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“The Global War on Terrorism: The Long War”

March 1, 2006

Speaker: **Brigadier General Robert L. Caslen, Jr.**, United States Army, Deputy Director for the War on Terrorism

This meeting, jointly sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Division of International Security Studies, the RAND Corporation, and the U.S. Army’s Eisenhower National Security Series, was part of an ongoing series on terrorism and homeland security.

Brigadier General Caslen presented an overview of the “Global War on Terrorism” from the perspective of the U.S. Department of Defense. He noted that only two years ago the Department had not reached a consensus on the nature of the war and of the threat posed by the United States’ adversaries in the post-9/11 era.

Caslen stated that the primary enemy is al Qaeda and its associated extremists. These groups are inspired by a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam, salafism, which holds that Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have strayed from true Islam and that violent jihad, including the use of terrorism, is a legitimate instrument to convert all Muslims to their fundamentalist vision and to expel non-believers from Muslim lands. Al Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups benefit from the pervasive sense of grievance in the Muslim world. These grievances arise from a plethora of sources, including the perceived U.S. disregard of civilian casualties from U.S. military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and perceived Western indifference to suffering in Palestine, Kashmir and Chechnya. Other sources are local – the lack of economic opportunity and stagnant political conditions in these countries. Globalization too is a source of grievance as the term widely connotes U.S. economic and cultural domination. These grievances are exploited by extremist groups to attract new recruits and to try to create political support in the broader population.

The Islamist terrorist groups are actively working to acquire military capabilities (including nuclear and other unconventional weapons), skillfully using information-age tools (notably the Internet) to control their operatives and to communicate with the broader Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. Al Qaeda’s near-term objectives are to expel U.S. forces from Iraq and establish an Islamic government (on the model of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan) and then to use that country as a base to destabilize the other countries in the region, starting with Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

U.S. strategy needs to focus on attacking terrorists and their capacity to operate effectively. This component entails eliminating safe havens and building state capacity so that allied regimes can exert sovereign control over their territories, thereby making the ability of terrorist groups to function more difficult. The dilemma is that such capacity-building may take decades. The critical complement to this capacity-building strategy is support for moderate, mainstream Muslim groups that reject the violent extremism of al Qaeda.

Caslen concluded that the United States is in the midst of a “long war” and that the decisions taken today will determine how long and how intense this war will be. He likened the contemporary struggle against al Qaeda and Islamic extremism to the challenge previous generations faced in Nazism and Communism.

The discussion period focused on the relationship between the military and political components of U.S. strategy – specifically whether U.S. military actions are undercutting efforts to build political support among Muslim moderates.