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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates

February 11, 2008 12:00 PM EST

Media Availability with Secretary Gates at Forward Operating Base Falcon, Baghdad, Iraq

SEC. GATES: A very interesting, very useful dinner with General Petraeus and the Iraqi leadership last night. We had a wide-ranging conversation about the legislation under way, about the status of forces agreement, about the successes that are being enjoyed here.

Had a -- had breakfast with a number of command sergeant majors today. Had a very candid conversation about some of the challenges they face. High morale, commitment, a great sense of satisfaction with what they've achieved.

Had a good meeting with General Petraeus. We met for about two hours, talking about where he is in his evaluation. And I feel a lot smarter now. And we'll do this forward operating base and then head home.

Q Can you give us any hint at this point what -- about the prospect for further troop withdrawals beyond the end of the surge?

SEC. GATES: Now I think we have a process in place. As we've indicated before, General Petraeus will make his recommendations in March for the president. And Central Command, the Joint Chiefs will make their recommendations, and I'll make my recommendations -- (cross talk) -- and I think we'll have to wait until the evaluations are done before we --

Q But in principle, Mr. Secretary, it doesn't make sense to have a pause, to let things settle, and see how things are looking after the four brigades are withdrawn before proceeding with any further withdrawals?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think that the notion of a brief period of consolidation and evaluation probably does make sense.

Q How brief would that be?

SEC. GATES: Well, that's one of the things that we're still -- we're thinking about --

Q Did General Petraeus explain to you his thinking on that subject?

SEC. GATES: Sure. And I must say that in my own thinking I had been kind of headed in that direction as

well. But one of the keys is, you know, how long is that period and then what happens after that. And all of that is still to be determined and then ultimately decided by the president.

STAFF: Thank you.

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