Mr. President, on the basis of the very kind

comments of the Senator from Illinois and others, very reasoned

comments, many of these comments having been stimulated by the Iraq

Study Group, which Mr. Baker and Mr. Hamilton both made their first

presentation to the Congress, to our Senate Armed Services Committee,

back in early December, there is a lot of wisdom in this. The members

of this study commission are some of the finest public servants to have

been produced in this country and who obviously have the interest of

this country at heart and who are struggling through this thicket of

unclear occurrences in the Middle East and Central Asia. The goal is to

figure a way in which there might be a chance at stabilizing Iraq

politically and economically so that country has a chance to continue

to exist with a democratically elected government. Yet, at this point,

it is certainly not clear that stability is going to materialize. We

certainly hope it does because of the consequences for America and for

the rest of the free world if Iraq crumbles into chaos.

Looming over that entire region is an ascendant Iran, an Iran that is

penetrating its influence, not only through the Shiites in Iraq but

through its efforts in other parts of the Middle East, through Syria,

through Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories and

as a result, we see the increasing influence of Iran and their brand of

Shiite Islam. This is much to the consternation of a majority of the

Arab world, in particular the Sunni Arab world as well as Israel.

In the 2 weeks preceding Christmas, I went on a visit to nine nations

within a 12-day period, coming back just in time for Christmas. I was

struck by the words I would hear from leaders in Israel where I first

visited and the words I would hear by other Arab leaders, in some cases

heads of state in Sunni Arab nations. Those words were almost identical

in describing the real present and future threat posed by Iran. Of

course, a lot of that concern was not only related to Iran obtaining a

nuclear weapon but the immediate concern of Iraq spiraling into chaos,

with no stability whatsoever, with the continued penetration by the

Iranian Shiite influence.

I first went to Israel, and then continued on, visiting with the

heads of state and the governments, in Palestine, and then on to

Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, on to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, which, by the way,

General Hayden, the head of the CIA, requested I go and spend time with

the Saudi King, to urge the Saudis to exert their influence with the

Sunni tribes in Iraq working towards reconciliation. I went from Saudi

Arabia to Bahrain and then into Iraq. I have come away with a number of

conclusions.

After visiting with the marines in western Iraq in Al Anbar Province,

indeed a U.S. troop increase may well help us be better able to

stabilize that part of Iraq. It is almost entirely Sunni, and the major

threat there is al-Qaida, and of course the big military threat to us

there is the IEDs, the improvised explosive devices.

I, along with Senator Coleman of Minnesota, as we were in Iraq

together--and he can certainly speak for himself, but I think we were

persuaded by talking to the Marine commanders that an increase of some

number of troops there would help them in what they are doing on a

daily basis, which is trying to get the local Arab leaders to take over

their own security. There is some degree of success in western Iraq but

not in Baghdad. In Baghdad there is the sectarian violence that

everyone has heard about.

What we were shocked to hear was from prominent Sunni members of the

Government in Iraq, in Baghdad. One prominent, high-level Iraqi

Government official, a shia, said to us: Sectarian violence is not the

problem. Those were almost his exact words. In his opinion, the problem

was the Sunni extremists, the Baathists who want to retain power, just

like they had it in the old days under Saddam Hussein, and the foreign

fighters from al-Qaida. For that high-level official to sit there and

look two U.S. Senators in the eyes and say that sectarian violence was

not the problem is either a complete misreading of the circumstances,

the reality on the ground, or else his mind is so enveloped in

sectarian violence and the old hatreds of the Shiites against the

Sunnis and vice versa, those hatreds that are so ingrained that he

can't see beyond that sectarianism.

So in a few days, we are going to receive the President's new plan. I

look forward to seeing and hearing the details of it, but it is not a

new plan because there is no plan now. We need some honest realism in

the policy, not hardheaded ideology. This so-called new policy ought to

be driven by realism. It is the situation on the ground in Baghdad that

no surge is going to solve the problem. I think those who are leaking

this report in advance of it coming out have it backwards. A surge to

solve the sectarian violence is not going to work. We ought to have the

sectarian violence subside because Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites decide that

it is more in their interests to reconcile than it is to fight the old

hatred fights. At the same time, it would be my recommendation, as the

Iraq Study Group report has recommended, that we start moving more to a

training mission from a combat mission. Only if the sectors decide they

are going to reconcile, then we, the United States, can help them be

better prepared in a training mission instead of a combat mission. It

is my hope that the Saudis would utilize their extensive tribal Sunni

contacts in order to urge those Sunnis in Iraq that the only way you

are going to see a better end of the day is to have some

reconciliation. And the Saudis told me that they are now starting to

see this opportunity.

There have been things that have come out in the last couple of weeks

that I don't think bode too well for us. The one general who, time

after time, came before our Senate Armed Services Committee and in whom

I had a degree of trust in what he was saying

was General Abizaid. Now General Abizaid is going to retire. He not

only speaks the language, he has been involved in that region of the

world for years, yet his advice is no longer going to be sought. That,

to me, is a mistake.

What is at stake is the entire region with the Iranian ascendancy.

What is at stake is the more than 140,000 American troops who are there

now and all of those who will be rotated there in the future. What is

at stake in the Middle East and central Asia is a part of the world of

enormous importance to the United States.

It is hard to talk about this very difficult condition the United

States is facing without also saying there is another policy we clearly

ought to look at in order to make some changes to lessen our dependence

on that part of the world in the future, and that is energy

independence. If we did not have to import 60 percent of our daily

consumption of oil from places such as the Persian Gulf region or

Nigeria or Venezuela, wouldn't the defense outlook for the United

States and the way we would approach our foreign policy in different

parts of the world be considerably different and a lot easier for the

United States?

As we eagerly anticipate the President's comments and his report on

his new policy, let's understand there is not a new policy. There has

not been a policy in the past. The idea that this surge of troops is a

new policy is not new. We tried that before a couple of years ago and

it did not work. It did not work because of the longstanding violence

and hatred between those two groups of Islam which goes back to the

1600s, when the two brands of Islam started separating, and what

ultimately came to be the Shiites separated from the Sunnis after the

death of Mohammed. A separation, with the two sides wanting revenge is

how this has played out over the years. It is still going on.

We have enormous stakes. We hope we can get it right. It is with a

great deal of anticipation that I look forward to the Senate receiving

the President's comments.

I yield the floor.