

Congressman Wally Herger

"Honoring the Fallen Who Have Given Us Freedom"

Special Forces Association

May 26, 2007

Good evening. I want to thank the Special Forces Association for inviting me today. It is truly an honor to participate in dedicating this Special Forces Association Chapter in the memory of SFC Allen C. Johnson, who made his home in Los Molinos. It's an honor to celebrate Memorial Day with the men and women gathered here --Americans who have sacrificed to preserve, protect, and defend the rights and privileges cherished by citizens of the United States.

As we observe Memorial Day, let's step back from the usual festivities associated with the beginning of the summer season and reflect on the service that millions of Americans have given our nation to make and keep us free. Throughout American history more than 35 million American military personnel left their families to serve their country during wartime. We are gathered here today to honor those who, as Abraham Lincoln said in his Gettysburg address, "Gave the last full measure of devotion" in all our wars throughout our history.

Our great nation would never have been founded, nor our freedoms preserved, without the courage and tenacity of men and women throughout history who died fighting for an ideal -- a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But perhaps today we should not only memorialize the fallen, but celebrate the privilege of freedom for which they perished.

Let us take a moment and reflect on how those freedoms have unleashed the prosperity and many blessings we enjoy in America. These liberties have all been earned through the ultimate sacrifice paid by so many of the members of our Armed Forces. Our soldiers have died fighting to end atrocities in other countries, to prevent the spread of communism, and to protect our country's national interest from terrorism and other foreign threats.

The war against radical jihadists is the current conflict in which we are now engaged. We did not ask for this fight, but fight it we must.

Some have questioned whether our fight in Iraq has anything to do with the war on terror. That question has already been answered by our enemy, al Qaeda. In a July 2005 letter, Osama Bin Laden's top deputy outlined al Qaeda's vision for transforming the Middle East into a terrorist sanctuary. The first step in their master plan is to "expel the Americans from Iraq." Next, al Qaeda envisions filling "the void stemming from the departure of the Americans" by taking control of Sunni areas in Iraq. A violent "jihad wave" could then begin spreading throughout the region.

Al Qaeda knows it cannot "expel" Americans by defeating our military. Instead, their strategy is to weaken our morale and convince us to give up. They use barbaric tactics against innocent civilians to ignite sectarian violence among Iraqis. They explode bombs with chlorine gas to suffocate and kill. They send young children on suicide bombing missions. And they won't relent unless stopped by force.

As General Petraeus recently stated, "Iraq is the central front of al Qaeda's global campaign." Al Qaeda certainly sees it as such. While they are not the only enemy in Iraq, the General describes them as "public enemy number one." We cannot leave Iraq's future in their hands. Doing so would bring al Qaeda a big step closer to fulfilling their vision of Middle East terror. That would threaten our national security and put Americans at heightened risk. Success in Iraq must be our only option.

As al Qaeda's war rages on, Congress has finally sent President Bush a bill that would fund our troops without micromanaging their commanders. The measure that the President has signed into law does not include dangerous timetables for an American withdrawal. Instead, it recognizes that our generals on the ground--not armchair generals in Congress--should make tactical judgments on how to fight the battle in Iraq. This bill provides our troops the resources they need to fight al Qaeda and other extremists. I'm very pleased that it is now law.

Meanwhile, our soldiers are implementing a new and comprehensive security plan in Iraq. Although not all of our additional troops have arrived, we are already seeing encouraging signs of progress. Sectarian violence in Baghdad is down considerably.

In the Anbar province, Sunni tribal leaders are increasingly fighting al Qaeda terrorists. And militias that participated in a cycle of violence last year have thus far cooperated with the new security plan by not retaliating when others strike their neighborhoods.

Not surprisingly, al Qaeda has unleashed brutal attacks to counter our progress. They sense that more and more Iraqis are turning against them. They are desperate to spark a new wave of revenge killings among Iraqis. They know that increased security undermines their efforts to transform parts of Iraq into a terrorist safe haven. And they know that their defeat in Iraq would undermine their hopes of a creating a region of terror.

Like all Americans, I want our men and women home as soon as possible. But we have a responsibility -- to our soldiers in the field, to future generations of Americans, and perhaps most importantly, to the families of the injured and fallen -- to give the new security plan a chance to achieve success. The mission in Iraq is to strengthen our national security by fighting terrorists abroad, rather than on our soil, and supporting a democratically elected government in the heart of the Middle East that hunts terrorists, rather than harboring them.

Today, as we honor our fallen military men and women, let us not tarnish their sacrifice by retreating from the battle of our generation. And our honor of our fallen heroes must not be limited to one day, because we live from the fruit of their sacrifices each and every day. All of our veterans, living and deceased, deserve the respect, admiration, and gratitude of the citizens of the United States let us never forget. It was a true honor to be with you on this day.