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**Presenter: Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee,
Senator John Warner (R-Va), Secretary of Defense Donald
H. Rumsfeld, Commander, U.S. Central Command, General
John Abizaid**

**Wednesday, January 26, 2005 5:54 p.m.
EST**

Secretary Rumsfeld Media Availability Following Senate Briefing

Russell Senate Office Building

SEN. WARNER: Thank you very much. The committee has had two hours of intense briefing with the Secretary of Defense and General Abizaid. I can say without any hesitation or qualification whatsoever it was one of our finest and most thorough briefings that the committee has had throughout this operation.

And I'd like to commend you, Mr. Secretary and General, for the work that you have done, are doing, and continue to do.

The one thing that I urged the secretary and the general is that the information that they imparted to some 20 senators today, in my judgment, needs to be quickly conveyed throughout the United States by the Secretary of State, Defense, and others in positions of authority.

The elections are going forward. Every expectation is that they will meet a measure of success. But the period of aftermath of the elections is fraught with uncertainty and we should prepare the American people for as many eventualities as could possibly happen.

For example, it will take several weeks after the election to certify the results. The assembly will then have to appoint the president and two deputies. They will appoint a prime minister. The prime minister has to be confirmed by the assembly.

Now, this is a period of uncertainty that will descend upon Iraq. And you've got to remember, these people have been suffering for some 30 years under Saddam Hussein and the acceptance and placing of confidence in another government, which is, again, not the final government, but an interim government, is going to take time.

And very clearly the secretary and the general explained to us we could anticipate a level of increased insurgency in this period of time and increased difficulty in trying to continue the good work that's been done to train all segments of the security forces.

So Mr. Secretary, I would hope that you could convey to the nation this message which you've given, I think, very successfully to our senators. And I'll yield the floor to you at this time.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I have no statement to make other than we'd be happy to respond to a couple questions.

Q For General Abizaid: Can you flesh out a little bit the role U.S. forces will play in a post-election Iraq environment? Doug Feith today, the undersecretary for policy, signaled that there'd be more -- a more intense effort to train, equip and organize Iraqi forces and less actually providing physical security. Can you shed any light on that?

GEN. ABIZAID: Well, clearly, in the post-election environment in Iraq we intend to increase the level of our training and partnership with the Iraqi security forces. Exactly how much force we would move from insurgency and counterinsurgency operations and counter-terrorist operations remains to be seen. Our staffs are working on that, but we clearly know that Iraqi security forces need to mature further. We know that the Iraqi people want that to happen. And as we move from this period of occupation to a period of partnership, more intense effort on our part to get those forces ready is something that has to be done.

Q General Abizaid? General Abizaid, if I could ask you something that Chairman Warner spoke about, which was what you expect after the elections. Apparently the committee was told to expect that things may be harder or more difficult. Can you elaborate on that? And what is that basis coming from? Is that from intelligence, that hunch? What do you suspect is going to happen?

GEN. ABIZAID: I think that we all need to understand that in Iraq today that what is happening is revolutionary in political terms. We also need to understand that the thing the enemy fears the most, the thing that people such as Zarqawi and bin Laden and Zawahiri fear the most are free elections, elections that are the result of a fair process where a new government is chosen and a new future is taken. And so we should anticipate that after the elections that the people that desire to derail the process of a new future for Iraq will continue to fight and continue to fight hard, but they're fighting an uphill battle because the Iraqi security forces, with our backing, will be successful.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Let me comment on that briefly.

If you think about it, Iraq originally had a governing council of 25 people with a rotating chairmanship. It was difficult for the United States government and the coalition to interact with a council of 25 people with a rotating presidency.

They moved from there to the current arrangement with a prime minister, where you have ministers and a prime minister and a president, and the coalition can interact with them and make agreements as to budgets and what do you want -- how many people do you need in the army, and you can then proceed on things.

We're now going to move into this period that the chairman just mentioned, where, for a couple of weeks after the election, the results will not have been certified. So there's a period of ambiguity -- who's going to be in the government.

And then, after it's certified, they seat the assembly, the Transitional National Assembly. And then they get organized. And that's another period of weeks, however many. Who knows?

And then what they do is they select a president and two deputies. And that's going to take a little time.

Then those three people will recommend a prime minister, and the prime minister will then recommend

cabinet ministers. Now this takes some time to -- these are not people who have a lot of experience in a democratic system, where you're going to be negotiating among all the people in this constituent assembly.

The next step, obviously, then, is that they have to -- the assembly has to approve by, I believe, by a majority vote, all of the ministers that are selected.

Then the ministers have to get into office and gather people around them, and the -- if you think about it, there are already people in those jobs. And the people coming in may be from a different tribe or a different viewpoint, and they may want to change the people in there. So now you've got some turbulence in these ministries.

And it is a -- I think General Abizaid used the word not a mature democratic system at this stage. It's in its early stages. And I -- the reason I mention all of this is because I think to be realistic, we have to recognize that that's the period we're moving into. And it will take some time for that government to settle down, gets its staff worked out, get its relationships worked out among the ministers, and they -- the -- I mean, if you think about it, it takes coordination between the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense. And so they're going to have to get to know each other. They're going to have to have a -- develop some working relationships. And I think it's -- I think that's the period we're going into, and that's the context we ought to be looking at, the things and the events that will be taking place in the period immediately ahead. You're looking -- I would guess, well, into March, possibly into April, for these things to sort themselves out.

Q Mr. Secretary, do you believe this will be as violent a period as it has been in the run-up to the elections? Does that -- ?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I don't know. I -- General Abizaid believes that we can --

We have to recognize what -- how determined the people we're up against are. These are people who cut off people's heads on television. These are people that go around killing innocent civilians throughout Iraq. These are people that know they have a lot to lose if Iraq is successful in setting itself on a path of democracy.

Q [Inaudible]

SEC. RUMSFELD: So one has to expect that the level of violence will either stay where it is, or go up or down modestly during this period as they attempt to prevent from happening that which is going to happen.

Q Mr. Secretary, a top U.N. election official today said the U.S. military was getting too involved, overenthusiastic in getting -- helping the get-out-the-vote effort in Iraq. Do you think the U.S. military should be involved in helping get out the vote?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Get out the vote.

Q The Marines are handing out flyers encouraging the Iraqis to vote.

SEC. RUMSFELD: [Inaudible] ...I just don't know.

GEN. ABIZAID: I think the only thing that you would see inside Iraq is American forces moving to assist the Iraqi Interim Government in ways that they've requested and the Iraqi Electoral Commission in ways that they've requested. We understand that our role is to ensure that this is an Iraqi election. And I think you'll see on Saturday millions of Iraqis will go to vote because they want to vote.

Q Don't you think it's appropriate for American soldiers to do that if they're asked to; or have they been

asked to?

GEN. ABIZAIID: No, I am saying that millions of Iraqis are going to go vote because they want to vote, and American soldiers do not have the mission to get the vote out.

STAFF: Last question

Q Mr. Secretary, there's word that Doug Feith, Undersecretary Doug Feith is going to be handing in his resignation today. Has he talked to you about this, or did you know that this was coming?

SEC. RUMSFELD: He visited with me after the election and indicated that at some point this year, later this year, into the summer, by summer, that he thought he, after serving four years, would like to move back into the private sector. And I've asked him to stick around. We don't have a replacement. And he's agreed to do that. I don't know what he's announced or what's been announced, but it happens to be a fact that he has had that discussion with me, and I'm hopeful he'll stay [Crosstalk] until we are able to find an appropriate successor, which we've not started looking for.

SEN. WARNER: We'll take a question in the back and wrap up.

Q I have a question for any of you who have any idea if the helicopter crash today was due to bad weather, inclement weather, and whether their mission was at all related to the election. Were they there to support the election in any way, and what was that?

GEN. ABIZAIID: As I understand it on my most recent information, the helicopter was on a mission in support of the elections in Ar Rutbah (sp?) in Al Anbar Province.

I can't tell you -- I don't know as to whether or not it was weather- related, mechanical or enemy action. We believe that we lost very tragically 30 Marines and one sailor. Our condolences go out to their family. I wish I could give you more information, but as you can imagine there is an intensive investigation going on.

SEN. WARNER: Thank you very much.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Thank you, folks.

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