Mr. Speaker, the right to vote--democracy itself--is more

than a way to settle disputes, however petty or important.

It is, rather, the embodiment of a larger, much more important

notion: the notion that every individual is worthwhile; that every

individual, by virtue of his or her humanity, is worthy of

consideration and respect.

What an important notion. How that notion is disregarded and abused

in so many places in the world--sometimes even here at home.

Where was that notion ignored more systematically than in Saddam's

brutalized Iraq? The Iraq of terror, of mass graves, of mothers and

children killed by poison gas and rotting where they dropped to the

ground?

Yet less than 2 years later, the Iraqi people, under the protection

of an American-led Coalition and their own nascent security forces,

have turned out in defiance of threats and, in some cases, even in the

face of explosions and gunfire, to cast ballots.

When they did so, they affirmed that, as individuals, they were

anyone's equal; they were, in essence, demanding respect from those who

would govern them. And by joining together in public, each with their

one vote, they were affirming their willingness to respect their

neighbors and permit each of them an equal share of power.

Mr. Speaker, as has been said repeatedly, this is but one step in a

long road. The election was not perfect. Elections never are. And yet,

this election may turn out to be a strategic victory for freedom for

Iraq and for its region.

It will, I hope prove impossible to persuade people who have

understood and exercised their rights to surrender them willingly. We

should have confidence that the Iraqi people will continue to defy the

threats, to respond to them with force if need be, and to press fro the

establishment of a state that continues to respect them as individuals.

Such a state will be a good friend of the American people, and a good

neighbor to all within its crucial region.