

Good afternoon,

Let me begin with some words in Italian for my Italian parents:

*“Buongiorno a tutti. Vorrei ringraziare il Ministro Di Paola per la bella ospitalità offerta qui a Roma. Sono un figlio dell’Italia ed è per me un’esperienza molto commovente tornare qui come Segretario alla Difesa degli Stati Uniti d’America. Sicuro di interpretare i sentimenti del popolo americano, desidero inviare a tutti gli italiani un messaggio di sincera amicizia. Siamo e saremo sempre una famiglia, amici e alleati. Grazie tante.”*

I am honored to be able to come to Rome on what is likely my final international trip as United States Secretary of Defense.

Today the Minister and I had a very productive session covering a host of bilateral issues – Afghanistan, our shared concerns about the situation in Mali, and how to strengthen our defense trade and cooperation, and assistance for the future. I am deeply grateful to the Minister Di Paola – someone who has been a good friend and a strong partner. He has exercised a tremendous leadership and I cherish that leadership for what he has done for the United States, and for NATO and for the Allies.

As the son of Italian immigrants, I have always felt –as many of you know – a strong connection to Italy. This is the home of my parents and I have many members of my family who are still part of Italy. But as Secretary of Defense, I have gained a profound new respect, because Italy is one of our best partners in the world, and provides significant contributions to regional and global security.

Italy is a key member of the NATO Alliance and has made a very important contribution in the Libya effort, in Afghanistan, in other operations in Africa, at the present time it is exercising a tremendous leadership in what we call RC-West.

In our session, Minister di Paola and I updated each other on the significant progress our forces are making in the work in Afghanistan, trying to build an Afghanistan that can govern and secure itself.

I gave him a briefing on the meeting that President Karzai had in Washington last week with myself, Secretary Hillary Clinton and President Obama. That progress will enable us to reach a key milestone this spring, when Afghan forces shift into the lead for security throughout the country with ISAF forces in support.

Italy has the enduring gratitude of the United States for its steadfast support for the ISAF effort. We will never forget, never forget, the more than 50 Italians who have died carrying out the mission in Afghanistan. Our hearts go to their families, those who were impacted by these losses. One of the toughest jobs I have as a Secretary of Defense is writing notes to the families of those who have

lost loved ones in the battle. So I understand deeply what those losses are all about, and I can't tell you how much we appreciate the sacrifices that have been made.

America is also grateful to Italy – and I expressed my gratitude to the Minister and his staff during the meeting – for its extraordinary hospitality that it has provided in hosting more than 30,000 U.S. service members, civilians, and dependents.

U.S. bases in Italy – as I pointed out – enhance the collective security of the Alliance. They are critical to our military's ability to respond to crisis, and to meet the challenges in this region and beyond. Tomorrow, I will have the opportunity to go to Vicenza to personally thank U.S. military personnel who are stationed there.

And in particular I want to thank Italy for its participation in the Joint Strike Fighter Program. I want Italy to know that the US is fully committed to developing this essential fighter for the future.

Together with their Italian counterparts, these young men and women are helping to write I believe a new chapter in the long history of Italian American friendship. I know they are inspired by the same goal my Italian father always told me: we must work hard and we must protect those we love in order to build a better life for our children. That was the dream of my parents, and it is our dream for a better world.

Thank you. ■