I thank the chairman.

I first want to take this opportunity to salute his leadership, the

way that he works on the Committee on Armed Services in a bipartisan

fashion to strengthen our Nation's military and to make sure our troops

have what they need. Certainly your leadership is commendable.

The one point that your comments brought to mind from some in the

Defense authorization bill that we recently just passed out of the

Committee on Armed Services, when we were talking about intelligence,

one of the other cut backs that was made in the 1990s was the overall

troop level. And we are seeing the unfortunate consequences of that

when we have gone from 18 Army divisions down to 10 today. And we have

our troops, our brave, loyal troops that are being asked by all of us

as Americans to win the war on terrorism and fighting in over 100

different countries. It is not just Iraq and Afghanistan. It is Bosnia,

it is Kosovo, it is many different places. And we are by virtue of

having made these cut backs, stressing our troops rather to a high

degree.

The point that I am trying to make, and perhaps the gentleman would

want to elaborate on this, is that in the Defense authorization bill

which we passed as I recall unanimously out of the committee in the

final vote, we upped the number of troops over the next 3 years by

30,000, 10,000 for each of the next 3 years, active members of the Army

and 9,000 additional Marines over the next 3 years. And this is

certainly a first step in addressing the fact that we have gone from 18

Army divisions to 10 divisions.

And certainly something that all of us have to look at to make sure

that not only, like intelligence, but in terms of personnel that we

have the troop strength that is necessary to win the war on terror, it

is not just the numbers. It is ample pay. It is the appropriate level

of benefits for veterans, housing allowances, all of those things that

the gentleman has shown such remarkable leadership on in his tenure as

a chairman to make those improvements for our troops.

As the chairman knows, I had the

opportunity to visit Iraq several months ago. While there is no

question what we saw there, there were six of us Members of Congress

with other military personnel attached to us. We saw a war zone. There

was no question about that. But we also saw the rebuilding of the

country; and that is something that, unfortunately, people only see the

pictures from the war zone, but they do not see the fact that the

electricity is coming on, that the water is being restored, that there

is adequate supplies of petroleum products in the country.

We saw a lot of traffic on the street. For instance, in northern

Iraq, in Kirkuk where we were, we even saw some new construction. We

were told there was plenty of food available in the country. As we flew

around the country, not only in the C-130 transport planes at 18,000

feet but in Black Hawk helicopters at 150 feet, we flew over a lot of

agricultural areas of the country that were starting the winter

planting.

We did not have, when we were there, the opportunity to visit a

school or a hospital; but certainly we have been

told, as you know, about the progress in refurbishing those critical

institutions for Iraqi education and health care. So these are things

that show where progress is being made to this day and certainly it was

when I was there in November.

The other thing I think is really important to stress, and I think

you may want to add to this, Mr. Chairman, is the morale of our troops.

I had the opportunity to talk to a number of New Hampshire troops at

every stop that we made, as did all of the other Members of the

delegation. You are right, we are asking them to do a dangerous and

dirty job. It is difficult. It is life threatening. And these kids are

so dedicated to their mission and that is probably the most compelling

story that I came away with. And when I say ``kids'' that is really not

right. They were young Americans. They are wonderful patriots. They are

fine Americans. And they are so dedicated to restoring a sense of

normalcy, a representative government in Iraq; and they felt, despite

the difficulty of the job that we are asking them to do, they felt that

they were making significant progress and the morale was high.

All I can say is God bless them, and I pray for their safe return.

They are doing a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances.

Mr. Speaker, one of the most telling

periods of time when I was there was our visit to the Abu Ghraib

prison, and while that prison has gotten a certain amount of notoriety

because of the abuse by our troops, a very small number of people, of

Iraqi detainees, the larger story that I took away from it is what I

saw in that prison.

When you walk through the execution chamber, when you go through the

torture chambers, and when you see the barbaric nature of those

facilities, and the fact that in this one prison, 80,000 Iraqis were

first tortured and then executed, it was a life-altering experience for

me and, I think, the other Members of Congress who were there to have

been in that room where so many souls were so cruelly murdered.

I left, from that experience, I think, a very changed person, having

seen that kind of depraved behavior and the aftermath of it; and

certainly when I have come home and had the opportunity throughout New

Hampshire to talk to people about that, it has been a pretty telling

experience.

I had a video camera with me and took an actual picture of the

execution chamber and how it worked. We were shown the grizzly details.

It is a very frightening experience, and people need to know of the

mass graves and the fact that Saddam Hussein started two wars; that he

actually used chemical weapons against his own people, against the

Iranians; that he was funding suicide bombers; that he did have a very

significant weapons of mass destruction program that the United Nations

was never able to account for at the end what happened to.

While there certainly have been intelligence questions, and we need

to improve our intelligence as we talked about at the beginning of this

hour, these are facts about what happened. Having been in that prison

and having seen that execution chamber, it certainly changed the way I

look at this entire situation.

In that prison.

Once again, it has been a pleasure to

serve under the gentleman from California's (Mr. Hunter) leadership, to

have watched the Committee on Armed Services start the process of

rebuilding our Nation's military, in particular, making sure that we

have given a pay increase to members of the military for the last

couple of years; that we have done a better job of providing the

bulletproof vests and the retrofit kits for the Humvees and that type

of thing. It is a process that needs to continue.

I thank you once again for your leadership and certainly look forward

to continuing to work with you.