan and here, as well as other things that our forces are doing.

For example, in the Philippines in training and equipping in Georgia, it has put a stress on the force. We've got a volunteer force. It works. The total force concept works. But it has to be managed and dealt with more efficiently than has been the case in the past, if we're going to be engaged in the kinds of activities that we're involved in. So know that there is a full recognition of the importance of enlarging the size of the Army. We just finished the budget for the last few days and we've been working on it for months, but we just - I think this week it goes over to the Office of Management and Budget and the President for their consideration. But you can be sure that the focus will be on the Army and the ground forces to see that they have the resources for personnel and to replace equipment that's getting worn and used at a rate that's higher than normal, to pay for the rebalancing of the active and reserve components and we sense exactly what your question suggested and we've simply got to do it and we've got to do it fast and we've got to do it right. Thank you.

Questions? Here's one right here.

Q: Sir, democracy takes a great deal of time to create and every day we strive to make programs that are legitimate in the eyes of the Iraqi people. But are the American people ready to stand, contribute as long as we are so that this country will be able to stand on its own and act as an example to democracy for not only itself, but for the entire Middle East?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, I guess that's the central question. You hit it right on the nose. Our armed forces are capable of defeating other armed forces. Our armies, our navies, our air forces can deter and defend our country. The test and the task is more a test of wills, it's a test of staying power. It's a task of being and willing to do what we're doing, what you're doing - helping to see that the schools get open, the hospitals get open, the clinics get open, that the security forces get trained and equipped and measured in a way that they can assume responsibility for the security in this country and that takes patience, it takes perseverance. It requires that people have an understanding of how fundamentally important this country can be to this entire region. If you are successful here, if we are successful here, if the coalition is successful here, think what will have been lost to the extremists. If the extremists are able to take this country back and turn it back to darkness, something will have been lost, an opportunity will have been lost that was historic. So we simply have to have the patience. We have to have the willingness to recognize that the Iraqi people are going to find an Iraqi solution for this. It's not going to be an Afghan solution. It's not going to be an American solution, but

they're going to find it. And they've got every opportunity. They have the oil, they have the water, they have the wealth, they have the intelligence, they have educated populations.

And our task isn't to do it for them; they have to do it for themselves and that's not the American way. The American way is if there's a ditch to be dug, let's go dig it. But in this case, that isn't our task. Our task is if there's a ditch to be dug, let's help them figure out how they can dig it and let's have them assume the responsibility. We don't want to create a dependency on their part, being dependant on us. We want to create an independency on their part of strength and an ability to go forward.

And because of the importance to this region, because of the importance to this country, I mean, if you think of this region, countries that don't have all of their population participating fully don't have much of a chance of competing in the world successfully. And a repressive regime denies people the opportunity to participate. The situation in Afghanistan where women weren't allowed to participate fully. The chances of their succeeding is so small. But a free system is respectful of the diversity in a country. Everyone has an opportunity to succeed and that situation is what we need to contribute to here and I think we've got - the people here have a good crack at succeeding and they do so because of what you're doing, because the fact you're hear, because of the fact that you're here not to occupy, not to take anything, we're here not for any reason that is in our nation's interest other than helping to create a free system that will be at peace with its neighbors and not go back to a vicious dictatorship regime that used chemical weapons on its own people, on its neighbors that invaded its neighbors.

So what you're doing is important, what you're doing can be decisive and yes, I think we've got a good crack at doing it. Thank you.

Questions. There's one in the back. Right there.

Q: His [Inaudible]. When I went home for R&R, there was not an understanding in my community and in my state about the importance of why we're here. And I think partially that has to do with the responsibility of the media and what they're portraying here. Is there a way we can portray this message that it really is important that we are here? I mean, I'm sure a lot of Americans do know because President Bush wouldn't have been re-elected.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Well, that clearly was a question that was not planted by the media. I don't know what the answer is. I know that you're right, I think the debate and discussion that took place during the campaign was, in some instances shrill and in some instances not as civil as one would have hoped. But that's what our country does - we debate, we discuss and it ended. And I think that the country does understand the fact that we lost 3,000 people on September 11th, the fact that those terrorists have been trained in this part of the world and were operating and tracking our nation, much to the nation's surprise, that there are terrorist organizations that are today global in nature.

There are states -- Iraq was a state - that was on the terrorist list just as Iran is and Afghanistan was. There are states that have harbored terrorists. We all know - you know better than anybody - you've seen the evil up close and personal that you've been dealing with in this part of the world. So you know the danger that that poses. If you're back in the United States and there hasn't been a terrorist attack for several years on the United States, in many other countries there have been - country after country - in Spain, in Indonesia and Bali and what have you. Sometimes people don't feel they are always engaged in the global war on terror as you have to feel being out here. But the battlefield of the global war on terror are everywhere one looks. And the reality is that a terrorist, an extremist has a big pool to draw from. They can go out across the world and take young people and put them in these schools and teach them that their goal in life has to be to go out and kill innocent men, women and children and they can find recruits. And there are countries that will harbor that and encourage that and permit that.

Our task, it seems to me, is to recognize that this is something that will take time, that those of us who believe in freedom know that the only thing that could happen is if we were terrorized would be we would have to alter our behavior - we could not behave as free people because a terrorist can attack at any time, any place, using any technique, and it is absolutely impossible to defend every place at every moment of the day or night against every conceivable technique. So the only choice we have is to be on the offense, is to deal with terrorist states and to deal with terrorist networks and to continue rolling up the al Qaeda leadership which we've been doing now for the past three years in some two-thirds to three-quarters of those leadership have either been captured or killed and to keep putting pressure on countries that could serve as terrorist safe havens and to keep squeezing down their finances and to have a 90-nation global war on terror that will cooperate and share intelligence.

So what you're doing is important. I think the American people get it. I agree with you. I wish that it was possible for more of the good work that you're doing here in terms of helping to open schools and hospitals and create an environment where a democratic system can grow and prosper. I wish more of that were considered newsworthy and were reported in a way that people could understand the progress that's being made because progress is being made and it's being made, thanks to all of you. So I'm going to say thank you. I'm going to wish you a very Merry Christmas and a wonderful holiday. And when you talk to your families, tell your families how much we - all of us - appreciate what you're doing and what they're doing in support of you. God bless you. God bless you all. Thank you so much.

[Applause]

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