

Remarks by Dr. Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
Ivane Javakhishvili Tblisi State University
Tblisi, Georgia
Thursday, May 15, 2008

Ladies and gentlemen, I am very pleased to be here, and I have been deeply touched by the warm hospitality that has been extended to us by our Georgian hosts.

In ancient times, fabled Colchis was considered a land of enchantments at the ends of the earth.

Today, the world seems much smaller, and our fellow mariners from Black Sea nations are members of a growing partnership among sea-faring nations.

But the sense of enchantment and wonder that fascinated Jason and the Argonauts still remains, and the United States Navy is proud to serve alongside our Georgian partners at sea and in theatres from Asia to the Middle East in a spirit of cooperation and mutual support.

The truth is, the passage of time from antiquity to the present day has witnessed many astonishing events, great opportunities, and the rise of sobering threats that call for closer ties among maritime nations.

Who could have predicted, 90 years ago, when Ivane Javakhishvili founded this superb institution of learning, the fate of the Bolshevik and communist seizures of power, Tblisi State University's seminal role throughout the 20th century as a leader in the nation's struggle for freedom, or the exciting events of the Rose Revolution nearly five years ago?

History's uncertain course will continue to surprise us, and it is likely that Georgia will continue to be at the center of so many of the world's momentous changes in the direction of self-government and human liberty.

As the first American Secretary of the Navy to visit this great country, I can tell you that I am deeply honored by the occasion.

My coming here is intended to demonstrate to you my enthusiastic desire to deepen the ties of friendship and cooperation between our Navies, thereby underscoring the importance the United States places on its relationship with Georgia.

Georgia has been a great friend and partner to the U.S., and I would like to take

this opportunity to express my deep appreciation for your many significant contributions in support of the war on terrorism in Iraq, and elsewhere.

I note with satisfaction that the United States Marine Corps' strong relationship with the Georgian Army has been marked by a spirit of cooperation and friendship across a number of training initiatives.

This cooperation has served to the benefit of both Georgia and the United States, and it has paid dividends in Iraq, where Georgian troops have been serving with notable distinction.

With approximately 2,000 Georgian troops serving in Iraq side-by-side with U.S. and Coalition forces, Georgia continues to provide valuable combat capability on the ground against a ruthless enemy that deliberately targets civilians, systematically sabotages reconstruction, and callously stokes ethnic and religious strife.

Georgia has been a stalwart partner of the United States in Iraq, and it has also suffered from the high price of bringing freedom and security to that long-suffering land.

I would like to express my deepest sympathy for the recent loss of LT Giorgi Margievi and Corporal Zura Gvinetadze, and for the injuries sustained by Corporal Tengiz Mirtskhulava in an IED attack in Iraq on May 2nd.

I extend my heartfelt condolences for all of the fallen from Georgia in this war. Please accept my heartfelt sympathy.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the heroic warriors who have done great honor to Georgia in defending freedom, and in giving the Iraqi people a chance at a brighter future.

Given Georgia's recent history, we note that you appreciate more than most how precious democratic freedoms are, and what sacrifices are often necessary to win them—and sustain them.

As we work together in Iraq in support of a set of common values—the rule of law, respect for the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, free elections—we see Georgia's commitment to values we share.

That commitment is reflected in your pursuit of democratic reforms at home, and we applaud your great progress.

In view of your most recent presidential elections, and parliamentary elections

just around the corner, we look forward to working with the newly elected and re-elected representatives of Georgia, and we deeply respect your country's embrace of democratic ideals.

Your actions in this direction will serve you well as you pursue NATO membership and greater Euro-Atlantic integration.

The United States continues to support Georgia's pursuit of NATO membership.

As President Bush said last month at the NATO Summit in Bucharest:

"NATO should welcome Georgia [and Ukraine] into the Membership Action Plan. And NATO membership must remain open to all of Europe's democracies who seek it, and are ready to share in the responsibilities of NATO members."

The United States supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, and we oppose violent efforts to undermine it.

Violence and instability in this region endanger the security and prosperity of Georgians, and alarm Georgia's neighbors.

A diplomatic solution to current disputes is essential to preserving Georgia's achievements since the Rose Revolution, and to maintaining its promising start in its NATO aspirations.

Given Georgia's strategic location, your leadership in the development of maritime security on the Black Sea, and in pursuing a more cooperative military relationship, is welcomed and strongly supported.

In that same spirit, I come to Tblisi today in support of continued U.S. support for the modernization and development of the Georgian Navy and Coast Guard.

I will be discussing the options to engage on this issue with the Georgian leadership, and I look forward to a bright future of ever-increasing U.S.-Georgian Naval cooperation.

Cooperative engagement is a cornerstone of the new U.S. maritime strategy, which was unveiled last summer.

Underlying this strategy is a recognition that there have been many momentous changes in the strategic environment over the past twenty years, but also an understanding that maritime security is an enduring imperative in defending our interests.

With 70 percent of the world's surface covered by water, 80 percent of the

world's population living near the coasts, and 90 percent of global trade transported by sea, it is easy to see why disruptions to global commerce caused by instability virtually anywhere in the world can have a direct impact on our economic activities.

This phenomenon is not new, but the effects of instability are more acute today as a result of the great efficiency of world markets in virtually every area.

In such an environment, increased maritime security can protect trade and commercial interests, in addition to providing security to all nations.

As a maritime nation, America has always looked to Naval strength as critical to its security, and today we are, more than ever, committed to building up and maintaining our Navy and Marine Corps.

I would like to close today by noting the historical significance of an American president who was a fervent believer in Naval power, and who, perhaps more than any other U.S. leader, transformed the United States Navy into a force with global reach.

Theodore Roosevelt—the youngest president in our history—was godfather and mastermind of the Great White Fleet, which proudly carried the American flag around the world 100 years ago.

President Roosevelt conceived the idea of amassing a fleet of 16 battleships—painted in white for the occasion—and sending them on a tour that would circumnavigate the globe.

Launched in December 1907 from Norfolk, Virginia, Roosevelt's Great White Fleet sailed for 14 months on a 70,000 kilometer journey, making 20 port calls on six continents.

Both a bold display of American power and a goodwill tour to nations overseas, the cruise also served as a great leap forward in my country's history of working with other nations in a spirit of friendship and cooperation.

The experiences and lessons learned from the tour of the Great White Fleet are still with us today.

As we work with coalition partners in Iraq and Afghanistan, provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to those in need, and face the growing challenges of transnational terrorism and asymmetric threats, the dedicated service of our Sailors and Marines remain the indispensable ingredient today, just as they were 100 years ago.

In commemoration of the 100-year anniversary of the Great White Fleet, the United States has sent ships to various ports around the world to highlight important partnerships and alliances, and to honor this historic achievement.

It is in that spirit that USS JOHN L. HALL—a Navy frigate—comes to your shores this week.

The HALL's port visit symbolizes the importance of the U.S.-Georgia relationship, and signals our desire for continued cooperation with the Georgian military.

The partnership we have established between our nations and our Navies will enable us to combat 21st century threats, and protect the international trade interests of both Georgia and the United States.

I look forward to working with the leadership of your country, and with your Navy and Coast Guard, as we go forward together in defending our common interests in the region.

Thank you, and may the spirit of friendship and cooperation always characterize the relations between us.