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Baghdad, Iraq

April 9, 2006

Today, on the third anniversary of Iraqi Freedom Day, the Iraqi people celebrate the freedoms that they were denied for more than three decades, and pause to remember the brave people who lead the way out of the darkness of tyranny into the light of freedom.

On this day in 2003, Iraqis, assisted by U.S. Marines, toppled the huge statue of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square. This act was not just symbolic. It signaled the beginning of a fledgling democracy that continues to mature. During the past year alone, Iraqis have elected a Constitutional government, drafted and ratified a constitution and held successful elections for their new national assembly. Through 2005 more and more Iraqis decided to engage in building the new Iraq, culminating in almost 75 percent of registered voters casting ballots in December's election.

Additionally, there have been great gains in the development of Iraqi Security Forces, forces critical to returning stability to Iraq and hastening the return of Iraq to the Iraqi people. Over last year Iraqi forces have almost doubled from 127,000 to more than 250,000 today. Today, 50 Iraqi Army Battalions, 13 Brigades, and 2 Divisions have security responsibility in Iraq. They are truly taking the lead. By the end of summer, 75 percent of the Brigades and Battalions will be leading counterinsurgency operations in Iraq, with the Coalition in support.

Despite the harsh test of sectarian violence following the bombing of the Golden Dome mosque in Samarra in February, Iraqi leaders and security forces have held together. The Iraqi government officials called for calm and Iraqi Security Forces secured key areas.

Iraqi Freedom Day is a time to reflect on what has happened, and what still needs to happen. Despite much progress, much work remains. We must continue to help Iraqis create a strong, stable and successful new democracy. The Iraqi people and their elected representatives must choose a competent government that will develop a program for Iraq that benefits all Iraqis. The legitimate security forces must quell sectarian violence. Population centers must be secure to allow Iraq's new institutions to take root and businesses to flourish. Finally, the people must be able to trust their leadership and the institutions of the state.

Through it all the United States and its Coalition partners will remain steadfast partners and encourage progress. In the end, Iraq will succeed. Its success will help transform the wider Middle East and give even greater meaning to Iraqi Freedom Day.

May God Bless the people of Iraq and the members of the Iraqi and Coalition Security Forces who have made freedom possible.

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