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Leon Panetta

Speech at U.S. Forces-Iraq End of Mission Ceremony



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Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much. Sergeant Major, General Austin, General Mattis, General Dempsey, honored guests:

It is a profound honor to be here in Baghdad, and to have the opportunity to participate in this moving ceremony, on this very historic occasion for both the Iraqi people and the American people.

No words, no ceremony, can provide full tribute to the sacrifices that have brought this day to pass. I'm reminded of what President Lincoln said at Gettysburg, about a different war, in a different time. As he paid tribute to the fallen in that war, his words echo through the years as we pay tribute to the fallen of this war: "the world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

Today we are honored by the presence of so many distinguished guests from the Iraqi and American governments.

And to the distinguished members of the Iraqi government, and the Iraqi military, thank you for your courage, for your leadership, for your friendship over these many years. More importantly, thank you for your loyalty to the future of Iraq. Your dream of an independent and sovereign Iraq is now a reality.

We are deeply fortunate that in addition to all the great commanders who led our troops here, there are two great Americans who stepped forward to lead this mission through this final transition. Today we honor these two national treasures: Ambassador Jeffrey and General Austin.

Jim, I want to thank you for your wise counsel and for your brilliant diplomacy at a time that called for both. Lloyd, our nation owes you its highest gratitude for your tireless commitment to this mission through multiple lengthy deployments. I want to offer my deepest thanks on behalf of the American people for shouldering this burden of leadership.



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Lloyd, your effort to make this day a reality is nothing short of miraculous. This was one of the most complex logistical undertakings in U.S. military history -- 50,000 U.S. troops withdrawn seamlessly, dozens of bases closed or handed over, millions of pieces of equipment that had to be transferred -- all while maintaining security for our forces and the security of the Iraqi people.

Lloyd you'll now reunite at the Pentagon with someone whose able leadership during a critical time in this war effort helped achieve its ultimate success: U.S. Army Chief of Staff Ray Odierno. Together with Ray, you'll now lead the army through an important moment of transition as Vice Chief of Staff. You're part of a generation of battle-proven leaders who have now taken the reins of our national security.

And I can't tell you how much we benefit from that great experience. Lloyd, I know you'll ensure, along with Ray Odierno and Marty Dempsey who fought in this conflict, that as we confront new strategic challenges, we do not forget the lessons of war.

Nor will we ever forget the sacrifices of the more than one million men and women of the United States armed forces who served in Iraq, and the sacrifices of their families. Through deployment after deployment after deployment, families somehow withstood the strain, the sacrifice, and the heartbreak of watching their loved ones go off to war. The loved ones fought in places like Fallujah, Ramadi, Sadr City and elsewhere. And today, in particular, we remember the nearly 4,500 brave Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, as well as the more than 30,000 wounded warriors many of whom still struggle with serious, life-altering injuries.

To all of the men and women in uniform today: your nation is deeply indebted to you. You have done everything your nation asked you to do and more. Your dedication, your commitment to this mission has been the driving force behind the remarkable progress that we've seen here in Baghdad and across this country.

You came to this "Land between the Rivers" again and again and again. You did not know whether you'd return to your loved ones. You will leave with great pride -- lasting pride -- secure in knowing that your sacrifice has helped the Iraqi people begin a new chapter in history, free from tyranny and full of hope for prosperity and peace, particularly for this country's future generations.

This outcome was never certain, especially during the war's darkest days. In 2006, as a member of President Bush's Iraq Study Group, I traveled here at a time when sectarian violence was skyrocketing and it seemed as if nothing was working. Iraq was struggling with turmoil, with violence, with uncertainty.

Today, some five years later, and after a great deal of blood was spilled by Iraqis and Americans, the mission of an Iraq that could govern and secure itself has become real: The Iraqi army and police have been rebuilt and they are capable of responding to threats; violence levels are down; al Qaeda has been weakened; the rule of law has been strengthened; educational opportunities have been expanded; and economic growth is expanding, as well. And this progress has been sustained even as we have withdrawn nearly 150,000 U.S. combat forces from this country.



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With the departure of the remaining U.S. forces within these last few days to the end of the year, we salute the fact that Iraq is now fully responsible for directing its own path to future security and future prosperity.

To be sure, the cost was high -- the blood and treasure of the United States and also of the Iraqi people. But those lives have not been lost in vain -- they gave birth to an independent, free, and sovereign Iraq. And because of the sacrifices made, these years of war have now yielded to a new era of opportunity. Together with the Iraqi people, the United States welcomes the next stage in U.S.-Iraq relations, one that will be rooted in mutual interest and mutual respect.

Let me be clear: Iraq will be tested in the days ahead -- by terrorism, by those who would seek to divide, by economic and social issues, by the demands of democracy itself. Challenges remain, but the United States will be there to stand with the Iraqi people as they navigate those challenges to build a stronger and more prosperous nation.

To that end, the U.S. is deepening our relationship with Iraq through our Office of Security Cooperation, and Iraq Security Forces will continue to partner with U.S. Central Command, led by General Jim Mattis. The U.S. will maintain a significant diplomatic presence here in Iraq. We will continue to help Iraq address violent extremism and defend against external threats. We will continue to have a robust and enduring military presence across the Middle East. We are not about to turn our backs on all that has been sacrificed and accomplished, and we will not allow those who would seek to undermine success to have their way.

But in the end, this is not about the United States. Rather, today is about Iraq. This is a time for Iraq to look forward. This is an opportunity for Iraq to forge ahead on the path to security and prosperity. And we undertake this transition today reminding Iraq that it has in the United States a committed friend and a committed partner. We owe it to all of the lives that have been sacrificed in this war not to fail.

I believe that the fundamental dream of all humanity is to be able to give our children a better life. Today, the Iraqi people move closer to realizing that dream, and Iraqis can take pride in knowing that through the service and sacrifice of so many brave warriors, your children will have that better future. That is the reward that we all cherish on this historic day. This is not the end, this is truly the beginning.

ay God bless our troops, may God bless America, and may God bless Iraq, its people, and its future.