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DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers

Wednesday, July 21, 2004 1:30 p.m. EDT

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(Participating were Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Air Force Gen. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff)

SEC. RUMSFELD: Good afternoon. Since March 2003, when Saddam Hussein's regime defied the international community for the final time and the coalition moved to hold him and his regime accountable for his long list of crimes against humanity, regime remnants have joined with terrorists to try to defeat the liberated Iraqi people.

First, the extremists, the Fedayeen Saddam, believed they could stop the coalition forces in their advance to Baghdad. Instead, the coalition forces took control of the country in one of the speediest and most skillful displays of military power in recent times.

Former regime elements then thought that they could ignite a civil war, if you will, and foment a nationwide uprising. Instead, the Sunnis and Shi'as and the Kurds are today working together in the Iraqi interim government to try to help rebuild their country.

Next, the extremists thought they could derail the handover of power to Iraq's interim government. Instead, the handover occurred a couple of days ahead of schedule.

Now they've adopted still another strategy, and they're targeting Iraqis who are cooperating with the new Iraqi government. They're attacking the Iraqi infrastructure. Their new strategy is proving them very visibly to be enemies of the Iraqi people, and they're losing; they're losing because hope is spreading and progress is continuing. There are many positive signs; a couple that people tend to ignore. One is the strength of the Iraqi currency, and the other is the fact that they've just opened a stock market.

Importantly, courageous leaders continue to step forward to help lead their country. Thousands of Iraqis are volunteering continuously to serve in the various Iraqi security forces. The damaged infrastructure is being

repaired. The new Iraqi prime minister has announced a series of measures to strengthen security and to defeat the insurgents. His government has been welcomed by the international community, and importantly, it's being welcomed by the Iraqi people.

The Saddam Hussein regime needed to be confronted. The United Nations had passed some 17 resolutions demanding disclosure of its weapons programs and that Iraq comply with international law. Saddam defied them all. And the Iraqi people have an opportunity today to earn their freedom and to fashion an Iraqi free state that will be a constructive neighbor in that important region.

The Iraq that's rising today is not the one that the Saddamists envisioned, and it's not the one that will seek alliances with our most deadly enemies.

Nearly three years ago extremists killed 3,000 people on American soil. The hard truth is that if they'd been able to, they would have killed many times that.

Today a country that once shared a common cause with terrorists is now an ally in the effort to defeat the extremists. And the American people can be enormously proud of the young men and women in uniform and our coalition partners, who are contributing every day in a very difficult task but what will be a victory.

General Myers.

GEN. MYERS: Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and good afternoon.

I wish to extend my sincere condolences to the families of our forces who have lost their loved ones or been wounded in the past several days. I think we must keep in the forefront of our minds the dedication and sacrifice not only of our brave men and women in the armed forces and our civilians that are serving over there, but also their families that support them.

Just 24 days into sovereignty, commanders on the ground in Iraq are reporting a sense of a hopeful future from the Iraqi people. This story is a positive sign of progress toward a more stable Iraq.

But let me be clear, on the other hand, that the threat posed by insurgents remains very real. As the secretary said, they continue their attacks, attacks on the coalition, and have recently increased their attacks on Iraqi forces and civilians. Since the transition of sovereignty in Iraq, insurgents have killed approximately 100 security forces, Iraqi security forces, and Iraqi civilians, and about 250 Iraqis have been injured. Government leaders continue to be targets of attack, and yet, as the secretary said, many brave Iraqis are stepping forward to fill those key leadership positions.

The U.S. and its coalition partners continue to focus on supporting Iraq's political transition, helping set the stage for national elections at the end of the year, and equipping and training and mentoring the Iraqi security forces. Those Iraqi security forces are making progress. As of this month, 39 of 45 battalions of the Iraqi National Guard were manned above 75 percent, and they are currently conducting joint patrols throughout Iraq with coalition and Iraqi police forces.

Switching to Afghanistan, in Afghanistan, coalition forces are aggressively and continue to aggressively seek out the remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda members and continue to conduct security and stability operations to support voter registration for the October presidential election.

To date, over 75 percent of the eligible Afghan population have registered to vote, and they continue to register at the rate of about 125,000 Afghan citizens each day.

And with that, we'll take your questions.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Yes?

Q: Mr. Secretary and General Myers, is the Defense Department considering extending the mobilization of some National Guard troops serving in Iraq or elsewhere beyond the two-year limit? And if so, what does that say about the degree to which the U.S. military is under strain by military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan?

SEC. RUMSFELD: You know, the two-year limit is an interesting question. My understanding is that there may be a law or a regulation or a policy that talks about 24 consecutive months, and then there has been a practice that addresses the 24 -- not from consecutive months, but from cumulative months, which is obviously a lesser threshold.

The answer to your question is no. We don't plan at the moment to extend people beyond the 24 months, although one should never say never. And we are at war; the country is at war. There is no doubt but that we have mobilized significant numbers of Guard and Reserve forces, and that the facts on the ground will determine what it is we do. So what we do is we engage in planning for lower amounts or larger amounts of troops in various locations of the world and attempt to think through how those things would be dealt with in the event combatant commanders recommend, and the military advisers to the president -- General Myers, General Pace -- recommend changes in numbers in various places. So we're constantly planning, but at the moment we don't have plans to do that.

(Cross talk.)

Q: Mr. Secretary, you mentioned that --

Q: Go ahead.

Q: -- the Saddamists, as you put it, are losing in Iraq. The U.S. casualty count continues to grow, and the number of deaths has now reached 900. I'm wondering if you have reason to expect that trend to improve soon?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I guess anytime someone is killed or wounded, our forces or other coalition forces, or indeed civilian Iraqis who are also being killed by the extremists, it's a matter of deep concern. Trying to predict the precise ebb and flow of that is not possible.

We know that there are a variety of categories of people that are involved. A lot of them are the regime remnants. A number are terrorists from other countries. Some are just common criminals. And what we have to do is continue on our path, which we believe is the right path, and that's to continue strengthening the Iraqi security forces and continue to pass responsibility to them for the security of their country.

Ultimately it's not going to be the United States, it's not going to be the coalition; it's going to be the Iraqi people that are either going to build a democracy and a representative system, a peaceful nation and have the capability of providing for the security of those people, or they won't. And we believe we have a good plan to do that.

We believe that we've got the investments that are necessary to achieve it. And we believe that the Iraqi chain of command and security forces are being developed under this new government in a way that more and more of those responsibilities will be taken over by them. Now if that happens, obviously they're more at risk at that stage and our forces are less at risk, and one would think that, over time, we'd be able to begin reducing those numbers.

On the other hand, as I say, what's going to determine that are the facts on the ground, and we're going to see this through, and if it takes additional forces, it will take additional forces. If we're able to pass off more and more responsibility -- as we believe we ought to be able to -- to the Iraqis, then it will take less.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you talk about the facts on the ground. A couple of days ago, Senator McCain was asked, "Are you happy with the way things are going in Iraq?" And he said: "I'm very worried. I believe we must win, but I think that there were significant failures after the military victories, among them the secretary of Defense's obstinacy concerning the number of troops that were necessary, for which we are paying a very heavy price."

Could you address the issue of number of troops? And also, 15 months now after the fall of Baghdad, do you agree with Senator McCain that there were significant failures?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I can't imagine what evidence anyone would cite for my obstinacy. (Laughter.)

The fact of the matter is that I have said and have consistently said and repeatedly said, publicly and privately, that the commanders on the ground are the ones that are making the recommendations, and they have recommended the number of troops that were used to win the war very rapidly; they are the ones that have recommended the total number of troops that are there today, and that we have agreed with them. And that has been General Myers' advice.

I have not been an advocate of any particular number, nor have I been an opponent of any particular number. I have listened to the arguments of the military commanders, and anyone who suggests to the contrary is mistaken. It's just a fact.

General Myers.

GEN. MYERS: And that's -- and those are the facts. In every -- and I don't know why --

SEC. RUMSFELD: It's a myth. It's an urban myth --

GEN. MYERS: There is an urban myth --

SEC. RUMSFELD: -- that's been promoted and passed around, and it's utter nonsense. It's just not true.

GEN. MYERS: In fact, there never was --

Q: He's a member of the Armed Services Committee. Presumably he's not listening to urban myths; he has better information than most.

GEN. MYERS: There was never a debate inside this building among the joint chiefs on -- there were lots of debates on the numbers, but in the end, we always came down on the side of the combatant commander who said, "Here's what I need." And that's, in fact, where the secretary has come down every time that I'm aware of, and that's been our consistent advice.

Nobody has implied, I think, that there is some sort of artificial cap put on the troops required. Never been the case. In fact, General Abizaid stood here many times and has told you all, and you've taken notes on this I'm sure, that the answer here is not more troops; that does not solve your problem in Iraq. And that's General Abizaid, who is the combatant commander.

So we put all that into the hopper. We provided our advice, our military advice, to the secretary, and he makes the decisions. But in no case has there been a cap, an artificial cap, any kind of intimidation of the military chain of command to request anything but what they thought they needed.

Q: Sir, you --

SEC. RUMSFELD: Now just a minute.

Now, you're right, he is a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, and he's knowledgeable and he's been over to Iraq. And every member has every right to recommend any number of troops they want to. And he has been very consistent that he has thought that the military commander were wrong, and that the advice of General Myers was wrong, and that my agreeing with them was wrong, and that there should be higher numbers. And that's fair. He's been fairly consistent throughout this period, as have a number of people.

It's just a difference of view, and I happen to agree with the combatant commander that -- that there's a balance, as General Myers says, that has to be reached as to whether you gain more by adding additional troops, additional force protection to protect them, additional logistics to support them, a heavier U.S. footprint, more than occupation feeling in that country, or less. And it is not -- there's no magical number; there's no formula for this. The Soviets had something like 200,000 or 300,000 people in Afghanistan. We had a few handfuls. The Soviets lost and we won. So someone can look at that and say, "Gee, therefore fewer's better." I don't say that. I think situations are different in different countries. And I think that it's terribly important that -- it's perfectly proper for anyone to think you ought to have any number you want and defend it and argue it. We've done that, and I am persuaded that the evidence I've seen suggests that General Abizaid and General Myers are correct.

Yes?

Q: Sir, if I could just switch gears completely to more of a domestic topic for a minute. With the presidential election season perhaps moving into full swing now, I think it's been some months since you've talked about your views on the role, if any, of the Pentagon, the military, yourself, during the election season. I think you've talked about your view on staying non-partisan. And I'm wondering if you still -- as we approach it -- your view on the military -- the department non-partisanship during the campaign, and you yourself as the secretary of Defense, but yet a prominent Republican. Do you plan to go to the convention?

SEC. RUMSFELD: No.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about your views?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Sure. Nothing's changed. The president, when I took the job, asked me and Secretary Powell to stay out of politics. He has, I have. We intend to. Neither one of us are planning to go to the convention. And that will be the policy of the president, and therefore it's our policy, my policy, and the policy of this department. I also happen to agree with it -- fortuitously. I think he's correct that -- (laughter).

Q: (Off-mike comments and laughter.)

SEC. RUMSFELD: Not stupid. (Laughter.) No, I do think he's correct, quite apart from the fact that that's his opinion, because I think that we're in a war, we've got serious business to be doing. And it's perfectly understandable that our country goes out and has a big debate and discussion and an election, and that's a good thing, it's how it works in our country. And by the same token, we've got to keep our eye on the ball, and the ball is trying to protect the American people from additional terrorist attacks and try to track down the folks that are planning threats against our country here and abroad.

Q: Mr. Secretary, a couple years ago in the former briefing room, I asked you if you would then consider a preemptive strike against North Korea when things were heating over there, and you said, quote, "You got to be kidding," unquote. The president is now apparently adopting or has adopted preemption as a national policy, and he's making some pretty tough verbal attacks against Iran. Will you consider a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities?

SEC. RUMSFELD: Those are not -- number one, those are not decisions, obviously, that I would make. Number two, it would be a presidential and a congressional one and in some cases decisions for others even beyond

that. There have been times when the United States has, for a variety of reasons, made judgments that preemptive actions have to be taken. We did in Afghanistan. We decided that that country being used as a terrorist training center -- Afghanistan hadn't attacked us, the al Qaeda had, and we made a conscious decision, the president did, to attack the Afghan government as well as the al Qaeda because they were harboring those terrorists.

Now, I'm not going to get into -- even if I were the ones making the decision, I wouldn't be discussing it.

Q: Can I get both your reactions to the Senate Intelligence Committee's report issued a couple of weeks ago, of the intelligence that led to, no matter how many troops are in Iraq, led to them to disarm that dictator? What's your reaction? Were you misled? Did you not question the intel enough? What's both of your reactions?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I haven't read the report.

Q: But you're aware of the news accounts, certainly, and the briefings on it.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Do you think that I'm going to start chasing news accounts? Seriously?

Q: Sir, it's been out a week and a half. I know you've read it or read parts of it.

SEC. RUMSFELD: I have not. I have not read it. We've got some of the chapters here, but not the recommendations.

Now, look, the commission spent time. They reviewed great many documents. They've come to some conclusions, which I've not seen. They're going to announce them tomorrow.

Q: (Off mike) -- Senate Intelligence Committee's report on prewar intelligence. I wasn't precise enough, obviously.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were talking about the 9/11 commission.

Q: The prewar intelligence report --

SEC. RUMSFELD: You've got the Senate committee. You've got the 9/11 commission. You're going to have the presidential commission, the Silberman commission. And what I would say about it is this: that the most important thing that will come out of these commissions, in my view, ultimately will be recommendations for how we can improve intelligence.

Part of their report will be looking back, trying to connect the dots after the fact. But part of it will be looking forward and saying: How could we do a better job connecting the dots before the fact, so people don't get killed? And that will be in various types of recommendations for reform.

What I hope happens in that regard is, number one, that people identify what the problem is. I hope these reports identify the problem before we start rushing to fix the problem and figuring out a bunch of -- how we can move the boxes around and have solutions to things that we've not identified. I've always felt that to those that would change what is or tear down what is falls the responsibility for recommending something better, and to precisely say why it's going to be better and how it's going to fix a real problem that's been previously identified.

Q: (Off mike) -- prewar intelligence claims of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction that you both articulated was the main reason for us going -- the U.S. going in, and that doesn't prove to be the case, that the intelligence was overstating.

General Myers, thousands of men were put into Iraq because of that intel. I mean, how do you feel right now, in retrospect?

GEN. MYERS: I'm where the secretary is. You know, there are some things we can learn from the experience, but it's a lot more complicated than we can go into here in 10, 15, 30 seconds. So I prefer not to get into that.

It has a lot to do with how we analyze countries where you have dictators who it's really hard to get in their head and figure out why they think what they think. I mean, it's a critical piece of this, and that's -- and Iraq is not the only place with individuals like that. And so, I mean, you know, it's tied up in your assumptions on how you do that work. So --

Q: Mr. Secretary, is there any intelligence suggesting that the Summer Olympic Games in Greece are going to be the target of a terrorist attack? And what role should NATO troops play and U.S. troops, in particular, in providing security for the summer games?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I am not going to get into intelligence about things that are up ahead of us. Those announcements are made by the agency and by Homeland Security, in the case of the United States. That's not this department's focus.

What we do is -- Greece has been working closely with NATO, and NATO has been, to the extent it's able, responding to the government of Greece's requests and thoughts and suggestions. And they've been in close cooperation for many, many, many weeks, and one has to believe that they've taken the appropriate steps.

Q: Well, General Myers, can you describe in maybe just a general way what kind of military support the U.S. could provide?

GEN. MYERS: It would be up to NATO. As the secretary said, the Greek government has made a request of NATO. NATO is evaluating that request. We tried to find out just before coming in here if we had any news on that, and we don't have news on if they've made a decision in Brussels or not. And once that decision's made, then we'll look at the kind of capabilities that might be required to help.

Q: Would it involve U.S. troops?

GEN. MYERS: It's all possible, sure. If it -- the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Jones, has a notional concept of operations, which has not been blessed yet by -- the U.S. piece of that has not been blessed by the secretary --

SEC. RUMSFELD: But it wouldn't involve U.S. troops per se, it would be only a NATO mission.

GEN. MYERS: It would be a NATO mission and --

SEC. RUMSFELD: There is no -- that I know of, there's nothing going on other than the Greek-NATO relationship and the 26 countries that are part of NATO, including the United States.

Q: Would that be under the concept of this Rapid Reaction Force that you've been pushing for NATO to be able to respond if something were to happen, that sort of thing?

GEN. MYERS: Probably not in this case, I don't think, no.

Q: You're just focusing on the NATO aspect of the Greek request and dialogue, correct? I mean, that doesn't -- that doesn't foreclose any unilateral United States action in the region, should there be a terrorist threat that only the United States armed forces could respond to properly, does it?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I would think you ought to just set that thought aside. The effort is with NATO, period.

Q: I appreciate that, Mr. Secretary. But the reason I -- it's difficult for me to set that thought aside is that as you --

SEC. RUMSFELD: Work on it! You can do it!

Q: I'll work very hard, sir. (Laughter.) But --

SEC. RUMSFELD: Sure you can do it!

Q: I appreciate the confidence.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Give it your best go!

Q: But you know the United States military has certain capabilities lacking among others, and NATO itself is strained at this moment.

SEC. RUMSFELD: We're a member of NATO.

Q: Other NATO nations are strained at this moment, they can't even get stuff to Afghanistan. The United States has a large presence in the region. I'm -- I'm --

SEC. RUMSFELD: My understanding is that Greece has constitution and laws that affect various aspects of your question, and that they have appropriately addressed it from a NATO standpoint, which is permissible from a practical, legal and policy standpoint in their country.

Q: Let me -- let me phrase it one more time, then, since I --

SEC. RUMSFELD: Oh, no. No --

Q: The practical point of view that if United States citizens --

SEC. RUMSFELD: I think you're using up all this time.

Q: -- or athletes are in danger and only the United States military is capable of going in and helping --

SEC. RUMSFELD: You're not hearing me. The United States is a part of NATO. We're one of the 26 countries in NATO. Greece is working with NATO. To the extent that Greece needs to cooperate with NATO for a variety of things, then NATO will look to the 26 countries and make arrangements that they consider appropriate and which are appropriate from the standpoint of Greece.

Q: Mr. Secretary --

Q: General Myers?

GEN. MYERS: Bret?

Q: General Myers, can you talk a little bit about, on the ground in Iraq, the cities of Fallujah, of Ramadi, and now Samarra possibly becoming a hotbed of insurgency, and what is being done along with the Iraqis to deal with those three places?

GEN. MYERS: First of all, let me explain how military operations are working in Iraq today. And that is that at the very highest levels, with General Casey, who is our Multinational Force-Iraq commander -- General Casey meets regularly with the Iraqi National Security Committee and their national security apparatus. They talk about these very issues, I mean, frequently. And then down at the tactical level, of course, we're doing more and more operations with the Iraqis. So that's the backdrop, and we've got pretty good partnership going since sovereignty, in the last three weeks.

With those cities, each of them is a little different problem. In Fallujah, it's primarily foreign fighters that are the problem. In Samarra, as you mentioned, it's primarily former regime elements or Ba'athists that are the problem. And so they have different solutions. And one of the things we want to make sure as we work through this, we work -- the Iraqis are going to have the lead on this, and our goal is to make sure that for major supply routes and coalition forces in the area, that these hotbeds don't become centers where they can spin out and create other havoc. So we're very cognizant of that, of course.

As you know, in Fallujah we still from time to time have made some strikes on some of the foreign fighters there, and successfully as a matter of fact. And we'll do what we need to do in the Samarra area as well.

Q: And are those strikes cleared through the Iraqis prior to --

GEN. MYERS: "Clear" is a bad term. I said we work in a partnership with them, and they are aware of -- we are working in partnership. And as that term is defined, just think about a partnership. (Chuckles.) We work it together, and that's how it's done.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Yes?

Q: Mr. Secretary, what could you comment on the Iraqi efforts -- apparent efforts -- to disrupt the coalition by kidnapping/beheading; how you're dealing with that and what effect it's having?

SEC. RUMSFELD: There's no question but that there are -- you say the Iraqis doing it. There are Iraqis. There are foreign terrorists. There --

Q: Things done in Iraq by Iraqis and others.

SEC. RUMSFELD: Right, and others. Zarqawi is clearly an active participant in that. I guess it's not surprising. It happened after World War II in Germany, that people tried to dissuade Germans from cooperating with the Allies, and clearly that's what's happening here. And as a result, you've seen police chiefs attacked, you've seen members of the Governing Council, you've seen various other ministers and officials from ministries attacked. But you've also seen an awful lot more just plain Iraqi civilians attacked. It is not a new technique, and in my view, it won't work.

Q: (Off mike) -- the coalition?

SEC. RUMSFELD: It has. You're correct. In any aggregation of people or countries, they all have the freedom to make their own decisions. And sovereign nations make sovereign decisions, just as individuals do. What we've seen recently is a couple of countries have made the decision to withdraw their forces, and that's a fact. It's also true that many more times the number of countries that have withdrawn their forces have said they will not withdraw their forces. And we've seen Japan and Korea and Bulgaria and any number of countries announce that they don't believe that's a good idea -- that if you want more of something you reward it, and if you want less of it you penalize it.

And weakness is provocative. Weakness entices people into doing things they otherwise wouldn't do, unless they believed that it would advantage them. And so to the extent they see advantage in it, they'll very likely keep

doing it. And to the extent they see that it's not going to affect the United States, and it's not going to affect the United Kingdom, and it's not going to affect the other countries I mentioned, because those countries understand what I've just said -- and I think one ought not to be surprised that it happens from time to time. But in terms of thinking that it's a pattern, I think not.

Q: Mr. Secretary --

SEC. RUMSFELD: We'll make this the last question.

Q: -- the 9/11 commission report is expected to have new information on links between Iran and al Qaeda, specifically stating that the Iranians provided some logistical support to the 9/11 hijackers. Do you believe that, and do you -- can you comment on your views of Iranian support to al Qaeda?

SEC. RUMSFELD: I cannot comment on the report I have not read, and I cannot comment on this particular item that you reference. I've seen the same news reports you have. Full stop.

The rest of your question was, can you comment on Iran and al Qaeda separately from that? And I can. I mean, we know there are al Qaeda in Iran, senior al Qaeda, and there have been for some time. We know that Iran has been helping Hezbollah and moving terrorists down through Syria into Lebanon and then down into Israel. So we know that Iran has been on the terrorist list. We know that Iran has been notably unhelpful along the border of both Afghanistan and Iraq.

And we can surmise -- reasonable people can, I think -- that Iran would be uncomfortable having a democracy in Afghanistan and a democracy in Iraq, a representative system, a system that was not repressive, a system that was not run by a handful of clerics, that that would make them uncomfortable, because they've got an awful lot of people in their country that know what's going on in the world and probably have a minimum of high regard for the way their country is being run. And so I can understand their anxieties, if you will.

Thank you very much.

Q: See you next month, hopefully?

Don't count on it.

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