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2006 ambassador speeches**Ambassador Khalilzad & General Casey's Joint Op/Ed****A path to success in Iraq**

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The U.S. will continue to support its partner to make sure that crucial goals in the Middle East are reached.

By Zalmay Khalilzad and George W. Casey Jr.

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THREE YEARS after U.S. Marines and Iraqis toppled the huge statue of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square, Americans and Iraqis can be proud of what our common efforts and sacrifices have achieved since that day, even as we acknowledge that challenges remain to reaching the goal of a stable and democratic Iraq.

The success of Iraq is vitally important to the region and the world. In the broader Middle East, the absence of freedom, accountable systems of government and social and economic progress contributed to creating an environment in which extremism and terrorism developed and thrived. The effects of the dysfunctional politics of the region were visited upon the U.S. on 9/11.

Supporting political transformations in distant regions has never been easy or inexpensive. But when free nations have persevered, these efforts have paid dividends that justified the investment. After World War II, the U.S. and its allies helped Germany and Japan become engines of postwar economic prosperity and vital democratic allies in the Cold War. The rebuilding of South Korea enabled that country to emerge as an Asian leader.

As we look at Iraq today, it is in the middle of a difficult transition. During the last year, Iraqis elected a transitional government, drafted and ratified a sound constitution and held successful elections for their new national assembly. About 75% of Iraq's registered voters cast ballots in December, and the new assembly will represent all of the country's major communities.

In the last 12 months, Iraqi security forces have grown from 127,000 members to more than 250,000. Fifty Iraqi army battalions, 13 brigades and two divisions have security responsibility for thousands of square miles of territory, and another 12 battalions and three brigades are poised to assume their own security responsibility soon. By the end of summer, the goal is 75% of Iraqi army battalions and brigades will be leading counterinsurgency operations, with coalition forces playing only training and supporting roles.

When faced with the harsh test of sectarian violence following the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February, Iraqi leaders and Iraqi security forces held together. The Iraqi government called for unity and calm and implemented security measures to prevent sectarian violence. Though not all Iraqi security forces reacted with the needed firmness and evenhandedness, the vast majority took the initiative early on in moving to full alert and securing key areas.

Despite progress, Iraq is recovering from more than three decades of neglect. We confront serious challenges that are evolving, and we must be

able to adapt our means to pursue our goals.

First, the principal threat to stability is shifting from an insurgency grounded in rejection of the new political order to sectarian violence grounded in mutual fears and recriminations. In the last six months, terrorists have continued to stoke sectarianism through calculated attacks such as the Samarra mosque bombing that, in turn, have triggered destabilizing cycles of violence between communities.

We are helping Iraqi leaders overcome sectarianism through the formation of a government of national unity that includes all major political forces, governs from the center and is composed of ministers who are competent to perform their duties.

Second, the coalition and Iraq's increasingly effective security forces are working hard to protect the Iraqi people. Though preventing every terrorist attack is impossible, the goal is to create an environment sufficiently free of attacks and intimidation needed for Iraq's new institutions to take root and for the people to develop their businesses and civil society. In 2006, the objective is to secure Baghdad and to initiate similar efforts in nine other key cities.

Third, Iraq's leaders must develop security institutions that not only are effective but also trusted by all groups. The ministers of defense and interior, as well as their senior staff, must have the confidence of all communities and cannot be tied to ethnic or sectarian militias. To help realize this goal, the coalition and the Iraqi government are dedicating additional effort and focus to increasing the confidence of police personnel and embedding trainers with Iraqi police units. Our objective is to ensure that the new police are in fact — and are perceived to be — servants of the public, not ethnic groups or sects.

Fourth, the U.S. and the new Iraqi government will work together to create a regional environment supportive of stability in Iraq. Many U.S. friends in the region have played a helpful role in encouraging Sunni Arabs to participate in the December 2005 election. Unfortunately, other countries, such as Syria and Iran, have opted to engage in actions unhelpful to Iraq's future. Though the U.S. hopes to see friendly relations between Iraq and all of its neighbors, we will work with Iraqis to counter any threat.

Many great nations have faced moments of crisis in which leaders and communities have to come together or allow their nation to fail. Iraqi leaders have navigated this period of crisis. The U.S. will remain a steadfast partner and help catalyze progress as needed. If we do so, Iraq will succeed and become the foundation of the transformation of the wider Middle East.

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