Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the gentleman from Iowa (Mr.

King) for his leadership and for what he did to organize that

congressional delegation visit to Iraq. I enjoyed that and learned a

great deal from that experience, along with the gentleman from Texas

(Mr. Cuellar) and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. Burgess).

I think what we learned in Iraq is that clearly there are problems,

and those problems remain; but considerable progress has been made.

That progress to me was best exemplified by a man from Pennsylvania

named Albert Chowansky, Jr.

And Albert Chowansky Jr., to me, exemplifies the spirit and sense of

purpose reflected by American civilians working and serving in Iraq.

This man, Albert is a Frackville, Schuykill County native who left the

coal regions in late 1970s, at the time a rather depressed area of the

State to study engineering at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

And this well-traveled engineer is now managing the construction of

the Taza power plant near Kirkuk in northern Iraq, and this is that

power plant that I am referring to. We learned a great deal from that

visit.

But this natural gas-powered plant, which Albert calls MOAG, or the

mother of all generators, and it really is, is tangible proof of the

positive reconstruction efforts proceeding in Iraq.

Visiting Iraq, the four of us, we saw efforts to rebuild a country,

not just from a recent war, but from decades in which its people and

its natural resources were raped and ravaged by an evil tyrant, Saddam

Hussein.

As part of this bipartisan four-Member congressional delegation that

visited Kirkuk, Basra, Baghdad, and Kuwait, we witnessed this and just

a handful of the thousands of other coalition construction projects

over a few days.

You know, many of us marveled at the accomplishments of the U.S. Army

Corps of Engineers under whose auspices much of this massive

construction and reconstruction continues, simultaneously fighting an

insurgency, reconstructing a nation, and at that particular moment we

were there, assisting in the development of a constitution, the

drafting and development of a constitution, which is a daunting

objective.

Security is intense. Most of the time we wore body armor and helmets,

and we were protected by heavily armed personnel virtually all of the

time. Nevertheless, I left Iraq feeling optimistic and hopeful that the

slow gradual pace to normal life in much of Iraq is progressing, not

without setbacks and heart-breaking loss of life, but still with

purpose and determination.

You know, the transporting of this particular MOAG, the mother of all

generators, is a story all by itself. Moving a nearly 500-ton piece of

equipment 600 miles from Jordan across the dangerous Al-Anbar Province

in western Iraq to Kirkuk by convoy is testament to the extraordinary

logistical capabilities of the United States military.

You know, after a few ineffective, but still very troublesome, mortar

attacks that landed near this particular power plant, Albert Chowansky

worked with regional ethnic and tribal leaders to form a local work

force, equitably distributing jobs to Sunni Arabs, Shiia Arabs,

Tukomeins, and Kurds.

This project is nearly complete, and there have been no more mortar

attacks. These are just some of the circumstances under which the

reconstruction of Iraq's infrastructure is occurring. But there you

have an example of just a guy using his good common sense and,

realizing there were some attacks, went out and met with local tribal

leaders, talked with them, distributed jobs and they all worked well

together. And just good old-fashioned American innovation working

locally to solve a very different, difficult and complex problem.

You know, our delegation also spent time in the southern Iraqi

province of Basra at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

We visited the nearby port of Umm Qasr and rode with the Iraqi Navy in

speed boats through the harbor.

The Iraqi Navy is actually more like a coast guard of about 800

sailors trained by the British Royal Navy and tasked with harbor

security and with the protection of the oil platforms in the Persian

Gulf. This is just a little picture of a meeting with some of the

officers of the Iraqi Navy, myself, and the members of the delegation.

But we had a wonderful experience with the Iraqi Navy. And you could

just get a sense of the professionalism, and of course they were well

trained by the Royal Navy.

Flying with the British Army in a Merlin helicopter, we viewed the

marshlands near Basra. And the gentleman from Iowa (Mr. King) just

referred to those marshlands. These marshes were originally twice the

size of the Florida Everglades until Saddam Hussein drained them as

retribution to the marsh Arabs who rose up against him after the 1991

Persian Gulf war.

Saddam Hussein displaced and killed tens of thousands of these

people, at the very least, whose civilization had lived in this ancient

homeland for 5,000 years.

It may again be possible to grow crops there, although it is unknown

if we can ever fully undo the environmental terrorism of the deposed

Iraqi leader.

Militarily, the Basra province is relatively quiet and is one of out

of 14 of 18 provinces that have seen progress with comparatively less

insurgent activity than in some years of Iraq.

The Royal Marines regional commander, General Jim Dutton, was quite

confident in the capability of the Iraqi Army. We spent a fair amount

of time with him. And he had quite high praise for the Iraqi Army in

the southern region under his command.

Our delegation later then flew into Baghdad via U.S. Army helicopter,

Black Hawk helicopters; and we flew a few hundred feet above the

ground. We were escorted by Apache helicopters. We flew from Kirkuk at

this point back down to Baghdad.

The British, we flew in the Merlin helicopters down in the Basra

area. But from our view, and just a few hundred feet above ground, we

could see oil pipelines and bridges across the Tigris River under

construction, along with vacant gun embankments. It seemed like bone

dry ditches just about everywhere, irrigation channels that were drug

out and bone dry.

But there were a lot of ditches and a lot of scars on the Earth,

vacant pools of oil exposed next to bodies of water. You know, in

Baghdad, in Baghdad's Green Zone actually, our delegation met with

General John Abizaid and General George Casey, respectively, the

military commanders for Southwest Asia and Iraq.

The generals presented, I feel, a very sober yet hopeful analysis of

the insurgency situation. Actually, there is not one insurgency in

Iraq, but three disparate groups: The disgruntled Baathists, the Sunni

extremists, and they are the most dangerous, of course, because they

include both domestic and foreign al Qaeda-affiliated insurgents, and

the third group are the so-called Rejectionists, a hodge podge of

people who for whatever reasons are unhappy or angry but are more

likely to be integrated back into the mainstream of society.

But regardless, that group of Sunni extremists is the most dangerous

because they are al Qaeda affiliated, many of whom are coming from

outside of Iraq. The generals told us that every month 3,000 insurgents

are taken off the streets. That is what the generals told us. Every

month 3,000 insurgents are taken off the streets, that is, they are

captured or killed, mostly captured.

General Casey said that 180,000 Iraqi security forces are trained and

equipped, and that number will be more than 200,000 come January. Our

congressional delegation also met with embassy officials for an

overview of the political reforms and progress on the constitutional

convention that was occurring just down the street.

Of course, this was just prior to the constitutional convention being

adopted by those who were participating.

Federalism, the role of women, women's rights, of course, role of

Islam, and control of the country's premier resource, oil, are among

the issues to be resolved.

And I left feeling persuaded that all sides, Shiia, Sunni and Kurd,

are dedicated to reaching an agreement. It was clear that they

understood, even though the Kurds and Shiias represented a majority of

the country, that they understood that they could not have a country

without the Sunnis being included.

And that is not an easy thing for them, given the maltreatment that

many of them had received at the hands of largely Sunni rule or the

Baathists for some time.

You know, the American role in that constitutional process was not to

impose a solution, but to facilitate discussion and present options.

And in fact I just left the Capitol, the Cannon Building where I heard

one of my constituents, Colonel Platte Moring give a presentation who

helped there. He was in the Army National Guard. He made a presentation

about his role in helping the Afghans develop a constitution about a

year and a half earlier.

And so there were some similarities there. Again, the American role

was really to help facilitate discussion, present options, and help

them when they got in trouble, not to impose solutions.

I think that was very important. That was an experience here in Iraq

and of course also in Afghanistan. That same day, we also had lunch

with the American-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, and we later met with

three judges overseeing the special tribunal on war crimes who are the

people who will try Saddam Hussein for crimes against his people.

The judges impressed me very much with their knowledge, their wisdom,

and dedication to the establishment of an independent, impartial

judiciary. Probably one of the best aspects of that whole visit is

meeting with these judges. You get a sense of their commitment to the

rule of law and the importance that they have a transparent process and

one that they can be proud to show to the world with respect to the

trial that they will be conducting at some point in the not-to-distant

future. I believe before the end of the year, we are likely to hear

more about that.

We also spent some time in Kuwait. There we witnessed the up-armoring

of the various American vehicles. We also witnessed the massive

logistical support operation that dispatches convoys of 800 trucks per

day carrying everything necessary to support an engaged military. More

than 20 percent of the trucks carry water. Of those 800 trucks, over 20

percent of them were carrying water. I met a gentleman from my

hometown. Army Major Steve Miscenzski, an Easton native, was among the

Pennsylvanians supporting this effort. We all dined with Steve and

other Keystone State natives at Camp Arifjan. We also met some folks

from Iowa and Texas. There are always Texans everywhere, a lot of

Texans in the Middle East and everywhere we went. It was just great to

see them all.

Throughout the trip, we ate in these mess halls with soldiers and

Marines whose morale was exceptionally high considering the 125-degree

heat that we walked into in Kuwait while wearing full body armor and

helmets. I think we all would agree, too, that the food was quite good

and plentiful. Veterans of previous wars would be envious. We hear our

uncles talk in World War II about the old K-rations. They would have

been envious of the food, I think, that was being served.

At every stop along the way, I was able to share some of the

generosity of the people of the 15th Congressional District. I handed

out phone calling cards as most of us did. I also handed out Gatorade

mix packets to our troops from Pennsylvania and elsewhere, even some of

our coalition partners from the UK and the Netherlands and Australia,

for example. These items, by the way, were donated by the Dexter and

Dorothy Baker Foundation and a drive led by Chapman resident Dottie

Niklos of Blue-Star Mothers through the Lehigh Valley Military Affairs

Council. These gifts were well received by our troops. We insisted that

they call home and they seemed to do that on a regular basis.

Leaving Kuwait, we flew home via Ramstein Air Force Base near

Frankfurt, Germany. There we visited wounded troops in the Landstuhl

military hospital. Many of the troops were wounded in Afghanistan as

well as Iraq. At Ramstein, we briefly boarded an Air Force plane

carrying wounded troops back to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington,

D.C. On this plane, I had the honor and privilege to meet a young

marine, Travis Gray, who was a fellow Allentown native. I do not know

who was more excited by that, me or Travis, but I was just thrilled to

meet this young man who was on his back in a stretcher in an Air Force

plane. I am happy to report that Travis was in quite good spirits. I

had called his mother shortly afterwards to give her a report on his

condition. He seemed to be doing quite fine and he was improving. I

think we had some pretty good news there for Travis and the whole Gray

family.

The harsh reality of war really struck me and I think it struck my

colleagues as well as I stepped off that plane carrying Travis and his

fellow comrades to make way for the final two passengers, two

unconscious, critically wounded soldiers. Watching as these two

soldiers were boarded was an emotional time, as 12 airmen methodically

and gently lifted their stretchers and all the life-sustaining medical

equipment onto the plane. It was quite a sight and quite emotional.

That is where the harsh reality of war really strikes one, witnessing

that particular procedure.

I left Iraq feeling proud of the Americans serving there. The

transition from Saddam's Iraq to a new country, establishing

representative government consistent with the country's traditions,

heritage and culture, has been painful, grueling and difficult.

Nevertheless, our military's perseverance is inspirational, just as is

the effort of our civilian personnel. In fact, one of those civilians I

met there actually was a Capitol Hill staffer who I bumped into on a

cold February night after being in Congress for about a month and a

half. I met this young man. I was getting dinner and he was telling me

he was about to head over, a civilian with DOD and who did I run into

in Iraq, in Kirkuk, but this young man who was so proud of his service

and will be home shortly. I have stayed in touch with him.

The point is the dedication of our military and civilian personnel to

their work and this mission is truly extraordinary. Many people ask me

when American troops will leave Iraq. I cannot give a precise answer,

but it is my belief there will be a military presence in Iraq and

Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. The question is how many troops

will be required and under what circumstances will those troops be

there. I believe we will see an eventual drawdown of those troops.

Like all Americans, I want our troops to come home safely. Like most

thoughtful Americans, no matter how they viewed the circumstances

leading up to the war or how it has been conducted, I understand that

leaving Iraq prematurely without better stabilizing the country could

yield catastrophic consequences.

That said, as the political and military situation stabilizes and

improves, the American presence in Iraq will diminish. For now, it is a

matter of patience and will.

The gentleman from Iowa again led our delegation and did a great job

of it. I should note, too, that he was very gracious and on every

occasion really did acknowledge the bravery not just of our personnel

but also of the Iraqis who are serving there, many of whom are in the

Iraqi navy, for example, and others in the security forces who really

cannot tell many of their neighbors and friends what they do for a

living. They cannot wear their uniforms to work. They serve at great

risk to themselves and to their families but they believe that they

have an obligation to make sure that country is stable and safe and

free of the types of horrible violence that we have witnessed there far

too often in recent days.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for this colloquy, and

he made a point that I think needs to be repeated. General Casey

pointed this out to us. We were in Iraq in August, and of course there

was a lot of press attention about the situation in Iraq, and much of

it very negative press. But General Casey said to us, have you read any

stories or heard any stories about Iraqi soldiers leaving their

positions? Have you seen any stories like that lately? We said, well,

no, we have not. He said, well, the reason that is the case is because

that does not happen anymore.

My colleague pointed that out, that the Iraqi Army is much better

trained and equipped than they had been earlier. So sometimes what we

do not hear is very important; that the Iraqi Army is standing in,

standing much stronger and is much better trained and equipped at doing

the job that we expect them to do in many cases. They are not where

they need to be just yet, but they are making great progress, and that

is a story that has not been told very well, and I am glad the

gentleman has raised that tonight.

Another thing the gentleman mentioned, too, about Iraq that again has

not been discussed very much out in the public, is one of the people

who joined us on that trip was a gentleman from the Army, an Assistant

Secretary of the Army named Dean Popps, who was part of the CPA, the

Coalition Provisional Authority, at one point. We had a discussion. We

all know how Congressmen are. We can get very unfocused. We get into

our business and we can get a little scattered. But there we were in

Iraq and just focusing on the situation in Iraq. And I remember what

Mr. Popps said; that when he was with the CPA, he said he looked at 52

state-run businesses, government-run businesses in Iraq, and many of

these companies he said were dual-use companies. That is, in the front

of, say, a fertilizer factory; yes, they were making fertilizer, but in

the back it was chemicals. Or in the front of a sheet metal shop; yes,

they were doing sheet metal in the front, but it was rockets or rocket

launchers in the back. He even mentioned that anthrax grinders were

found over there. He made a lot of comments to us that sometimes you

just have not read a lot about that.

I thought that was a very interesting part of our experience, talking

to people like the Assistant Secretary of the Army, who had been there

for some time and actually been on the ground meeting with the people

who ran those state-run businesses, to give us a bird's-eye view of

what is really happening there.

Something else my colleague mentioned that is worth repeating. In

Iraq, of course, we all know that they have these tremendous oil

reserves, but their refinery capacity is really quite limited. So they

produce the crude oil in Iraq, they send it out of the country, have it

refined, bring it back into Iraq, and then they sell it at 13 cents a

gallon. Of course, they are losing money selling gasoline. Again,

coming out of this Saddam legacy of really a closed economy, it has

created tremendous problems for the people of Iraq.

Electricity. Another thing we learned about. Electricity is not paid

for by people. So, of course, if you do not pay for a particular

commodity, you will tend to utilize more of it. So, of course, they

have all kinds of problems with electricity. Lights do not go on, and

there were many, many problems there.

We also learned, too, about the damage that Saddam Hussein had

wreaked upon his people. Much of it was psychological damage. I think

that is one thing our troops and the British learned, that it is

difficult for many of the Iraqis to make decisions because their

experience had always been that they had to get approval from Baghdad,

from the central government. So decision-making was not something they

were used to, and that is part of this transition from where we are

today in this situation in Iraq.

We went through a liberation phase, an occupation phase, and we are

now in the third phase. And this is a planned phase of our time in

Iraq, is this partnership stage. We are in there now, but as we move

and transition to a self-reliant stage, part of that transition really

requires helping the Iraqis develop the ability to make decisions once

again.

We saw the same thing in the old Eastern Bloc, after the Soviet Union

collapsed and the Communist nations became free. Many Western people

would go in and say the people had a hard time making decisions. They

were never able to do that. And that is kind of what we see in Iraq.

And part of our job is to help them, help them make this transition and

help them to understand their options and to make decisions.

One other thing worth noting, too, that I find very interesting is

that as we met with that Iraqi American Chamber of Commerce, I really

enjoyed those conversations. When we were there, too, this whole notion

of federalism was a very big issue to the Iraqis, and they were

obviously quite concerned about the issue. They were sweating the

issue. What do we do about federalism? And as Americans, you almost

have to chuckle a little bit and say, you know, we had a little trouble

with federalism ourselves. We set up these Articles of Confederation

after the American Revolution. Things did not work out well with the

Articles, and we developed the Constitution, which is a great

Constitution, a great document, but not a perfect one. We made

mistakes. And ultimately the issue of federalism was settled in our

country by a Civil War in the 1860s. And to this day we are constantly

having debates in this great Chamber about what is the role of the

Federal versus the State Government. And my advice to some of the

Iraqis there was do not feel as if you are going to get this question

of federalism right on the draft. You are going to have to do the best

you can.

And I think that is what they did in the document that they adopted.

And coming from the State of Pennsylvania, I feel like I have some

ability to talk to Iraqis on that issue, given that Philadelphia is the

birthplace of American democracy, and of course Pennsylvania is the

State where oil was first discovered, in western Pennsylvania. Not

Texas, I say to my colleague, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. Cuellar).

But nevertheless, I was most impressed again by the trip and that

experience, and it is something I will remember for the rest of my

life. And having said all that, I yield back to the gentleman from

Iowa.