Mr. President, freedom took another important step

forward this past Saturday in Iraq. Last December, we witnessed

millions of free and brave Iraqi citizens defy the terrorist death

threats and go to the polls to elect a parliament. Since that election,

Iraqi political leaders have been hard at work forging a government

that reflects the will of the Iraqi people.

This Saturday--unfortunately, it took a while to get there--we were

finally able to celebrate the good news. Iraqis have made major

progress toward achieving the goal of having a government in place.

Iraqi political leaders reached an important agreement for the top

leadership post for a national unity government.

Iraq will retain the experienced hand of Jalal Talabani as President,

and the new Prime Minister Jawad al-Maliki appears to be a reformer,

respected by all sides, who will hopefully have the credibility and the

authority to shape a strong government with the power to take on the

major issues facing that country.

The new Iraqi leadership has the will of the people at its back. They

understand that democracy requires the courage to reach consensus. Over

the next 30 days, they must fill the remaining slots of the cabinet and

begin to address the challenges that grip that country.

Freedom and stability in Iraq is bad news for the terrorists. A

stable, strong Iraq will unite its people against continued violence. A

stable, strong Iraq will be an ally in the war on terror and a beacon

of democracy in the Middle East. A stable, strong Iraq that cracks down

on the terrorists in its midst will make the region and the world more

secure.

Aside from the Iraqis themselves, much credit for this triumph in

Iraq goes to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Her skillful

diplomacy appears to have been a crucial ingredient in breaking the

logjam.

Much credit also goes to our U.S. Ambassador there, Zalmay Khalilzad,

for his tireless efforts. And, of course, President Bush's continuing

resolve to defy terrorism and terrorist-friendly regimes and to support

freedom and democracy has inspired and strengthened everyone in the

process.

As we celebrate the victory in Iraq, we are mindful that much hard

work certainly lies ahead. Terrorist violence in Iraq continues. Some

say the momentum from the three successful elections of last year each

one drawing greater levels of turnout than the one before has been

squandered with the last 4 months of political bickering. The new Iraq

leaders must be sure not to squander any more by failing to assemble a

government in a timely manner.

Although we are cautious, I think we should also be optimistic.

America will continue to stand beside Iraq in the days ahead. I remind

anyone who thinks this new government took too long to form that

America also had a rocky start at its beginning. People forget that

from the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution was 11 years,

and from the Declaration of Independence until George Washington

actually took office was 13 years.

Freedom, however, is worth the wait. The incoming Prime Minister

appears to understand that he must form a consensus government, one

that must reach out to Iraq's many ethnic and religious groups as his

country begins its journey of democracy.

I was heartened by the promise he made this weekend. Here is what he

had to say. He said:

The new Prime Minister, al-Maliki, has the right attitude, and that

attitude should continue to guide the new government in the days ahead.

I know my colleagues will join me in congratulating the people of

Iraq for spurning the terrorists and continuing down the road to

democracy.

Most of all, I wish to express my profound gratitude for our troops

in Iraq. It has been their strength and courage that has made progress

on the road to freedom possible.