Mr. Speaker, yesterday marked the official end of

America's 9-year war in Iraq. In a low-key ceremony in Baghdad, U.S.

troops lowered the American flag of command that flew over the Iraqi

capital. The 4,000 remaining U.S. servicemembers in Iraq will leave by

this year's end.

The Iraq war was a painful and difficult time, extraordinarily costly

in terms of Americans, America's lives and resources. Nearly 4,500

Americans, including 45 Nebraskans, were killed in Operation Iraqi

Freedom. 227 Nebraskans were wounded in combat. Tens of thousands of

Iraqis lost their lives. We lost good men and women, individuals full

of life and blessed with talent, whose proud families awaited their

return to the country they loved so dear and served so well.

But in spite of our wounds, we are proud--proud of our fallen heroes,

proud of the veterans who have come back to us, proud of their

sacrifice, proud of their noble vision that has significantly changed

the global environment where democratic ideals are now making steady

gains everywhere.

The work of our troops, steadily done in the midst of extensive

public debate and strategy deliberations about the war was the strength

of this mission. These troops achieved what was set before them. The

victories were theirs. Their unwavering commitment, their skill, and

their bravery got the job done.

The troops' efforts unbound an Iraqi people held hostage for decades

by an egomaniacal dictator. Insurgencies led by terrorists seeking to

wreak havoc and disorder were put down by our troops. Space was created

to allow Iraqis the time necessary to build the foundations of a

representative government in a more open society.

But there are still challenges and significant obstacles. It would

have been preferable, Mr. Speaker, for a small stay-behind force to

remain for ongoing response and stabilization efforts.

The way forward will not be easy, but today Iraqis determine Iraq's

future. No longer constricted by the dictates of a despot, they have

held elections, they have written a constitution, and hopefully they

will build a culture that respects the rights and dignity of all of

their people.

America and the world needs a stabilized Iraq. Our security is

strengthened by it, and we will continue a strong, diplomatic

relationship to help achieve it. An Iraq that protects the rights of

all of its people, Sunni and Shiite, Christian and Yazidi, and employs

a government that maintains order and preserves liberties will be an

Iraq that can help transform the entire Middle East looking for a new

way forward.

The foundation for this has been laid, after much toil and bloodshed,

by valiant American soldiers who return to us now as modern-day heroes.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.