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## Remarks at the 88th Annual American Legion Convention

### Secretary Condoleezza Rice

The Salt Palace Convention Center  
Salt Lake City, Utah  
August 29, 2006



**SECRETARY RICE:** Well, thank you for that warm and generous welcome and thank you, Commander Bock, for the generous introduction. And I want to thank Commander Bock for his leadership of this great organization.

The Commander is serving the American Legion so well. And you, the people of this great organization, are serving our country so well. Perhaps Commander Bock's story is a common one to some of you. I just had the great pleasure of meeting his son, Adam, who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and he's soon leaving for Afghanistan. And it just shows that America's families are contributing and giving to our nation. Thank you, Commander Bock, for your family's service to our nation.

(Applause.)

I would also like to recognize National Adjutant Robert Spanogle, all of the nations – all of the national officers of the American Legion who are here today, and other distinguished guests.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am so honored to be with you here in Salt Lake City today. As our nation's largest veterans' service organization, the American Legion plays a very special role in America's history and in America's life. The men and women in this hall and others like you have made the greatest of sacrifices: leaving your families, and your friends, and your loved ones to protect America's freedoms, America's democracy, and especially American lives.

It was you, our veterans, who stopped Nazi aggression in Europe and Japanese militarism in Asia during World War II. It was you, our veterans, who fought heroically to contain the spread of communism in Korea and in Vietnam. And it was

you, our youngest veterans, whose valiant service has removed old threats and brought new hope to Afghanistan and to Iraq. America owes an immeasurable debt of gratitude to the brave veterans of our nation.

So today, on behalf of President Bush, and all of the American people, I want to thank the members of the American Legion for your service to our country, and I want to join with all of you today in sending this message to our fighting men and women overseas: Your service is bringing hope to others, honor to yourselves, and you are making every American very, very proud.

(Applause.)

Earlier today, I had the opportunity to spend some time with the women of the American Legion Auxiliary, and I want to salute them for their volunteerism, for their patriotism, and for their commitment to the veterans of our country. There are few better examples of the American spirit than the members of the American Legion and of the Auxiliary.

Through your two signature programs, Boys State and Girls State, you're introducing a new generation of Americans to the principles of the American republic. You're setting them on a course to become the new leaders of our country. And you're teaching our youngest citizens to be proud that we Americans are and will always be, "One Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

(Applause.)

The service of America's Legionnaires was especially inspiring one year ago to this day, when our nation suffered the worst natural disaster in our history: Hurricane Katrina. On that day and in those that followed, American Legion Posts all across this country sprang into action to help the residents of our Gulf Coast. In DeRidder, Louisiana, for example, Post 27 turned its bingo hall into an emergency shelter for 41 kidney dialysis patients. And right here in Salt Lake City, Post 71 sent truckloads of clothing to displaced hurricane victims living in Houston.

In times like those, in times of unbearable loss and heartache, the compassion of the American people shines through in groups like the American Legion. And it serves as a beacon to the world and it tells the world that America is proud, America is resilient, and when tragedy brings us to our knees, we will help one another to rise to our feet, united every time.

(Applause.)

I'm especially reminded of America's resolve in times of adversity, as we come upon the fifth anniversary of September the 11th. That day, America encountered the darker nature of our world, and our nation's course was profoundly altered. Since September 11th, we have taken the fight to the enemy, and we are making America safer.

Consider the progress we have made: Five years ago, the members of al-Qaida were largely free to operate, to organize, to travel, to move money, to communicate with each other, and to plan attacks to murder innocent people. Today, however, five years later, America is leading a great coalition of countries in the fight against terrorists. Together, we are seizing their money. We're closing their sanctuaries. We're hunting their cells. We're killing and capturing their leaders. Ladies and gentlemen: We are waging a global war on terrorism, and we are breaking the back of the al-

Qaida network.

(Applause.)

Because we've gone on the offense, America is safer, but we are not yet safe, as we've seen just recently with the foiled terror plot in London. We know that every day, each and every day, violent extremists are plotting new ways to do us harm. And we know that now and for many years to come, America and our allies will be engaged in a long war, a war that we can and must win.

Today, five years after the attack on our nation, people still differ about what September 11th called us to do. On the one hand, if you focus only on the attacks themselves and believe that they were caused by 19 hijackers supported by a network called al-Qaida, operating from a failed state, Afghanistan, then the response can be limited.

But if you believe, as I do, and as President Bush does, that the root cause of September 11th was the violent expression of a global extremist ideology, an ideology that thrives on the oppression and despair of the Middle East, then we must seek to remove this source of terror by helping the people of that troubled region to transform their countries and to transform their lives.

We must be very clear about this broader struggle: Yes, it is a war, but a war of completely new and different dimensions. It is a struggle between the vast majority of moderate Muslims, who desire peace and freedom from oppression, and a small minority of violent extremists that will do whatever it takes to further their ideology of hatred and injustice.

The dream of some, that we could avoid this conflict, that we did not have to take sides in this battle in the Middle East, that dream was demolished on September the 11th. For as we learned on that fateful day, America's stake in this struggle is very clear: The security of our citizens is inextricably linked to the success of freedom and moderation and, yes, democracy in the Middle East.

(Applause.)

Under President Bush's leadership, the United States is now standing shoulder to shoulder with moderate men and women all across the Middle East. Together, we are summoning a vision of hope to combat the ideology of extremism that we face. And in the past few years, we have witnessed some unprecedented events.

Five years ago, who could have imagined that a vibrant debate about democratic reform and economic reform and social reform would be raging in every country of the Broader Middle East, a debate not about whether to proceed with reform, but how to proceed? Who could have imagined the positive changes we have already witnessed in places as different as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait and Morocco, and Jordan? Sure, there have been many setbacks and step backs in each of these cases, but the steps forward are also taking place.

And who could have imagined that the people of Lebanon would stand up by the hundreds of thousands and call for the Syrian occupation of their country to end and for a new democratic future to begin? And of course, who could have imagined that the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, after years of tyranny and misery, would turn out by the millions to make their voices heard and to vote for a better life?

These events were remarkable. And they were setbacks for the forces of extremism in the Middle East. But the elections of the previous years only marked the beginnings of a journey to democracy, not its completion.

Advancing the work of democracy, the daily effort to build effective institutions through which all of a country's citizens can experience justice and exercise power equally, this is a longer and far harder process. And it is made even more difficult because the moderate citizens of the Middle East face violent enemies who are determined to reverse the gains of democracy.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban is terrorizing the Afghan people and trying to stop their democratic progress. But we and our NATO allies are helping the Afghan people, their government, and their army fight them and beat them back. In Lebanon, the radical leaders of Hezbollah launched a war against Israel to undermine the moderate Lebanese Government and to put at risk the lives of the Lebanese people. But now, we and the international community are helping this young democracy to strengthen and to expand its sovereign authority.

In the Palestinian territories, radical elements of Hamas are holding an Israeli soldier hostage, as well as the aspirations of the Palestinian people and their leaders. And of course, in Iraq, we see the same struggle being played out daily, as terrorists and sectarian militias seek to strangle the promise of peace and unity and democracy.

I know that many of you here today have friends and family members who are serving in Iraq. Some of you have served there yourselves. We've all seen stories about Iraq, some positive and inspiring; others, indeed many, that are disheartening and frustrating to hear. I know that Americans are concerned about the course and the future of Iraq. On the one hand, Americans want desperately to succeed in Iraq. They want to do whatever it takes to achieve victory.

But on the other hand, there are unsettling questions. Is success possible? Is it really worth the effort? Do the Iraqi people really want to live together in peace and freedom, the peace and freedom for which our troops have sacrificed so much. Or do they desire a darker path, somehow, of violence?

Ladies and Gentlemen: I am here today to tell you that I am confident that Iraq, Iraqis, and America will succeed.

(Applause.)

When you speak with our fellow citizens who are serving in Iraq and when you ask them why they fight, why they are optimistic and inspired to conduct their mission, I am sure that most of them give you the same answer that I hear from troops when I speak to them, and from members of our diplomatic corps, and other civilians who are there risking their lives in Iraq. Most of these men and women say that what motivates them to do their job every day is the overwhelming hope that they witness in the Iraqi people and the tremendous sacrifices that Iraqis themselves are bearing to realize that hope.

Most Iraqis want what all people want. They want freedom from coercion and oppression, safety from violence and injustice, opportunities for a better life for themselves and for their children. They want a future of peace and moderation for their country, as do the leaders they freely elected in December, who are now serving at great personal risk in Iraq's national unity government.

To a small number of extremists in Iraq, however, this vision of a moderate, democratic future is an existential threat, because it is one in which their ideology of sectarian hatred will find no support. So these terrorists and these militias resort to unthinkable acts of brutality to drag the country into civil strife and to destroy the hopes of their fellow Iraqis. They target innocent civilians making a religious pilgrimage. They murder people with a certain first name, because it signifies a sectarian difference. And they lay bombs on soccer fields to murder young children, because games like soccer are deemed "idolatrous."

Though the risks to their lives are clear and present, though, Iraqis of every sect and every ethnicity, carried forward in their hope -- and they are pulling together to make a new Iraq succeed. Despite rocket attacks and campaigns of terror, they are building water treatment facilities and laying new roads, and preparing to open classrooms for the start of a new school year. And of course, despite intimidation and assassination and the murder of their friends and loved ones, Iraqis volunteer by the tens of thousands for the new Iraqi Army. And when they find themselves in a fight against terrorists and militias, I am told by our military people that they do not cower and run; they join the battle and they fight until that battle is won.

One American soldier in Iraq, -- Army Major Michael Jason, tells the story of one Iraqi who would wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning, each morning, for months, just to begin the long, dangerous walk to Baghdad to stand in line for an application to the new Iraqi Army. And when he was finally cleared to serve, when he was asked one day why he would risk his life and that of his family to join up, his response was, "I am a soldier and my country needs me." All of you understand that statement and that desire because you have felt it yourselves.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is that desire for freedom; it is that belief in country and in family that unites us with people in Iraq and Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East who simply want a better future.

Now in Iraq, we are helping them with a strategy of "clear, hold, and build." It means that with Iraqi forces in the lead and with our strong support, areas are cleared from terrorists and militia control. And this difficult, yet promising work that you are witnessing in Baghdad right now is a part of that effort.

Second, we are helping the Iraqi government to hold the areas we have cleared together; most importantly, by supporting Prime Minister Al-Maliki's plan for national reconciliation. That plan got a significant boost over the weekend when 100 of Iraq's tribal leaders signed a "pact of honor," declaring that they would do what they could to stop the sectarian killings that have plagued Iraq.

Finally, we are helping the government and the people of Iraq to rebuild their country. The keystone of this effort is a compact which will rally new international support for Iraqi reconstruction as the Iraqi government proceeds with democratic and political reform.

Ladies and gentlemen, this strategy can succeed and it will succeed, but if we quit before the job is done, the cost of failure will be severe; indeed, immeasurable. If we abandon the Iraqi people, before their government is strong enough to secure the country, then we will show reformers across the region that America cannot be trusted to keep its word. We will embolden extremist enemies of moderation and of democratic reform. We will leave the makings of a failed state in Iraq, like that one in Afghanistan in the 1990s, which became the base for al-Qaida and the launching pad for the September 11th hijackers. And we should not assume for one minute that those terrorists will not continue to come after

the American homeland. That is why President Bush calls Iraq a central front in the war on terror.

I know that the struggle before us sometimes seems daunting. I know. I feel it. I see it in the challenged eyes of Americans across this great country. But I know too that America has a proud tradition of struggling with others and helping them to secure their freedom. This tradition is embodied in the members of the American Legion and I know many of you, like me, can also remember extraordinary times in history when American leadership and American perseverance and American resolve were required. We stood strong and we must stand strong now.

All of us know, as we look back on history, that there were things that seemed impossible at the time that, in retrospect, seemed quite inevitable. Last summer, I spent some time reading the biographies of our founding fathers. By all rights, the United States of America, facing the greatest imperial power of the time, simply should never have come into being. This past summer, I read a wonderful book about Abraham Lincoln and the civil war. By all rights, this country should never have survived our violent division to come back united and free.

The last time I was in government, I was fortunate enough to serve at the end of the Cold War and I was there for the unification of Germany and the liberation of Eastern Europe and for the peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union, events to which many of you contributed in the steadfastness that you exhibited during the Cold War.

But you know, again, in looking back, I know that that victory was assured not in 1989 and in 1990 and 1991, but in 1946 and 1947, and 1948 and 1949, when in the aftermath of World War II, Europe was devastated and prostrate and the Soviet Union seemed on the march; when in 1947, there was civil war in Greece and civil conflict in Turkey; when Germany was permanently divided in 1948 by the Berlin crisis, Czechoslovakia fell to communist coup; and in 1949, the Soviet Union exploded a nuclear weapon five years ahead of schedule, and the Chinese communists won and a year later, the Korean War broke out.

Who would have thought in 1946 or 1947, or 1948 or 1949, or 1950 that by 1991, we would be celebrating the victory of free men and women over communism? But indeed, we were and it was because of the steadfastness and the commitment of America, of our men and women in uniform, of our leaders, and indeed of the American people to a cause greater than ourselves. Because we knew that only when the world was freer would America be so secure. Now, no one can imagine war again in Europe, and no one imagines war against Japan or in Asia, but in 1949, it didn't seem that way.

I submit to you that if we stay strong, if we stay committed, if we remain true to our values, that one day, people will look back and they will say, "Who could ever have doubted that of course, the universal values of democracy and freedom would take hold in the Middle East?" And they will say, "Who could have ever doubted that the people of Iraq and Afghanistan would be free?" And they will look back and they will say, "Thank God that America stayed the course."

Thank you.

(Applause.)

**2006/T21-2**

Released on August 29, 2006

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