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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute

DoD News Briefing with Secretary Gates, Stephen Hadley and Lt. Gen. Lute from Al Asad Air Base, Iraq

SECRETARY GATES: Well I hope that you all thought that the trip was worthwhile. Because we were concerned that you all might not be adequately cared for since we were separate – we came in separately from the president's plane, I wanted to do this. So I have a "three-for" you here tonight. Steve Hadley, myself and Doug Lute. And I'll ask Steve to just say a few about the purpose of trip, and then we'll open it up for questions – all on the record.

MR. HADLEY: We thought about this five or six weeks ago. Obviously we're going into an important week, week after next in Washington with General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker coming back and reporting. And the president thought it was important for him to come to Iraq and hear firsthand from Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker about how they saw the situation – the assessment, their assessment of the situation.

He also thought it was important to have a face-to-face meeting with the leaders of the Iraqi national government before we went into this important week and important debate back in Washington. And it was particularly appropriate to do so since just a little over a week ago the five principal leaders of the various groups in this country got together and signed a document, in which they as you well know, talked about how they were going to work together to move an agenda forward in this country, had made some progress on issues involving de-baathification and provincial powers, which hopefully will set up some provincial elections, and talked a way forward about addressing some other issues.

So the president wanted to congratulate them, and he did in his meeting today. Congratulate them for the achievement of a week, 10 days ago, but also emphasize that that could only be a starting point. They now need to press forward to get resolution of a number of those issues as well.

And finally, he thought it was appropriate to come to Anbar province. A lot of discussion about what has gone on here on this province, which is very important for the future of Iraq. You may remember in the speech he made in January of '07, when he talked about the reinforcement for the surge. It was really for two purposes. One, to get sectarian violence down, which was centered in Baghdad. And secondly, to try and take advantage of what was beginning to happen in Anbar provinces (sic) with local political leaders and tribal sheiks coming together to fight al Qaida.

And that process with the leadership of our civilians here and with the huge contribution made by our men and women in uniform. And the reinforcement of those troops that the president announced last January. We've really seen some remarkable progress here. A progress against al Qaida. A coming together of local political leaders to begin to provide security and services to the locality. And beginning to reach out and connect with the Iraqi government. The president wanted to hear from those leaders firsthand – thank them for what they've done for Iraq, what they've done for the war against al Qaida, and for helping to make Anbar a place that will not be a safe haven from which al Qaida can plot against the United States.

And finally, in that meeting, he wanted to have a session with both the Anbar leaders, but also Iraq's national leaders to encourage this connection – support from the national leaders to the Anbar leaders here in terms of economic and other support so they can begin to show a difference in the lives of their people. And similarly inviting the leaders of Anbar to begin to try and make a contribution for the broader reconciliation process that needs to go forward in Baghdad.

So, that was the concept of the trip, and it reflected in the meetings that the president had today. And it's been a good day, and of course, the most important thing is then to end it speaking directly to the men and women in uniform and thanking them for their terrific contribution they've made here.

SECRETARY GATES: I might just say a word since we haven't talked for several days about the process that we went through this week. I felt it was very important that the president have the opportunity to speak directly to each of his senior military commanders and to get their views on the way forward. Admiral Fallon and Central Command had been doing their own analysis. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, under the leadership of General Pace, have been doing their own analysis. And, of course, General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have been doing theirs. So we had opportunities on these conference, televised conference settings, for General Petraeus to tell the president his assessment and what he was thinking about. We had an opportunity for Admiral Fallon to do the same with the president. Actually during that same session, but Admiral Fallon was there in person. And then as you well know, the president came over to the Pentagon on Friday and heard from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

And so I thought it was important for the president to hear directly from these commanders, not filtered through me, or even summarized by General Pace. And I think that's been a very satisfactory, a very satisfactory process.

Q: Mr. Secretary, we wanted to ask you about one of the comments the president made outside that caught our attention, which was his reference to if security conditions continued to improve that it would be possible to maintain the same level of security with fewer American forces. Could you elaborate on that a bit in terms of what time frame he's talking about and if he's talking about Anbar province in particular (inaudible) ?

SECRETARY GATES: Well I don't want to, first of all I don't want to preempt General Petraeus' testimony on the hill a week from I guess today and tomorrow. But clearly, that is one of the central issues that everyone has been examining. What is the security situation? What do we expect the security situation to be in the months ahead? And I would say in the next several months. And what opportunities does that provide in terms of maintaining the security situation while perhaps beginning to bring the troop levels down? That's what everybody's been looking at. That's what we've been examining. And I think I'll just let the president's words speak for themselves without foreshadowing what General Petraeus is going to say.

Q: If I could just follow up Mr. Secretary. Was he referring to Iraq as a whole or specifically about Anbar in those remarks? Or how do you view the situation?

SECRETARY GATES: I think he was referring to Iraq as a whole.

Q: (inaudible) If I could just follow up one more – (inaudible) you've stated quite often that troop numbers will

come down as conditions permit. So I guess I'm sort of wondering whether there's some new understanding that withdrawals are possible. Whether there's a timetable under consideration for withdrawing troops or whether we're still at the stage we were, we've been at for a number of years, which is as security improves we will look at it and then make a decision (inaudible) troops?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, let me answer and then invite Steve to answer. I think there is the general view that certainly here in Anbar the security situation has improved. It has improved in other parts of Iraq as well. And so we're trying to look at Iraq in its different pieces, and clearly there is hard work that remains to be done in some, but the situation elsewhere is in pretty good shape. And so that's the kind of analysis that has been driving the work that's been going on.

MR. HADLEY: He said security; we've seen some improvements of security. A lot of work ahead. We've seen some improvement in the Iraqi Security Forces. So the issue is, are we at the point where we can continue to make security progress and reduce the number of forces. As the president said very clearly, the starting point for that debate, for him, is the report from our commanders on the ground, informed by Admiral Fallon and secretary of defense, and Pace and the joint chiefs. And that's what will begin to play out when General Petraeus returns to Washington and begins his testimony to Congress a week from today, a week from tomorrow.

Q: (cross-talk)

MR. HADLEY: So, what he was trying to do was frame the issue, and then give General Petraeus an opportunity to present it to the Congress and to the American people. And that's how he wants to proceed.

SECRETARY GATES: I might add I also have an opinion on this.

Q: What is your opinion?

SECRETARY GATES: I will share it at the appropriate time.

Q: (inaudible)

SECRETARY GATES: Yes, I think so.

Q: Can you talk about how important it was that all the commanders give the president directly their thoughts? How are the differences between your commanders and your military commanders are? Are they wide difference or are they very narrow – there's general agreement on some principles? (inaudible).

SECRETARY GATES: I'm going to answer that question kind of enigmatically. Just because I wanted the commanders to present their views independently and directly to the president does not necessarily mean they were in disagreement.

Q: (inaudible) presented their analysis will come in the future, and will be presented separately or together?

SECRETARY GATES: The president already has it. That's what we did this week.

Q: Are you expecting the president to make some sort of major speech or pronouncement on the way forward for the next several months after he gets the Petraeus/Crocker report?

MR. HADLEY: I think you can expect at some point the president will, having had General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker and an opportunity to speak to the Congress, the president having heard from them, the secretary of defense, his combatant commander Admiral Fallon, General Pace, the joint chiefs, Secretary Rice, and having heard the political side from Ambassador Crocker, and then pulling on what he's learned today, I think

you can expect at some point the president is going to tell the American people what he thinks, and outline the way forward based on these inputs.

The president actually said that several months ago. He said he would get the reports that I've just described. He would talk to, consult quietly with members of Congress, Republicans and Democrats, and then he would make his decision. And when he does make that decision, I'm sure he'll have an opportunity to explain it to the country.

STAFF: In the interest of preserving your filing time, let's take one more question.

Q: When the American people look at the surge strategy and whether it's had a positive impact, has it had a positive impact in Anbar or is the successes in Anbar been kind of a serendipitous event that's been extraneous to the surge?

SECRETARY GATES: Let me start and then Steve follow up, and Doug if he wants to say something. I think that what has happened in Anbar is not just fortuitous. The strategy out here to try and enlist the help of the sheikhs, for the tribal leaders to come together began, for all practical purposes, almost a year ago. We have seen, the fruit of that effort has really become more apparent in the last few months, but it has been underway for quite some time with a lot of courageous leadership by the Anbaris themselves.

But they were very explicit in their comments to the president today that it was the additional, the presence of the additional U.S. forces, the Marines that came in, that helped cement the gains they felt they had made but were at risk and made the situation in their view one that is pretty stable as far as they're concerned. General Lute.

GEN. LUTE: Yeah, I'd just add that the president last January announced an addition of 4,000 Marines to al Anbar, and they've been here serving since then. But the Anbaris themselves have added 20,000 Anbaris to the rolls of the Iraqi Security Forces. So you get a sense of order of magnitude here. Four thousand additional Americans perhaps served as a catalyst for something that actually started before they arrived, and helped us promote the addition of about 20,000 Anbaris to Iraqi Security Forces.

MR. HADLEY: This is not serendipity. If you remember the president's speech January of last year, he focused on two things. Reinforcements into Baghdad to deal with sectarian violence, and reinforcements to Anbar to take advantage of the opportunities that he saw emerging and that had been worked on. So this was part of the plan, and an essential part of the plan that he outlined in January of last year.

GEN. LUTE: If I may, one other thought on Anbar, though, and we shouldn't leave without this. There an the American contribution, there was an Anbari contribution; we should not underplay the prominence of what al Qaida did here to spark these moves. It was really al Qaida which overplayed its hand here, and I think if you look across the Arab world, Anbar province in Iraq is the place where al Qaida said it was going to plant its flag and create Anbar as the cornerstone of its caliphate. And what we've seen now, I think first time in the Arab world, is that the Anbaris have said, "Not here; you're not doing that." And they rejected the al Qaida vision. So al Qaida played a role in what happened here in Anbar as well.

SECRETARY GATES: In fact, it was said explicitly today that for the first time a Middle Eastern people got to see what rule by al Qaida would be like, and the Iraqis rejected it.

Q: Mr. Secretary, if I may, what was the atmosphere like in the meeting between the tribal sheikhs and the Maliki government. I mean I think anyone would acknowledge there's still strains in those relationships. Could you give us a sense of whether they just showed up or if there was a feeling of reconciliation? What was it like?

SECRETARY GATES: Well, I think, actually, there was, I think, a good feeling, and each of the elements –

there was also some military in there, we had the provincial governor there, we had the sheikhs, and we had the national leaders. And I would say there was a sense of shared purpose among them, that they were all in this together. And then there was some, what I consider some good-natured jousting about resources, and who's going to get what in terms of reconstruction and so on.

STAFF: Thank you all.