Mr. President, I have spoken here previously about the

contribution that one of our closest allies, Australia, has made to

support our efforts in Iraq and in the ongoing war against terror. At a

time when other members of the international coalition in Iraq are

beginning to draw down or remove their forces from the region,

Australia continues to do its part.

In fact, over the following weeks, Australia will expand its

commitment to Iraq by about 50 percent. This will increase the total

Australian military personnel currently working in or around Iraq to

1,370. These additional Australian troops will provide a secure

environment--following the withdrawal of Dutch troops--for Japanese

engineers who are involved in the reconstruction efforts in the Al

Muthanna Province in southern Iraq. The additional troop commitment

will also bolster the existing training of Iraqi forces by Australian

troops--training which is essential to the successful transformation of

Iraq into a secure democracy.

Australia has always been a great friend and ally of ours. It shares

a tradition of democracy and a dedication to the values of freedom and

respect for life that we hold dear in the United States. Australia is,

in fact, the only nation to have sent forces to fight alongside the

United States in every major conflict during the 20th century,

including Afghanistan, the first gulf war, Vietnam, Korea, and both

World Wars.

Sixty-eight years ago, when Americans and Australians fought

alongside one another at the Battle of the Coral Sea, during the

darkest days of the Second World War, only 12 democracies survived on

the face of the earth. The United States and Australia were 2 of the

12. Today, when more people vote for their own governments than ever

before, and as fledgling democracies emerge in the Middle East and

Eastern Europe, it is important to remember how precious democracy is,

and to recognize and thank our allies, such as Australia, who have

always stood beside us and fought in the defense of liberty.

Earlier this month, I traveled with Senator Reid and six other

Senators to Iraq, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Georgia, and

Ukraine. During that trip it was clear that the Iraqi elections--the

bravery of the Iraqi people in staring down intimidation and violence

to go to the ballot box--had been an inspiration to that part of the

world. But, in the short term, democracy in Iraq can only take hold

with the continued support of coalition troops--including those from

Australia.

So I thank the Australian troops and the Australian people for the

crucial help they continue to provide to this important mission in

Iraq. Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Minister Downer have shown

leadership and courage in standing with us in this difficult time.

Their support is important to building on the success of January's

elections so that Iraq may continue on its difficult path toward

democracy.