Mr. Speaker, it is my privilege this evening to be

joined by some of my colleagues. We went to Iraq a few weeks ago. We

find a lot of conversation on the House floor about what should and

should not be done, and so we would like to take this opportunity to

discuss what we saw.

I guess one of the main objectives tonight is to inform the public

that this is not always a highly partisan issue. The Members that went

to Iraq were both Republicans and Democrats. We got along very well. We

continue to get along very well. Sometimes the general impression that

is conveyed by conversation on the House floor is that we are always at

each other's throats and that this is what politics is all about. I

think this is very misleading in many cases; and as a result, we hope

to have a bipartisan discussion tonight of those events that we

encountered as we traveled overseas.

Those who went with us were the gentleman from New Hampshire (Mr.

Bradley), the gentleman from Colorado (Mr. Beauprez), who is here now,

the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. Davis), the gentleman from Texas (Mr.

Neugebauer), and the gentleman from Colorado (Mr. Udall).

As we talked to the soldiers over there, we often heard this comment:

there seem to be really two wars. There is the war that ofttimes is

seen on television; and certainly the bombings, the beheadings and all

the really violent things we see are very true, they are part of this

conflict; but also the soldiers would continually mention the fact that

there is another war that they are seeing, another war they are

fighting that ofttimes is not conveyed over the airwaves. So we would

like to really discuss these issues.

I have made three trips to Iraq. I have been to Afghanistan, Kuwait,

and Jordan twice, Landstuhl Air Base in Germany a couple of times, and

Walter Reed many times. So I have had many chances to talk to the

soldiers. And I guess the thing that continues to impress me and the

overwhelming impression that I get is the efficiency of our Army, the

sense of mission, the sense of accomplishment, and a generally upbeat

attitude.

Now, certainly being in Iraq or Kuwait or Afghanistan, or in a

hospital, cannot be an entirely uplifting experience; and there is some

hardship and there is some difficulty. But, still, it seems the

soldiers are amazingly intact and amazingly upbeat when you consider

their circumstances.

I will just mention two things on this trip and then turn it over to

some of my other colleagues here for discussion. The first stop that we

had in Iraq was at al Asad. Al Asad is a base out in the desert. It is

in al Anbar Province, which is the largest province in Iraq. It is a

desert area. It is becoming a fairly dangerous area because many of the

insurgents have been driven out of the cities and are now in the

desert. So it is a fairly wild situation.

In my previous trips, again I had always had a fairly positive

reception from the troops. But as we landed in al Anbar, I thought,

well, this is the place where I am going to start hearing the

complaints. Because there was not a blade of grass, there was not a

tree, obviously very little to do socially, and quite a large number of

troops out there. There are two groups from Nebraska, one was a medical

troop and one was a transportation group. So I spent quite a bit of

time talking to those soldiers, probably met about 100 of them

personally, and there were about another 80 who were out on patrol.

Again, the same attitude that we had encountered other places was very

prevalent. They were proud of what they were doing, they had a sense of

mission, and generally were very positive about what was going on.

So that trip, the first part, was, again, somewhat of a surprise in

view of the surroundings. The second area that I want to mention was

towards the end of our trip. We went to an Iraqi women's caucus, and

this caucus was held in Jordan on the banks of the Dead Sea. And the

reason we went over there was that we had formed an Iraqi Women's

Caucus for Women's Issues here in Washington.

The genesis of that caucus was simply a conversation between Paul

Wolfowitz, Jennifer Dunn, and myself, where we began to speculate on

the role of women in the new Iraqi government as the war progressed.

And we began to talk about the fact that women would certainly play an

important role; that women ofttimes are the peacemakers; and possibly

to have a positive resolution to this whole conflict would have to

involve the women of Iraq.

So we began to move forward on this. Iraqi women were brought to the

United States. And part of this movement was to bring Iraqi women over

to the Dead Sea, out of Iraq, where they could learn a little more

about democracy and strategies in terms of running for office and so

on.

So there were 1,000 women who applied for 250 spots at this seminar.

And so we met with those 250 women. They came by auto, and they came

from all

points in Iraq. And they were stopped for about 12 hours, most of them,

at the Jordan border. They could not get in the country. So that was

difficult. Three carloads of them were fired upon as they went across

al Anbar Province. And of course there was a great deal of danger and a

great deal of risk. Two of the women we had had over here in the United

States as part of the caucus had been killed during the elections, when

they ran for office. So it was a very dangerous business.

As we interacted with those women, we had some interesting

conversation and we picked up some general themes, and those themes

were reinforced by three women who were from Iraq who were in my office

yesterday. Essentially, what these women were saying yesterday and also

several weeks ago was very similar. They said, first of all, we now

have a sense of hope. We have a sense that the future is going to be

reasonably bright. We appreciate freedom.

They pointed out that there is now a great deal of marriage going on

in Iraq, where under Saddam, for many years, very few people got

married because of the situation. They have noticed a resurgence of

entrepreneurial activity. They are pleased with the number of women in

government. There were roughly 80 out of 275 spots in the

constitutional convention that belonged to women. Schools have been

renovated. Attendance, particularly by women, has gone up in the

schools. And, of course, a great many of the children, about 97 percent

of the children, have been vaccinated.

Now, we do not mean to paint an entirely rosy picture. The women I

saw yesterday, the women we saw in Iraq said that security is a major

problem. They live with some sense of fear almost all the time. They

mentioned problems with the infrastructure. Electricity still is a

problem. In many cases, it is on only about half the time. The thing

about it now, though, is different than under Saddam. Under Saddam,

there were certain areas, where his people were, that had very good

electrical service and the rest of the country had no service at all.

Now there is service all over the country, but many times people have

only intermittent service.

Sewage disposal is still a problem, water problems still persist; and

the job market is not what we would like to see it, but it is better

than it was before. And of course the other issue is there has been a

resurgence, particularly as it relates to women to fundamentalism.

Sharia, the rather fundamental interpretation of Islamic law, sometimes

is regaining a hold in terms of how women are perceived and how they

feel they should be treated or are treated.

So it is a mixed picture. But still, overall, they say they would not

trade their present situation with the insecurity that they are now

experiencing for what they had under Saddam and feel they are generally

much better off.

So with those prefatory comments, I would like to yield to my

colleague from Colorado (Mr. Beauprez), who we really enjoyed being

with and spending time with. And so I will let each Member have a shot

at it, say a few words, and then we will all have a dialogue as time

goes on.

Mr. Speaker, I yield now to the gentleman from Colorado (Mr.

Beauprez).

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Colorado (Mr.

Beauprez) for those observations. Many people do not realize that life

does go on in Baghdad. There is a degree of normalcy. It has been

almost universal, my experience with the troops, who have indicated

that their number one desire is to get back to their units, some who

have even lost limbs.

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to yield to a very unusual Member. He

spends a lot of his time in the House gym. He has been up on Everest

several times. I do not know if he has ever made it to the top. He has

climbed a lot of the highest mountains in the world, and has become a

great friend.

We have actually been to Iraq twice, and he even wore a Nebraska

football hat as we flew over Baghdad, so Members can tell he is an

unusual person. I am referring to the gentleman from Colorado (Mr.

Udall), and I would appreciate any recollections the gentleman has of

the trip.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Colorado for his

insights. He has been a great guy to travel with, a great person to get

to know, and certainly someone whom I admire a great deal. You

mentioned being at Landstuhl. All of you remember the young guy whose

name was Chris Ruehl. He had been shot and been in an ambush. This guy

was interesting because I thought, if I was coaching a football team, I

would like to have a whole bunch of Chris Ruehls, because he had this

hole in his shoulder, but he got up and he was explaining what

happened. Then he gets out his camera, and he is showing us pictures

that he took while he was getting shot at. I thought, you know, this is

one brave guy. I tracked him down, I got his cell phone, after he got

back to the United States. He was all geared up, ready to go back. He

wanted to get back in the fight.

An interesting guy, an interesting time. The gentleman from Texas

(Mr. Neugebauer) is next. He and I made a couple of trips. We were in

Afghanistan and Iraq together and Kuwait, and then this last trip. I am

interested in hearing his insights into what he saw and what he

remembers. Even though it has been 6 weeks ago, I am sure he remembers

a lot.

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I thank the gentleman

for his insights. We were at Abu Ghraib also last September, and at one

time Saddam Hussein had been told he had too many people in the prison

and to get rid of 2,000. The ones that he did not like a whole lot, but

did not hate, he hung. And the rest of them, he put

in the wood shredder. It is unbelievable that one human being could do

that to another, but in one day he got rid of 2,000 to get the numbers

down to where he felt it was more comfortable.

The last person I would like to yield to is a great friend of mine,

and we cochair the Congressional Prayer Breakfast on Thursday morning.

So tomorrow morning we will be together. And that is the gentleman from

Tennessee (Mr. Davis). We sat across from each other for about 14 hours

going over, and I learned how to speak Tennessee during that period of

time. The first 3 hours I did not understand him, but as time went on,

I got to understand him really well.

We really had a great time with the gentleman. We put him in the Dead

Sea, and we could not even sink him in the Dead Sea.

So, Mr. Speaker, I now yield to the gentleman from Tennessee.

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I thank the gentleman

for his comments. And we will not even get into that elephant that was

hung in his district. That is for another special order.

I just want to mention the bravery of Iraqi officials. We kind of

stick our necks out here a little bit, but over there when they run for

office, they are literally putting their life on the line and their

families. And that jumped out at us.

The other thing I might mention is that General Casey mentioned to us

that he thought things were going better since the elections, but he

said the wild card here is the issue of the Sunnis, are the Sunnis

going to be incorporated?

That is still up for grabs. So we do not want to leave the American

people with an impression that everything is perfect. There are still

problems. But I think anyone who goes there and spends time there,

spends time with the soldiers, from either party, we may disagree on

how we got there, whether we should have gone there, but you have to be

impressed with the soldiers in this situation.

If anyone has a closing comment for the good of the order, we would

be glad to hear it from any of you.

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, it makes it all work.

Mr. Speaker, I have enjoyed this. We enjoyed the trip and thank all

of you for participating tonight. Again, we tried to show that a lot of

us do get along pretty well. Some of the best hours here are in the gym

and places like that, where we do not really have an identity as

Republicans or Democrats, and we simply come together and try to solve

problems in the country.

I was honored to have time with these gentleman. I thought I learned

a lot. I learned a lot from the Iraqis, but I learned a lot from you,

and thank I you for participating tonight.