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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld

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Television Interview with Secretary Rumsfeld on the Pentagon Channel

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QUESTION: Thank you very much, sir, for joining us today.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Happy to do it.

QUESTION: Excellent.

First question, sir, what is the real significance of this new Iraqi government?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well, if you think about it the terrorists, the violent extremists have been working for a couple of years now trying to prevent progress in Iraq. They tried to stop the election a year ago January and they failed. They tried to stop the drafting of the constitution and they failed. They tried to stop the referendum on the constitution last October 15th and they failed. Then there was the election December 15th of last year to elect a new Iraqi government for a sovereign nation. They tried to stop that and they failed. Now they're trying to stop the formation of a new government and once again, they're going to fail.

The Iraqi leadership has gone ahead and selected the top seven political leaders for the period ahead, for the coming government, which is an enormous accomplishment. They've had some tough negotiations, some politicking and pulling and hauling, and of course that's what government is about in a representative system. You had 10 or 12 million Iraqis that went out and voted. That's what they expected would happen.

So over the past four months they've been working their way through this and now they've produced the top leadership of the country. The next step, which is an important one, will be to select the ministers who will then fill the various ministries and flesh out this new government which really, I mean they've had a Governing Council, they had an Interim Government, they had a Transition Government. This is the government of Iraq. It's their government in a sovereign nation and it's a thrilling accomplishment.

QUESTION: Sir, kind of picking up on those comments, what are the concerns, especially in the security arena, for Iraqi and U.S. forces? Should we expect an increase because this is something that the insurgents can kind of jump on?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Oh, we've always seen spikes of violence and I think it's reasonable to expect that they'll continue to try to prevent the completion of this government and the ministers. They'll use intimidation. These are people who chop off people's heads. These are perfectly terrible people.

Imagine if they succeeded. Imagine if we lost our will and the Iraqi leadership lost their will and the Zarqawis and the Saddamists took back that country. It would be a terrible thing for the region, for the 25 million Iraq people, it would just be a tragedy. And the consequences for the world would be serious and dire.

So what happens now is, the next step is that the new ministers that will appointed, named, and then approved by the parliament will have to begin that difficult task of governing and taking their ministries and seeing they have the right people in there and then seeing that they're proceeding with a budget that makes sense and beginning to serve the Iraqi people. That's tough. That's a difficult assignment and it won't be easy for them.

If you have a repressive regime like Saddam Hussein, people didn't get very entrepreneurial or they ended up dead or in jail if they started making decisions for themselves, so they don't have a generation of people who necessarily are used to leadership, and particularly leadership in a free political system so it's going to take them a while and we have to wish them well.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, how will the new government affect the rate at which the Iraqis are taking control of their cities across the country? How will this have an impact?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well it can. If they select competent Ministers of Defense, and Ministers of Interior, if they have agreed that they'll govern from the center and not consider it the spoils of an election for their particular sect or group or tribe, but if they do that, if they're competent and they govern from the center and work closely together, then the Iraqi security forces will continue to be successful.

They have been very successful. They've provided the bulk of the security for the last two elections.

I guess my observation would be that it's important that they work closely together, it's important that they link intelligence to the security forces, both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior forces, and that they be seen as representative of the entire country and they be seen as fair to every element in that country. There are a lot of people, I think it's over 250,000 Iraqi security forces at the present time and they're growing every week. As they continue to take over more responsibility they'll take over cities, they'll take over real estate, they'll assume responsibility for military bases and the like, and that's a good thing. That's the path we're on. That demonstrates success.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, President Bush talked about the formation of the new Iraqi government over the weekend, and he mentioned reassessing our tactics and our methods. How will the formation of this new government affect the way we are operating now on a daily basis? Or is it really kind of too early to tell?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well, it's a little early to tell, but needless to say, the commanders on the ground constantly have to reassess their tactics, their techniques and their procedures. The reason for that is that the enemy has a brain. The enemy is watching what the Iraqi security forces and the coalition forces are doing. They are making judgments about how they can best advantage themselves, and of course our commanders then have to watch what they do and then adjust our tactics, techniques and procedures so that we are advantaged rather than the terrorists and the Saddamists.

QUESTION: Sir, I'm going to ask this next question, I don't know if there's an answer for this. We have seen Iraqi forces take on a larger role as you mentioned earlier in their own defense. Coupled with this new government how will this impact the number of U.S. forces on the ground in Iraq in the near and long term. And like I said before, is it just really too early to tell or predict that?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well of course the President and General Abizaid and General Casey have all said that the draw-down of our forces will be condition based. That is to say that the conditions on the ground will determine the pace at which we're able to reduce our forces. We've been as high as 160,000, 165,000 U.S. troops there. Currently we're at about 132,000 U.S. troops. As we're able to pass over more responsibility one would think that we would be able to continue reducing down our forces.

I think however, we've talked only about Iraq and Iraq's important. I would like to say that Iraq is really one of the battle grounds in the global war on terror. What's taking place is a challenge for the United States and for our Western friends across the globe. There are terrorist networks that are determined to change the way of life of free people and as a result we have to constantly remind ourselves that the threats are there. We just saw this recent tape by bin Laden. We know that they're determined to kill Americans. We know they're determined to terrorize and alter the behavior of free people everywhere, and we simply can't allow them to do that.

There's a lot of talk today about Iran, and concern about their nuclear program, concern about some of the things that have been said by the leadership in Iran. If one thinks about it, Iran borders Iraq and Iran borders Afghanistan. The last thing Iran wants is to have successful regimes, representative systems, free people in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is harmful to their view of the world, to their extreme view of the world.

So those people who suggest that the cost is too great or it's taking too long and we should not stay the course, it seems to me have to think what it would do for Iran and how it would advance their cause. Their cause is a cause that's dangerous to the world.

It seems to me that we need to put Iraq and Afghanistan in that context so that those people in our country who are deeply concerned about Iran, which is understandable, recognize that success in Afghanistan and success in Iraq is critical to containing the extreme impulses that we see emanating from Iran.

QUESTION: Yes, sir. So they're really tied together in this global war on terrorism.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Indeed.

QUESTION: Sir, President Bush says the new Iraqi government is now a key component in defeating the terrorists in Iraq, and much like you just said really in that whole region.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Right.

QUESTION: What is the real milestone that U.S. forces should look forward to next in this global war on terrorism? Not only in that region but I guess everywhere, with that kind of being the catalyst I guess.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well I think the next step in Iraq is to have the ministers appointed and have them develop a strong, capable government that gives confidence to the people in that country that it can protect them. And as the Iraqi security forces grow in size and capability and competence and experience, then they will take over more and more of that responsibility and we'll see that happen over the coming weeks and months which is a good thing.

You know, every once in a while someone says wouldn't it be nice if we weren't in Iraq? And of course it would be. No American Soldier, Sailor, Airman or Marine wants to be in Iraq, they'd rather be home. We're there for a reason. We're there because it's important that we fight those terrorists and the violent extremists there rather than having to fight them back home, here in the United States. It seems to me that we need to remind ourselves of that important fact. They are dangerous people, they're a vicious people, they're people who behead people and are proud of it. They are just killing innocent men, women and children, Iraqis and people in other countries. There were some bombings today I'm told in Egypt. So we have to recognize that regrettably our world is not a peaceful world and it's our task to keep putting pressure on the terrorists and to succeed in what we're doing and to be willing to persevere and to see it through.

QUESTION: Sir, what would you like to say to the men and women who have served there in the past and are serving there now?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Well God bless them. Every one of them is a volunteer. Each one of those individuals is serving wherever they are, in the Horn of Africa or in Asia or in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Middle East, elsewhere. They're all there because they put up their hand and said I want to volunteer to defend my country, to serve my country, to help protect freedom, and we are so deeply grateful to them for what they do. They are without question the finest military and armed forces on the face of the earth, probably in the history of mankind. They're professional. They have values and standards and they are contributing to a more peaceful world, a more stable world, a world where the people here in the United States are able to be free and get up in the morning and go where they want and say what they want and send their children to school knowing those children are going to come home. That is a great gift that they're giving all of us. They're going to look back on their service to our country with a great deal of pride, and well they should.

QUESTION: Yes, sir.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: No, sir.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for your time and spending a little time with an Okie today, sir. I really appreciate it.

