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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and United Kingdom Secretary of State for Defense John Reid

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DoD News Briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld and United Kingdom Secretary of State for Defense Reid

SEC. RUMSFELD: Good afternoon, folks.

I'm pleased to welcome to the Pentagon the Right Honorable John Reid, secretary of State for Defense of the United Kingdom. We've had good discussions today, as we have on many other occasions.

On this day in 1917, I'm told, that the United States entered World War I on the side of Great Britain and the allies in the cause of freedom. It was an important moment in what has grown into a very special relationship over these many decades between our two countries, a relationship that would include cooperation in World War II, the Cold War, and certainly today in the struggle against violent extremists.

Last month Prime Minister Tony Blair explained that in order to win the war on terror, we must reject the thought that somehow we are the authors of our own distress, that if only we altered this decision or that, the extremism would fade away -- unquote. Our nations understand well the dire consequences of allowing the terrorists and hostage takers to take control of either Afghanistan or Iraq. Terrorist havens in those countries would lead to more terrorist recruitment, fundraising, training, and more attacks on our people.

The situation in Iraq suggests that there's a good deal of work remaining, obviously, but on the other hand, the country has come a long way since the liberation of Baghdad three years ago this week. We've unearthed the mass graves of Saddam Hussein and he's been placed on trial. The Iraqi people have defied terrorist threats and successfully had two elections and a referendum on a new constitution, each time with still larger turnouts. More than 250,000 Iraqi security forces have now been trained and equipped and are on the job providing security for the Iraqi people. The same population that boycotted the earlier electoral activity has since stopped the boycott of politics and emerged as a voice in the political process.

And tens of thousands of British, American and coalition soldiers have been fighting the violence and dealing with the situation in that country with a great deal of courage and professionalism. They've done so with determination, they've done so with a volunteer spirit and with few precedents in history. And they and their families can be enormously proud of what they're accomplishing. They are making our world safer and freer.

Mr. Minister, we're very pleased you're here.

SEC. REID: Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary. I'm delighted to be here.

Can I just say first of all, since we had the loss recently of Cap Weinberger, that I would just pay my condolences for that. He was a great friend of the United Kingdom, and I think the presence here of Lady Thatcher testified to just how much we thought of his contribution towards that relationship which Secretary Rumsfeld just referred to. In any case, anybody who was a great friend of the United Kingdom as he was, a tutor and mentor of Frank Carlucci, and a wrestling partner of Donald Rumsfeld, must have been a pretty considerable man. So we pay testimony to him,

We have had a very useful meeting today, as normal. We've covered a whole range of topics. I would merely highlight three of them.

In the strategic arena, three elements of that.

First of all, in Iraq. This is a time for holding firm and holding our nerve in Iraq, a time for the politicians in Iraq to do that, to come together in a government of national unity, and a time for the multinational forces and those politicians who support the Iraqi democrats to do that as well. In other words, as the terrorists seek, by their own barbaric methods, to divide inside Iraq and divide outside Iraq, our response should be to hold firm and give maximum unity inside Iraq and maximum unity outside.

In Afghanistan, again, to see through the job we have set ourselves, which is to ensure that that country will never again fall back into the clutches of the Taliban and the terrorists and become a launch pad for the sort of terrorist attacks that you know well here in Washington and farther along the coast in New York.

And thirdly, in the strategic arena, the need for us to cooperate better on an international level across the whole range of weapons and our armory -- which extend far beyond military hardware but include diplomacy, include international legality, include taking a firm stand when necessary through the United Nations and other international organizations -- and that's what I was speaking today at the conference about.

Finally, on operational matters which have strategic import, we discussed some of those; most importantly, our joint commitment to give expression to our partnership of working together not just for the next few weeks, but for the decades to come through the interoperability of our forces in general and specifically the Joint Strike Fighter, which is the fighter of choice for the United Kingdom for our two new major carrier projects that are coming up. And we are committed to seeing that that works through, and I'm certain that's going to have a positive outcome.

Okay, I think that's all I would say at the beginning, Donald, and --

SEC. RUMSFELD: Why don't we take a few questions, maybe from alternating sides if we can figure out where the alternating sides are. I --

SEC. REID: A U.S. hand's up first. There you go.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Yes. (Laughter.)

SEC. REID: You might want to ask me, and the British might want to ask you, so --

SEC. RUMSFELD: There you go.

Q Now, Mr. Secretary and Mr. Minister, you mentioned this for a little bit, but how urgent is it that the Iraqi leaders finally form this new government, and in the absence -- in the continuing absence of it, what effect

is that having on the security environment there? For both gentlemen.

SEC. REID: Terrorists love a vacuum. I know that from my own experience in Northern Ireland. And it's the same throughout the world. So the longer this goes, the more pleased the terrorists would be because it gives them the opportunity to intervene with acts of violence, and secondly, because they will claim it is an illustration of the inability of politicians in Iraq to come together.

On the other hand, I am convinced that there is the will in Iraq for people from different backgrounds, different ethnic groups to come together and form a government of national unity. I was there 10 days ago. I spoke to President Talibani, I spoke to Prime Minister Ja'afari right through the many groups, and there is a great deal of urgency about this. I think it is the most important thing on the agenda in Iraq, which is to respond to the efforts of the terrorists to divide by terrorism, by uniting through democracy. And that would be a huge signal not only to the outside world, but to those brave people of Iraq who through bullets and death and destruction and massacres and threats have turned out in greater number to exercise their democratic rights, to signal their commitment to democracy, than even the people of the United Kingdom or the United States in her big elections. So it is pretty important.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Is there a fellow from the U.K. here?

Q Mr. Secretary?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Come on!

Q I'm in between. (Laughter.)

SEC. REID: Is that Demitri (sp)?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Yeah. Do you want to let him --

SEC. REID: Good God!

SEC. RUMSFELD: -- you can call on him.

SEC. REID: (Inaudible) -- what were you doing in (Maryland ?) last weekend?

Q I was stalking someone who was buying a can of soup for his lunch. But that's another story. (Laughter.)

The head of the Missile Defense Agency, last month at a public conference, said that the U.K. is one of three possible sites for missile defense interceptors. Both the Pentagon and the U.K. Ministry of Defense have said there have been no negotiations. Yet the Missile Defense Agency again this morning said they want to make a decision by the end of September. Can you explain why there have been no negotiations, or when you anticipate having some?

SEC. REID: That issue didn't come up. We --

Q But what I'm asking, are you going to have negotiations?

SEC. REID: You have to ask them, Demitri (sp).

SEC. RUMSFELD: I'd have to talk to the people at the agency. But they've been involved in thinking

through ways, various ways. There are multiple ways they could arrange themselves. And they've not come back to me with specific proposals. And it's a subject that didn't come up today.

Yes, John?

Q I've got another question for the defense minister. Condoleezza Rice came in for some criticism over Guantanamo, not just the war, during her recent visit. The Northern Ireland minister, Peter Hain, said he would prefer that Guantanamo were closed.

And you have called for a review of the Geneva Conventions. Given the U.S. position that those held in Guantanamo are not required to be treated according to the Geneva Conventions, why is there a need for a review?

SEC. REID: Because the Geneva Convention was constructed on the basis of conditions that did not envisage unconstrained terrorism, potentially allied, to be unconstrained -- destructive capacity of weapons of mass destruction. In other words, the legal system that we've inherited that governs international conventions was formulated 50 years ago and more for circumstances that were entirely different from today. It dealt only with state actors. It did not envisage non-state actors with the international reach and destructive capability of states.

And therefore, what I have said is that the Geneva Convention or other international law should be extended and strengthened. I do not believe that any of us want to resile from international law and convention, but I believe that many of us would like to see it extended so that it includes non-state actors who can have the destructive capacity of state actors.

Q Sir, if I could follow up on that, you'd like to see the end of this sort of twilight status of people who are designated enemy combatants, a designation that's not in the Geneva Convention. You'd like to have some specific reference to how they ought to be treated?

SEC. REID: You want me to ask the questions, and you give the answers now? (Light laughter.)

Q I'm merely trying --

SEC. REID: I mean, I think it's quite plain what I have said, and I can't make it any clearer. And I've just produced two speeches on it which I will supply you with. You know, at great length it explains it.

Q I'll just write yes. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. Secretary?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Is there someone here from the U.K.?

Q (Off mike.)

SEC. RUMSFELD: Pardon me?

Q I have ancestors in the U.K. (Laughter.)

(Cross talk.)

Q I'm from the U.K.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Good. I'm glad you -- that you're here.

Q I want to ask whether you've discussed Iran, and if so, I'd be interested to hear what you discussed, and if you didn't, I'd be interested to know why you didn't because there seems to be a lot of talk at the moment about potential military options about the Iranian threat.

SEC. REID: I actually discussed Iran at the previous meeting with Condi Rice. And we -- given the time limitations of what we were based on, we -- I think it was mentioned briefly in passing here. But we discussed Iran and we discussed -- with Condi Rice, and the position at the Security Council, the International Atomic Energy authority, the need for international solidarity, the force of diplomacy being multiplied by the strength of the unity of all of the elements in it. So -- does that answer your question?

Q You didn't discuss it, then.

SEC. REID: Sorry.

Q You didn't discuss it here today.

SEC. REID: No, I -- I think I mentioned to the secretary, honestly, what I had just been discussing with Condi Rice. I said we've just gone through a number of issues with Secretary Rice, one of which was the question of Iran and the present position on it. But it wasn't one of the specific items we went through.

If you're asking whether we touched upon, mentioned, implied, nodded to each other in any way, sent signals about military action in Iran, the answer is no. (Laughter.)

SEC. RUMSFELD: (Laughs.)

Q Speaking of the State Department --

Q Following up on your opening statement, you talked about more than 250,000 Iraqi security forces. In light of the rise in sectarian violence, are you satisfied that the Iraqi security forces, police and army, have the right mix of ethnicity, the right number of Sunnis, Shi'as, Kurds? And that seems to be a top priority, but despite all our efforts, we can't get numbers, we can't get estimates as to how much each of those groups are represented.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I think it -- I think it would be accurate to say that for the most part the Ministry of Defense -- security forces -- have a reasonably good mix of ethnicity. The -- understandably, the Ministry of Interior forces that are local, as opposed to the Ministry of Interior forces that are national in scope, the ones that are local tend to be recruited locally. And therefore, they tend to be recruited from the population that exists in that area. And therefore, one would think that they reasonably reflect the ethnic composition of the country, and they tend not to be -- have the balance, if you will, that the Ministry of Defense forces do.

The second thing I would say is, as General Casey has indicated, the progress of the Ministry of Defense forces is considerably more advanced than the Ministry of Interior forces. And that is why the focus that's currently taking place tends to be, in terms of General Dempsey's efforts and the NATO train and equip effort, tends to be focused on the police for those reasons.

A second reason they seem to well behind the ministry of Defense forces is the fact that the government of Iraq, when asked, approved the coalition forces for embedding in ministry of Defense forces, but not to the same extent in ministry of Interior forces -- only at the very, very top levels.

And the advantages that have accrued to the ministry of Defense forces from having U.S. forces embedded have been substantial in terms of being able to very rapidly see needs -- shortfalls in equipment, shortfalls in connections between the ministry of Defense and the ministry of Interior, shortfalls in the connections between the intel community and the forces' logistical needs and the like, leadership strengths and weaknesses.

All those things have been reasonably understood in a very transparent way on the ministry of Defense forces; not so on the ministry of Interior forces. That process is now going forward. We're increasing the coalition embeds in the ministry of Interior forces, and we expect to see this year a fairly substantial improvement in the performance of the ministry of Interior.

As the minister said, however, we've got to have ministers appointed by the new government. They're going to have to be ministers that are competent. They're going to have to be ministers that understand the importance of having their ministry seen throughout that country as being balanced and governing from the center, and something that's certainly not a representation of the spoils of an election victory; and that the selection of leaders -- military leaders and ministry of Interior leaders -- are people that have the confidence of the troops and provide a good, strong rib cage for those organizations.

Q Mr. Secretary --

Q Mr. Secretary, what impact do you believe the failure of the Iraqis to stand up their government will have on the military's plans to at least consider some sort of new plans for troop levels in the coming year?

And secondarily, do you believe that a thousand tactical errors were made in the war, as has been suggested?

SEC. RUMSFELD: With respect to the latter, I talked to Condi about that, and she pointed out the transcript where she said she was speaking figuratively, not literally.

And the -- you know, the -- the -- democracy's tough. It isn't an easy thing is what those people are trying to do. It's easy for us here in an air-conditioned room to say, "Gee, they ought to form a government." And they should. And it would be a help if they did.

On the other hand, what they're doing is difficult. They're negotiating, they're meeting with each other, they're talking to each other as opposed to shooting at each other, they're stepping forward and putting themselves at risk to provide leadership in that country. And, you know, the sooner they're successful in doing that, I'm sure it will be a happy thing for them and they'll be pleased to get on with their new government. I'm -- I don't know when it will happen or exactly what way it will shake out.

It's going to be an Iraqi solution -- it's not going to be an American or a British solution for that country -- as it should be. And, you know, we don't do things very rapidly either, if you think about it. We go from elections in the first week in November and we don't seat a new government till January 20th of the following year, which is quite a period of time, if you think about it.

SEC. REID: And the British prime minister and the Irish prime minister this morning are launching a plan to get the Assembly in Northern Ireland up by four years and two months after when it was suspended. So, you know, a few months -- it's very important it's done (urgently ?), but as Secretary Rumsfeld said, the amazing thing there is actually that people who have suffered such a deep reservoir of death, destruction and despair have come together at all, have formed a constitution. It took a long time to form it in this country, it took several centuries to form it in my country, and we haven't even solved the Irish part of it yet. So a degree of humility

about these things, at the same time as we give a degree of support to them trying to get that government of national unity.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Pam?

Q Mr. Minister, would you shed some light on a situation that's been getting a lot of press coverage both in the United States and Britain now, two Arab men who are British residents that were taken to Guantanamo by way of Afghanistan in 2002. Both of these men were in touch with MI5, one apparently was cooperating, one wasn't, while they were in Britain. If they were dangerous men, if they were a danger to society, why weren't they arrested in Britain? And if the U.K. government didn't have anything to do with their rendition to Guantanamo, are you working to get them out or to take them into British custody?

SEC. REID: I think the two gentlemen you're talking about were not British citizens.

Q Not British citizens --

SEC. REID: No.

Q -- British residents.

SEC. REID: Yeah. They're not British citizens.

Q Right.

SEC. REID: That's the first thing.

I think secondly, despite the Foreign Office had made representations, but I can't cast any light on what you asked me to cast light on, which is allegations of secret service activity or something of that nature.

SEC. RUMSFELD: You've spent the day with the American press corps, I understand; is that right?

SEC. REID: Yes, and spoke very favorably of them, did I not, Secretary Rumsfeld?

SEC. RUMSFELD: You did, in private.

SEC. REID: Well, in public I will, as well.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Do you want to make a closing statement to this group?

SEC. REID: Yes. I want you to know that despite the coverage being given to the very special relationship between Jack Straw and Condoleezza Rice, Donald and I are very close as well. (Laughter.)

SEC. RUMSFELD: Thank you, folks.

SEC. REID: Thank you.

Q Are you sure Condi Rice wasn't just being diplomatic when she said she was speaking figuratively?

SEC. RUMSFELD: No. Come on.

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