



Remarks at the Swearing-in of Ronald Neumann as the U.S. Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Secretary Condoleezza Rice
Benjamin Franklin Room
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(4:00 p.m. EDT)

AMBASSADOR ENSENAT: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. I'm Ambassador Donald Ensenat. I'm the Chief of Protocol and I want to welcome you here to the beautiful Benjamin Franklin Room. We're gathered here for the swearing-in of Ronald Neumann to be the next U.S. Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Ambassador Neumann is accompanied by some of his family members: his wife Margaret behind me, his son Brian Neumann and wife Amy, his daughter Helen Denise Baker and her husband Rory Baker and their granddaughter Willow Baker and his mother-in-law Margaret Grimm. We also have the Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of Afghanistan here in Washington. Please join me in welcoming our special guests.

(Applause.)

Our order of events today will be the Secretary of State will deliver remarks and then administer the Oath of Office to Ambassador Neumann. Ambassador Neumann will then deliver remarks and sign his official appointment papers. You are invited to congratulate him then in front of the podium. And I would ask if the Chargé will be the first in line for that greeting.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Secretary of State.

(Applause.)

SECRETARY RICE: Well, thank you. It is really a great honor and a great pleasure to be here to swear in Ron Neumann as our next Ambassador to Afghanistan. I want to thank very much Margaret for being here and I want everyone to know that Margaret had to say "yes" and I'm really glad that she did. (Laughter.)

I'd also like to welcome, of course, the other members of the Neumann family. I'd like to welcome the Chargé, other members of the Diplomatic Corps. We also have a number of senior members of the Administration here: John Negroponte, the Director of National Intelligence; Karen Tandy, the Administrator of the DEA; and Gordon England, the Acting Deputy Secretary of Defense. Thank you all for being here as well.

Well, Afghanistan. I want to start by telling you a little story which is that, first of all, I'm an old Soviet specialist. And so for me, Afghanistan once meant something very different. It is also the case that the fates of Afghanistan and the United States became intertwined in a very fundamental way on September 11th, 2001. And I can tell you that a matter of days after the attacks on the Twin Towers, on the Pentagon and the crash of the flight in Pennsylvania, the President and his senior team went to Camp David to plan what we would do next.

And as you might imagine because Afghanistan was the home of al-Qaida, the home base of al-Qaida, we rolled out a map of Afghanistan. We kind of took a look at the area and quite literally, I think, the color drained from everyone's face because this is a region that has always been known as the "arc of crisis." And I think there was a sense at that moment wondering just how had we come to this fate of having to deal with the future of Afghanistan now with American security interest at the core and how were we going to succeed in a place that many thought was a place that great powers went to die, whether the British Empire or the Soviet Union.

The remarkable story, of course, of Afghanistan is that some three and a half years later it is a place of great hope and great promise. It is a place of great hope and great promise, first and foremost, because of the remarkable people of Afghanistan -- a people who survived years and years of civil war and turmoil to emerge now determined to build a democratic future, a prosperous future and a future in which Afghanistan is no longer a platform for terrorism and chaos in the region, but rather a stable member of a growing South Asian and Southwest Asian region.

That remarkable story has, of course, been aided enormously by the sacrifice of American men and women in uniform, American diplomats and workers and, of course, coalition partners from around the world who now see the promise of Afghanistan.

I personally got to see Afghanistan for the first time in my life just several months ago. And what really struck me was that these are people who have a great spirit and a great determination. And that great spirit and that great determination, of course, were demonstrated when they went in huge numbers to vote for the first freely elected president in that region in a very, very long time.

So Afghanistan, once the center point of the "arc of crisis," is now a place of hope and promise. And so when the President and I were looking for someone to entrust the responsibility of helping to deliver on that hope and promise, we turned to a really good man who has the skills and the dedication and the experience to help America help Afghanistan deliver on that promise.

Ron Neumann has, of course, already been Ambassador twice, to Algeria and to Bahrain. He was most recently in another place of promise and challenge, Baghdad, from February 2004, with the Coalition Provisional Authority and then later on as Embassy Baghdad's principal interlocutor with the Multinational Command.

Ron was an Army infantry officer in Vietnam where he was awarded the Bronze Star. Because Ron has this very special set of skills -- the ability to work in difficult circumstances, the ability to work in an environment that is still transitioning from war to peace, the ability to work hand-in-hand with our military, our partner, in bringing about a stable and prosperous Afghanistan -- because I know Ron to be someone of great dedication to the people who

work for him, I know that he's going to lead the men and women of our Embassy in Kabul with the same dedication and caring that he brought to his other jobs. And that would be important because Kabul is a tough assignment, but I can't think of anyone better to lead the men and women of the Foreign Service, Civil Service, the many other government agencies that are in Kabul and the U.S. military, as well as the remarkable Foreign Service Nationals who work for us, the Afghans who work there -- people, by the way, who kept the key to our Embassy during the years that we were not in Afghanistan and, after the liberation of Afghanistan, presented us with that key.

I know that Ron will be a partner for President Karzai and for the newly elected officials of the Afghan Government following the parliamentary elections that will take place, but most importantly I know that Ron, whose father was Ambassador to Afghanistan and who traveled the country as a young man, has a special affection for the country. That, too, makes him the right person for this job. His skill, his experience and his dedication to freedom and liberty and to the causes and principles that make America great will serve him well in helping the Afghan people to also realize their aspirations for freedom and liberty.

Ron, we look forward to working with you. Godspeed.

(Applause.)

(The Oath of Office was administered by the Secretary.)

(Applause.)

AMBASSADOR NEUMANN: Well, thank you, Madame Secretary, for those really extraordinarily warm words. It is a great honor to be standing before you today as the new Ambassador to Afghanistan and I would like to thank you, Madame Secretary, and the President, for the privilege of representing the United States in a country that has become so important to us in our fight against terrorism and an extremism that would divide peoples and turn the clock backwards on human equality and toleration.

The struggle in which we are contending is not a clash between civilizations; rather, it is a clash within Islam that seeks to remove our influence so that it can impose by force a narrow view that would restrict human freedom and progress throughout the Islamic world. It is a view of Islam that has been repeatedly rejected by Muslim scholars, and much rests on our success in Afghanistan. And I am honored to help lead a team of courageous and dedicated civilian and military personnel towards securing Afghanistan's long-term security, democracy and prosperity.

I would also like to recognize Ambassador Khalilzad for his remarkable achievements during his tenure in Afghanistan and during the period which he served as the President's Special Envoy to Afghanistan.

My father told me years ago that ours is a profession in which one rarely starts what one finishes, or finishes what one starts. And I will be building on much that has been achieved by many others and I am sure that, even with success, much will remain to be done when I eventually hand over to a successor. I am privileged and honored to take up the work that Ambassador Khalilzad and so many others have carried so far.

The recent tragedies in Sharm el-Sheikh and London underscore the importance of staying the course -- helping the Afghan people work their way to a peaceful and stable future as a unified state. Our success in Afghanistan, which will ensure that the country will never again be a safe haven for terrorists, is pivotal to our overall success in the global struggle with terrorism. Since 2001, we have made remarkable progress to that end. For the first time in history, Afghanistan is now ruled by a democratically elected president and multiethnic cabinet. Nearly 6,000 candidates are running in this September's parliamentary election, among which 10 percent are women. The country has adopted one of the most enlightened constitutions in the Islamic world, an amazing accomplishment given that the Taliban ruled Afghanistan just four years ago with an Islamic absolutism that denied fundamental human rights, particularly to women.

On the security front, major militias have surrendered many of their weapons; increasingly, warlords have to choose between supporting the new democracy and becoming marginalized. Weakened Taliban and al-Qaida forces are resorting to desperate attacks on soft targets, but they will not be allowed to undermine the continued rule of President Karzai's government in Afghanistan or its progress toward a better future.

The Afghan national army, now a force of some 24,000 strong, has won praise from the international community and, more importantly, has won acceptance from Afghans for its fight against insurgents and tribal factions. NATO's command of the International Security Assistance Force, the Alliance's first operation beyond Europe, has steadily expanded so that it will have responsibility for the entire country in the coming years.

Our reconstruction efforts are helping to rebuild a country torn apart by decades of war and poverty. We've built roads, clinics, schools and basic infrastructure and are doing more.

But while significant challenges remain, especially in fighting narcotics, establishing the rule of law and enhancing security, I am optimistic about the future of Afghanistan. With the signing of the strategic partnership, the United States reaffirmed its long-term commitment to an Afghanistan that is democratic, free and able to provide for its own security. And I will work with the Afghan people toward this end, especially in the areas of security, economic development, democracy and governance. I look forward to collaborating with President Karzai, a visionary leader with a clear mandate to lead his people toward a brighter future. And I particularly appreciate the presence here of Afghanistan's Chargé d'Affaires, General Payenda Mohammad.

I am humbled to be able to work with American men and women, both in and out of uniform, in bringing freedom and stability to the Afghan people. I pledge that I will do all in my power to keep the people in my charge safe, their morale high, and ensure that they receive all the support they deserve. And I know the Secretary has told me to ask if I need help.

I look forward to a close as possible relationship with my military colleagues under the leadership of Lieutenant General Eikenberry.

On a more personal note, there are more people in this room that have influenced my life and career than I can properly thank or acknowledge. Former ambassadors, former secretaries, DCMs, colleagues from other agencies have inspired me and taught me over many years. And I'm really honored and thankful that so many of you are here today to share this moment with me.

The loyalty and friendship of so many of those I have supervised has repeatedly been a source of strength through difficult times in the past. Some, like my aide Bill Paton and my secretary Alene Richards, who couldn't be here today, are crazy enough to come with me from Baghdad to Kabul. And I am grateful to them.

I wish my parents, Robert and Marlen Neumann, had lived to see this day. They shaped my sense of duty and love of foreign affairs. My father was a particular friend and colleague as well as a father. And their love for this profession and for Afghanistan was deep. And I hope that somehow they are sharing in this moment.

My own family remains a source of strength. My mother-in-law Margaret Grimm, my son Brian, and daughter Helen, now with spouses of their own, have risen to the challenges of life abroad. They supported my decision to go to Baghdad as they have supported this journey to Kabul and their confidence is very special to me.

I have left to last the one person without whose love and support my life could not have possibly have unfolded as it has, my wife Elaine. In nearly all the 40 years of our marriage -- nearly 40 -- we have never liked being separated. But she understood and supported me when I asked to go to Vietnam. She supported me in Algeria and humanized my leadership at my first embassy through her counsel from a distance. When I pondered the decision to remain in Baghdad, she helped me make that decision by reminding me that I had some particular talents that might be of service at a difficult time.

I have long believed that the sometimes ritualistic thanks we pay to spouses left behind is inadequate. We who go to the far-flung and sometimes dangerous posts have the professional fascination of the work and the adrenaline stimulation of the day to keep going. They get to keep up the bills, the house and the family. It is all critical but it is not exciting.

We know most of the time that we are safe. They have always to wonder. I think Elaine's job is harder than mine. I could not do mine without her support; and for that, and for your love and strength, thank you, darling.

(Applause.)

The remarkable progress of the past few years in transitioning Afghanistan to a stable, democratic state is a testament to the Afghan people's resilience and hope for a better way of life. As I take on the mantle of a post once held by my father, I am inspired by the courage and dedication of Afghans, Americans and our international and NATO partners in bringing freedom and security to this region and to the world.

Secretary Rice, I thank you and President Bush for the honor of serving the American people.

(Applause.)

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