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Iraq Has Made Major Gains in Three Years, Rumsfeld Says

Secretary cites Iraq's provisional government, constitution, security forces

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(begin byliner)

What We've Gained in 3 Years in Iraq

By Donald H. Rumsfeld
U.S. Secretary of Defense

Some have described the situation in Iraq as a tightening noose, noting that "time is not on our side" and that "morale is down." Others have described a "very dangerous" turn of events and are "extremely concerned."

Who are they that have expressed these concerns? In fact, these are the exact words of terrorists discussing Iraq -- Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his associates -- who are describing their own situation and must be watching with fear the progress that Iraq has made over the past three years.

The terrorists seem to recognize that they are losing in Iraq. I believe that history will show that to be the case.

Fortunately, history is not made up of daily headlines, blogs on Web sites or the latest sensational attack. History is a bigger picture, and it takes some time and perspective to measure accurately.

Consider that in three years Iraq has gone from enduring a brutal dictatorship to electing a provisional government to ratifying a new constitution written by Iraqis to electing a permanent government last December. In each of these elections, the number of voters participating has increased significantly -- from 8.5 million in the January 2005 election to nearly 12 million in the December election -- in defiance of terrorists' threats and attacks.

One of the most important developments over the past year has been the increasing participation of Iraq's Sunni community in the political process. In the volatile Anbar province, where Sunnis are an overwhelming majority, voter turnout grew from 2 percent in January to 86 percent in December. Sunni sheiks and religious leaders who previously had been sympathetic to the insurgency are today meeting with coalition representatives, encouraging Iraqis to join the security forces and waging what violent extremists such as Abu al-Zarqawi and his al-Qaeda followers recognize as a "large-scale war" against them.

The terrorists are determined to stoke sectarian tension and are attempting to spark a civil

war. But despite the many acts of violence and provocation, the vast majority of Iraqis have shown that they want their country to remain whole and free of ethnic conflict. We saw this last month after the attack on the Shiite shrine in Samarra, when leaders of Iraq's various political parties and religious groups condemned the violence and called for calm.

Another significant transformation has been in the size, capability and responsibility of Iraqi security forces. And this is vitally important, because it is Iraqis, after all, who must build and secure their own nation.

Today, some 100 Iraqi army battalions of several hundred troops each are in the fight, and 49 control their own battle space. About 75 percent of all military operations in the country include Iraqi security forces, and nearly half of those are independently Iraqi-planned, Iraqi-conducted and Iraqi-led. Iraqi security forces have a greater ability than coalition troops to detect a foreign terrorist's accent, identify local suspects and use force without increasing a feeling of occupation. It was these Iraqi forces -- not U.S. or coalition troops -- that enforced curfews and contained the violence after the attack on the Golden Dome Shrine in Samarra. To be sure, violence of various stripes continues to slow Iraq's progress. But the coalition is doing everything possible to see this effort succeed and is making adjustments as appropriate.

The rationale for a free and democratic Iraq is as compelling today as it was three years ago. A free and stable Iraq will not attack its neighbors, will not conspire with terrorists, will not pay rewards to the families of suicide bombers and will not seek to kill Americans.

Though there are those who will never be convinced that the cause in Iraq is worth the costs, anyone looking realistically at the world today -- at the terrorist threat we face -- can come to only one conclusion: Now is the time for resolve, not retreat.

Consider that if we retreat now, there is every reason to believe Saddamists and terrorists will fill the vacuum -- and the free world might not have the will to face them again. Turning our backs on postwar Iraq today would be the modern equivalent of handing postwar Germany back to the Nazis. It would be as great a disgrace as if we had asked the liberated nations of Eastern Europe to return to Soviet domination because it was too hard or too tough or we didn't have the patience to work with them as they built free countries.

What we need to understand is that the vast majority of the Iraqi people want the coalition to succeed. They want better futures for themselves and their families. They do not want the extremists to win. And they are risking their lives every day to secure their country.

That is well worth remembering on this anniversary of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

(end byliner)

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