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For Immediate Release
Office of the Vice President
January 19, 2006

Vice President's Remarks on Iraq and the War on Terror at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research

The Grand Hyatt New York
New York, New York

12:37 P.M. EST

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. (Applause.) Well, thank you for the warm welcome and thanks for the introduction. And I've been looking forward to the visit today, and after my comments I'll be happy to accept a few questions.

An honor, of course -- it's an honor today to be joined by Governor George Pataki. It's always a pleasure to be with my friend and colleague Ambassador John Bolton, who is here with us today. And I want to thank the people of the Manhattan Institute for hosting us here this afternoon. This is a place of tremendous creativity, of original thinking, and of intellectual rigor. The scholars of the Manhattan Institute have shown, time and again, the power of good ideas to shape public policy and to have an impact on the lives of people here in New York and across the nation. You have made enormous contributions to the betterment of the city and the policy debate nationwide. The Manhattan Institute is greatly admired in the country, and rightly so. I congratulate you for building such a fine reputation, and for maintaining it over the years. (Applause.)



As always, I enjoy the opportunity to visit New York, a city that means so much to America, and where I was nominated for a second term as your Vice President. New York, of course, is where the first Vice President, John Adams, was inaugurated, together with President Washington, in 1789. This was the nation's capital, and back then Congress met in Federal Hall, down at the intersection of Broad and Wall Streets. I was interested to learn that in those early days, the Vice President actually had floor privileges in the United States Senate. He was allowed to actually go down into the well of the Senate and engage in debate of the day. And then he did a couple of times, and they withdrew his floor privileges. (Laughter.) And they've never been restored.

So, all that a Vice President can really do in the Senate these days is to preside, and to cast tie-breaking votes. This is something John Adams did 29 times; I've done on seven occasions. The most

recent was last month, when the Senate split 50/50 on the deficit reduction package. I was pleased to take the chair that day to cast a crucial vote for spending discipline. Once again, I'm happy to observe that every time I get to vote, our side wins. (Laughter and applause.)

In order to cast that vote, I had to cut short a trip to the Middle East -- although I did get back to the region just this week, visiting Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. In Afghanistan last month, Lynne and I witnessed the first full session of parliament -- a significant event in any country, but one that had special meaning in a nation that just over four years ago was in the grip of a cruel dictatorship.

Now Afghanistan is a free country -- with a market economy, equality for women, and millions of children going to school for the first time. There is still a terrorist element that threatens the Afghan people, and there continues to be tough fighting in some of the mountains and along border areas. Our military is getting the job done, together with coalition partners and an increasingly strong and effective Afghan military. It is impossible to overstate all that our coalition has achieved in Afghanistan -- and when our forces return home from that part of the world, they will be able to be proud of their service for the rest of their lives.

I brought that same message to our people serving in Iraq. These Americans in uniform have been absolutely relentless in their duties -- going out every day, striking the enemy, conducting raids, training Iraqi forces, countering attacks, seizing weapons, capturing killers. They have faced long deployments, the hardship of separation from home and family, the loss of comrades. Their efforts are bringing us closer to the goal we share with Iraq's leaders: a democratic country that can defend itself; a nation that will never again be a safe zone for terrorists; and a model for peaceful democratic reform in a troubled region. When that goal is achieved, all of us will live in a safer world.

Our strategy in Iraq is clear, our tactics will remain flexible; we'll keep at the work until we finish the job. Progress has not come easily, but it has been steady.

A short time ago, the Iraqi people had an appointed government, no popularly elected legislature, no permanent constitution, no recent experience with free national elections. In less than a year they have drafted a progressive, democratic constitution; then approved the document in a national referendum; and elected a new government under its provisions. And in each successive election in Iraq going back to January a year ago there's been less violence, broader participation, and bigger voter turnout. Iraqis have shown they value their own liberty and that they are determined to choose their own destiny.

Our coalition has also put great effort into standing up the Iraqi Security Forces, and we've come a great distance over the past year. We're helping to build an Iraqi force that is well equipped and trained, and that was vital in the success of last month's elections. As the security force grows in strength and as the political process advances, we will eventually be able to decrease troop levels without losing any capacity to do battle with the terrorists.

Going forward, any decisions about troop levels will be driven by the conditions on the ground and by the judgment of our commanders -- not by artificial timelines set by politicians in Washington, D.C. (Applause.)

There is still hard work ahead because we are dealing with enemies who have declared an intention to bring great harm to any nation that opposes their aims. Their prime targets are the United States and the American people. And so we have a continuing responsibility to lead in this fight.

In the war on terror we face a loose network of committed fanatics, found in many countries, operating under different commanders. Yet the branches of the network share the same basic ideology and the same dark vision for the world. The terrorists want to end American and Western influence in the Middle East. Their objective in that region is to gain control of a country, so they have a base from which to launch attacks and to wage war against governments that fail meet their demands. The terrorists believe that by controlling a whole country, they will be able to target and overthrow other governments in the region, to establish a radical Islamic empire that encompasses a part of the globe from Spain, across North Africa, through the Middle East and South Asia, all the way to Indonesia.

They have made clear, as well, their ultimate ambitions: to arm themselves with weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate all Western countries, and to cause mass death here in the United States.

Some have suggested that by liberating Iraq from Saddam Hussein, we simply stirred up a hornet's nest. They overlook a fundamental fact: We were not in Iraq on September 11th, 2001, and the terrorists hit us anyway. The reality is that terrorists were at war with our country long before the liberation of Iraq, and long before the attacks of 9/11.

For many years, they were the ones on the offensive. They became convinced that if they killed Americans, they could change American policy. In Beirut in 1983, terrorists killed 241 Marines. Thereafter, the U.S. withdrew from Beirut. In Mogadishu in 1993, terrorists killed 19 American soldiers. Shortly thereafter, U.S. forces withdrew from Somalia. Over time, the terrorists concluded they could strike America without paying a price, because they did, repeatedly: The bombing at the World Trade Center in 1993; the murders at the Saudi National Guard Training Facility in 1995; the attack on the Khobar Towers in 1996; the attack on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; and the attack on the USS Cole in 2000.

Believing they could strike us with impunity and believing that if they hit us hard enough, they could change U.S. policy, they attacked us on 9/11 here in the homeland and killed 3,000 people.

Now they are making a stand in Iraq -- testing our resolve, trying to intimidate the United States into abandoning our friends and permitting the overthrow of a new Middle Eastern democracy. Not long ago we obtained a message from the number-two man in al Qaeda, Mr. Zawahiri, that was sent to his chief deputy in Iraq, the terrorist Zarqawi. The letter makes clear that Iraq is part of a larger plan of imposing Islamic radicalism across the broader Middle East and of making Iraq a terrorist haven and staging ground for attacks against other nations. Zawahiri also expressed the view that America can be made to run once again.

Lately our forces in Iraq have been receiving some mixed signals out of Washington, and they might have been wondering whether America has what it takes to stay in the fight. When I visited Iraq and Afghanistan, I assured our forces that the American people do not support a policy of passivity,

resignation, and defeatism in the face of terror. This nation made a decision: We will never go back to the false comforts of the world before September 11th, 2001. We will engage these enemies with the goal of victory. And with the American military in the fight, that victory is certain. (Applause.)

Fighting the war on terror is a significant test of military skill and of our national resolve. Four years ago, President Bush told the Congress that the country -- and the country that the path ahead would be difficult, that we were heading into a long struggle, unlike any we have ever known. All this has come to pass. We have faced, and we are facing today, enemies who hate us, who hate our country, who hate the liberties for which we stand. They dwell in the shadows, wear no uniform, have no regard for the laws of warfare, and feel unconstrained by any standard of morality. We've never had a fight like this -- and those of us in positions of responsibility have a duty to wage a broad-scale effort for the sake of this nation's freedom and security. We've had to hunt down terrorists in remote areas. We've made it clear that regimes that support terror are equally guilty of terrorist crimes and must be held to account. We've strengthened our intelligence capabilities, and undertaken a major anti-proliferation effort with other countries to protect the civilized world from the threat of weapons of mass destruction.

The war against terror includes a home front, which is every bit as important as the battlefields overseas. In his speech to Congress after 9/11, President Bush said the United States would, "direct every resource at our command -- every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war -- to the disruption and the defeat of the global terror network." The Congress backed him up in full, authorizing the President to defeat an enemy that had already slipped into our country and waged a horrific attack against innocent, unsuspecting men, women, and children.

A vast effort like this naturally involves a home front, with a great deal of urgent and difficult work needed here, as well.

Four years ago, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Patriot Act, to give law enforcement the tools they need to track down terrorists inside the United States. Lately the Patriot Act has become a victim of partisan politics. It was filibustered in the Senate last month, and Democratic Senator Harry Reid boasted that he and his colleagues had "killed the Patriot Act." We managed to get a brief extension passed, but the law is still set to expire early next month. I believe the security of the United States needs to be above politics. Congress needs to renew the Patriot Act. (Applause.)

Another absolutely vital requirement in the war on terror is that we use whatever means are appropriate to try to find out the intentions of the enemy. To this end, in the days following 9/11, the President authorized the National Security Agency to intercept a certain category of terrorist-linked international communications. Let me emphasize that, because you frequently hear this called a "domestic surveillance program." It is not. We are talking about international communications, one end of which we have reason to believe is related to al Qaeda or to terrorist networks affiliated with al Qaeda. It's hard to think of any category of information that could be more important to the safety of the United States than international communications one end of which we have reason to believe is related to al Qaeda.

If you'll recall, the report of the 9/11 Commission, it focused on our inability to uncover links between

terrorists at home and terrorists abroad. The authorization the President made after September 11th helped address that problem in a manner that is fully consistent with the constitutional responsibilities and legal authority of the President, and with the civil liberties of the American people.

The activities conducted under this authorization have helped us detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks against the American people. As such, this program is critical to the national security of the United States.

A spirited debate is now underway, and our message to the American people is clear and straightforward: These actions are within the President's authority and responsibility under the Constitution and laws; and these actions are vital to our security. This is a wartime measure, limited in scope to surveillance associated with terrorists, and conducted in a way that safeguards the civil liberties of our people. It is important to note that leaders of Congress have been briefed more than a dozen times on the President's authorization, and on the activities conducted under it. I've personally presided over most of those briefings. In addition, the entire program undergoes a thorough review within the executive branch every 45 days. After each review, the President determines once again whether or not to reauthorize the program. He has done so more than 30 times since September 11th -- and he has indicated his intent to do so as long as our nation faces a continuing threat from al Qaeda and related organizations.

It seems more than obvious to say that our nation is still at risk of attack. Yet as we get farther away from September 11th, some in Washington are yielding to the temptation to downplay the threat, and to back away from the business at hand. That mindset may be comforting but it is dangerous.

We're all grateful this nation has gone for more than four years without another 9/11. Obviously, no one can guarantee that we won't be hit again. But our nation has been protected by more than luck. It is no accident that we haven't been hit in more than four years. We've been protected by sensible policy decisions, by decisive action at home and abroad, and by round-the-clock efforts on the part of people in the armed services, law enforcement, intelligence, and homeland security. The enemy that struck on 9/11 is weakened and fractured, yet still lethal and still determined to hit us again. Either we are serious about fighting this war on terror or we are not. And the enemies of America need to know: We are serious, and this administration will not let down our guard. (Applause.)

All of us know that crucial debates lie ahead, just as we know that this New Year will bring its own challenges for our country. When those challenges come, America will have the resources, the resolve, and the character to meet them all. The more you know about this country, the more you travel and see what we've been able to achieve in this troubled world, you cannot help but grow in optimism and, yes, in pride as well.

On the final day of that trip abroad last month, I went by helicopter to the earthquake-stricken area, in the foothills of the Himalayas in Pakistan. On the ground below, across some incredibly rugged territory, were the remnants of entire villages that were utterly destroyed last fall in the earthquake that killed more than of 70,000 people. After the quake had hit, President Bush ordered units of our military to go in and help, within 48 hours Americans had begun airlifting thousands of tons of equipment and supplies. It was up in those mountains that the U.S. Army set up a MASH unit, with sophisticated

medical supplies, military physicians, nurses, and physicians' assistants, and even some volunteer doctors from the United States.

Lynne and I went to that tent village. And I can tell you, it's quite a feeling to stand in the remotest hinterlands and see the American flag and citizens of our country giving aid to the desperate, including medical care to people who had never seen a doctor before in their entire lives. (Applause.)

These are extraordinary accomplishments -- and yet they are typical of America -- and so very much in the spirit of our country. The United States is a good and a generous land. We're a nation that believes in ideals, that upholds them in our own country, and that acts on them throughout the world. From providing more global food aid, by far, than any other nation, to supporting life-saving treatments for hundreds of thousands of Sub-Saharan Africans living with HIV/AIDS, to standing with freedom-loving peoples in the struggle against tyranny and terror, we do great good in this world. And in 2006 and beyond, we will do even more as we serve humanity and justice, the dignity of the individual, the rights of mankind, and the cause of liberty.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. MONE: Thank you. The Vice President has agreed to answer some questions. I'd ask you to raise your hand, wait for me to acknowledge you, and then wait for the hand mike to come to you so we can all hear your questions. So we have some questions?

Q Mr. Vice President, you mentioned that success has bred a certain amount of complacency with regard to how real the threat of terrorism is. What else can be done to convince the American public, and particularly Congress, that this is, indeed, a very serious ongoing threat?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, we do everything, obviously, we can by way of trying to keep this in front of the nation. The President and I talk about it nearly all of our appearances. I think there are a number of members of Congress who are actively and aggressively engaged in the effort, as well, too.

And I think -- it's not surprising that people want to look and say, well, it's been four years now, maybe 9/11 was a one-off event, that it's easy enough to sort of put it out of our minds and get on with our lives. It's a normal, I think, sort of understanding of the way the human character works.

Those of us in positions of responsibility, though, have to constantly and continually remind everybody that the threat is very real, that it's still out there, and that they're doing everything they can to get at us. And I don't know any other way to address it than to simply get after it.

Obviously, the public can have an impact to the extent that you ask questions about it, demand action. When we get into one of these debates about the appropriateness of defensive measures we've put in place, such as the controversy over the National Security Agency and our program to pick up on communications by al Qaeda types, I think it's important for groups like the Manhattan Institute or others who have an interest in public policy to engage in the debate. Talk to your congressman, talk to your senator, let them know how you feel about it. Don't leave it just some sort of remote esoteric debate for the halls of Congress. It affects the lives of all Americans, and I think it's important that

people be heard from.

Q Mr. Vice President, you've spent years in the House, you preside over the Senate, so you understand the workings of Congress. I would argue that this Congress has lost the trust and respect of the people, which is serious for democracy. Do you believe your party and its leaders can do something about not just the K Street syndrome, but the earmarks which have exploded, the unrecorded holds on nominees, so good nominees of the President can't get a vote for two years and nobody knows who or why? Do you believe that that can be changed, and the Congress can regain the respect and the confidence of the people?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think you've touched on a couple of key items. The question of holds -- Don Rumsfeld, for example, over at the Defense Department did a calculation the other day, and he has operated the department during the five years he's been there with an average vacancy rate of 25 percent among those senior posts that require Senate confirmation. Could you imagine running your company or your law firm and you start with the proposition that you only get 75 percent of your total allotment of personnel? Keep in mind that there are only fewer than 50 people confirmed by the Senate to run a department that has some 3 million total personnel in it. And as Peter points out, you can't fill those slots because the holds are placed on the nominees, oftentimes without the senator ever letting anybody know why he put the hold on it, or even who is responsible for it. It is a problem.

Earmarks are a problem. These are provisions written into legislation or basically added in conference that specifies how money is supposed to be spent by the executive. When I was Secretary of Defense 15 years ago, the Defense Authorization Bill was about 70 pages long. That was the total length of the bill that told us how to operate for a year. Today the Defense Authorization Bill is, I believe, close to 900 pages long. And that's just the growth in the detail, specific requirements that are imposed on the department by the Congress, oftentimes without regard to national security issues, but rather specifying how much -- how many meals-ready-to-eat you'll order that are aimed specifically at maintaining a certain level of production, a certain number of jobs back in the district. So it is a problem.

And I think, again, the emphasis needs to be -- and is at present -- I think Denny Hastert, for example, in the House is moving fairly aggressively on a number of these issues. I think earmarks may well be part of the reform effort that's mounted in the Congress here in the months ahead. We go through these cycles periodically when we run into problems. I think from a substantive standpoint that the record of the Congress has been good in many areas. I think on tax policy, for example, in recent years, I think in supporting the President and the troops, and the war on terror, I think it's not a negative message in all respects -- although there are some problems, obviously, that do need to be addressed and I think will be.

Q Mr. Vice President, a cornerstone of U.S. policy has been to spread democracy in the Middle East. Does the electoral success of Hamas and of the Iran-backed fundamentalist parties in Iraq prompt any second thoughts?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, I think the basic principle is still sound. If you look at the problem in Iran, though, a very restrictive system in terms of who's allowed on the ballot. And there's an unelected

group of clerics, basically, that dominate in Iran. They're the ones who have to certify before someone is allowed on the ballot. And we've seen the result of that process, obviously, has been the election of the new President Ahmadinejad, the former mayor of Tehran. And he has conducted himself in a way and made a number of statements since he got elected, obviously, that are cause for concern. I don't think you can blame democracy or democratic principles for the fact that he is there.

Hamas in the Palestinian areas -- we'll see what happens. We got an election coming up shortly. But if you believe in democratic practices, as we do; believe in a freedom agenda for the Middle East, as we do; then I think it's important for us to be as consistent as possible going forward.

I think we've seen in Iraq what happens when you get it basically right with respect to the elections that have been held there. It has been a wide-open system. We've had hundreds of parties file. We've had elections in January, elections in October, elections in December. We've seen the participation rates climb steadily in each of those three elections. And I think we'll have good -- eventually a good government in Iraq.

Once we've started down this road, though, I think it's very important we stick with it, and stick with those principles. And we believe -- the President believes very deeply and I share his conviction that the solution to the long-term problems in the Middle East lies in having democratically elected governments in places like Iraq that won't spawn the ideology of hatred and violence that has dominated so much of the region, that will offer people opportunities and hope, and will reduce the prospects for war in the future. So it doesn't mean you're always going to get a perfect result, but I would argue that we're going to get a much better result out of that process than we have the system that's been in place in the past that has produced the likes of Saddam Hussein, for example, or of Yasser Arafat.

MR. MONE: This will be the last question.

Q Mr. Vice President, thank you for your remarks today. My question is on tax policy. The Congress and the administration cut rates in 2003 on labor and capital and we got more of both of those -- more jobs, more capital. But the movement seems to be stalled now. One of the main obstacles is the scoring process that Congress uses. So they assume that there's no change in the growth rate no matter what you do with tax rate, so it makes it very hard to get ahead on that.

What's the plan on tax policy for the remainder of the administration? Where are you going? Any chance of changing the way people score the tax changes?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I think many of us would support the proposition that we ought to have -- allow more dynamic scoring with respect to tax changes. But part of that is a problem for the Congressional Budget Office and falls within the jurisdiction of Congress the CBO.

From our perspective, I would argue that the single most important thing we've done in terms of our economy were those tax changes, especially what happened in May of '03 when we put in place the 15 percent rate on capital gains and dividends. You can trace the beginning of this recovery to that month when they kicked in and were effective. We've added something like 4.6 million new jobs during

that period of time.

I think you can also make a very strong case that those tax cuts contributed directly not only to economic growth and prosperity here at home, but also generated additional revenues for the government. And we think going forward it's very important we continue those rates.

The problem we have, of course, is that the way the rates were put in place was through reconciliation. And under the rules of the Senate what that means is that after a certain period of time, the rates will go back up. In other words, if no action is taken, we'll see a tax increase on things like cap gains and dividends, as well as the overall rate structure on income taxes. We think that will be a terrible mistake. We think if that were allowed to happen it would do serious damage to the economy, so we think it's important to try to make those tax changes permanent. And that's our stated position and what we'll continue to produce. There is legislation pending in the Congress that would extend for a period of time those changes that we put in place in May, but our ultimate objective would be to make those tax changes permanent. We think they've been vital to the success of the economy. And we'll continue to work for that objective.

Q Thank you, Mr. Vice President. (Applause.)

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