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Multi-National Force- Iraq Change of Command (Iraq)

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Iraq, Tuesday, September 16, 2008

Admiral Mullen, General Petraeus, General Odierno – it is a true honor to speak at this ceremony as the reins of Multi-National Force – Iraq are passed from one great general to another.

Few words can adequately sum up the measure of these two men. Between them, they have given more than six and a half decades of service to our country. Combined, they have spent six and half years in Iraq. Like all of you, they have lost precious time with friends and family as they devoted themselves these last years to a cause greater than themselves. They have borne the burdens of command, and they have grieved with you as brave men and women in uniform gave the last full measure of their devotion.

When General Petraeus took charge 19 months ago, darkness had descended on this land. Merchants of chaos were gaining strength. Death was commonplace. Around the world, questions mounted whether a new strategy – or any strategy, for that matter – could make a real difference.

As we all remember too vividly, those early months of the Surge were tough. Casualties were high. Troops moved out of fortified bases and into the communities they were charged to secure – 24 hours a day in the thick of an unrelenting fight. You all had to adapt – and adapt you did. The principles of counterinsurgency were embraced at every level. Our guns and steel were matched by flexibility, creativity, and hard-won knowledge of a culture where shame and honor often mean a great deal more than hearts and minds. To these classic methods were added groundbreaking approaches never before seen or conceived in the history of warfare. Slowly, but inexorably, the tide began to turn. Our enemies took a fearsome beating they will not soon forget. Reinforced and fortified by our own people, the soldiers of Iraq found new courage and confidence. And the people of Iraq, resilient and emboldened, rose up to take back their country.

The situation here is much different today than when General Petraeus took command of MNF-I in February 2007 for this tour, and when General Odierno arrived as corps commander in December 2006. They were an incredible team. The darkness has receded. Hope has returned. After four years off and on in Iraq, General Petraeus leaves this country transformed – but does not leave it for good. I'm sure that, as commander of Central Command, he will be back in short order. General, you have set an incredible example for everyone in uniform. More importantly, you have dealt the enemies of the United States of America and Iraq a tremendous, if not mortal, blow. And I believe history will regard you as one of our nation's great battle captains.

Of course, we know that our enemies are down but not out. We know that great peril remains and fighting still lies ahead. It is fitting, then, that we turn over command to one of the other key architects of the Surge. General Odierno agreed to return to Iraq for his third tour after only seven months at home. He knows that we are at a pivotal moment – where progress remains fragile and caution should be the order of the day. And as we proceed further into the endgame here, I am sure he will make the tough but necessary decisions to protect our national interest. General, thank you for returning to Iraq, and thank you for your ongoing service.

I might note one other historical achievement. Between General Odierno and Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, we just might have the tallest command in American military history – about thirteen feet of general by my estimate. From my vantage point it feels like more.

As much as this ceremony is about honoring Generals Petraeus and Odierno, I am confident they will be the first to say that today does not belong to them. It belongs to all the fighting men and women who have served in Iraq and continue to serve here. Whose bravery, courage, and commitment are unmatched in modern times. Whose valor has been tested on foreign sands and forged in the flames of battle.

You have volunteered to put your lives in harm's way for the good of our nation. And in the last year and a half, you have succeeded beyond our imagination. To paraphrase General Douglas MacArthur, you have built courage when courage seemed to fail; regained faith when there seemed to be little cause for faith; and created hope when hope had become forlorn. The great beneficiaries of that hope are not just your countrymen back home, but millions of Iraqi citizens who now have a chance to build out of the rubble and ashes of war a peaceful and prosperous nation.

You have the eternal gratitude of the American people.

General Odierno, and all the men and women of Multi-National Force – Iraq, good luck and Godspeed.