Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding to me and

for his leadership on this and so many other issues. It has been a

great pleasure to serve with the gentleman from Georgia, and I do have

comments about what is truly a world historic event.

It was so exciting on Saturday and Sunday in the United States as we

watched the results of the Iraqi elections to see the millions of

Iraqis overcoming horrific intimidation to get to the polls and vote. I

want to talk about some of that.

In the weeks and months leading up to the January 30 elections in

Iraq, we were warned of plans for violent attacks, mass chaos

surrounding polling places, and the improbability of any positive

outcome. We heard it on the news. We heard it in briefings. And,

indeed, we did see the loss of life of Iraqi citizens and members of

the international alliance providing support, and we were pained. The

reality was grim, but it served to underscore just how important it was

to proceed with the January 30 date for legitimate elections in Iraq

and the promise, the long-last promise of true freedom for the Iraqi

people.

In that recent trip which the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. Gingrey)

was discussing, I did have the opportunity and indeed the great

pleasure and honor to lead a delegation. Four of my colleagues went

with me to visit Afghanistan and Iraq, and it provided us with a better

understanding of just how very important, in fact, critical, it was to

hold fast to the January 30 date for Iraqi elections. The soldiers that

we talked to, the Marines that we talked to, officer and enlisted,

Iraqi leadership, the ambassador and his staff all insisted that the

elections must go forward on January 30; and the reality of Sunday's

success reflects just how true their calls were and how important that

lesson was.

Prior to the election, there was a brutal, a brutal campaign of fear

and intimidation waged by those who feared a strong and democratic

Iraq. After decades of tyranny, a transition to democracy presented a

challenge to the predatory environment in which these individuals

thrived under Saddam Hussein. These anti-Iraqi forces, the AIF, sought

to thwart democracy

in the only way they could, through violence, and this is violence

almost unimaginable to us here in the United States, violence and

intimidation on a scale which is beyond really our ability to conceive

it. These thugs, these insurgents were taking Iraqis and pulling them

out of their cars and going to their homes and killing them and killing

their families. Absolutely unbelievable.

The amazing thing is, the miraculous thing is, they did not succeed.

For the vast majority of Iraqi men and women and the democratic

coalition of nations that provided support, of which we are a very

proud member, knew the temporary violence that they endured would pale

in comparison to the freedom in which these elections offered.

We were in Afghanistan before we were in Iraq, and Afghanistan is an

encouraging model despite poor conditions, and Afghanistan is one of

the poorest nations on earth. My notes say that they have an ailing

infrastructure. That is kind. They have no infrastructure. The success

of their democratic elections last fall has generated within the Afghan

people a national confidence and the desire to rebuild their nation.

Under the secure protection of a unified and growingly capable

national army, Afghan national army, commerce is growing. We were

pleased as to see, as we drove through the streets of Kabal, that

vendors were lining the streets with their shops and goods were

available for sale. It is not like going to a mall, and we are the

proud home of the Mall of America in Minnesota, and I guarantee my

colleagues that it is nothing like that. These are little ramshackle

shacks. But the Iraqis are out there. They are selling goods. Commerce

is starting to open up. And that is a wonderful sign of a stable

society that is on the rise.

During our discussions, President Karzai, who was very kind to give

us of his time on a Friday, a holy day for the Muslims, and he came in

on a Friday to meet with us and talk to us about his vision and his

dreams and his hopes for his people and his confidence that his country

was on the move towards more freedom and prosperity. And I want to say

to my colleagues here how grateful that President Karzai was to the

American people. He made a point of looking me in the eye and my

colleagues and saying, ``I do not think you understand that the

American people know how grateful we are in Afghanistan. We know that

we would not be a free country on the move to greater democracy without

your help.''

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman would continue to yield, I

think that is exactly the point, that in Afghanistan, despite the

abject poverty, the lack of infrastructure, the brutality that they

lived under for decades, and we forget how brutal the Taliban regime

really was and how oppressive, despite those things and despite 7 years

of drought, which would be crippling anywhere, we know the pain that we

feel in our country when we have years of drought, the country of

Afghanistan is just devastated. Even with that, the tribal warlords are

coming on board with the new national government. They are turning in

their arms, and we saw tanks and armored personnel carriers and missile

launchers and weapons of all types that were left over from their

conflict with the former Soviet Union being turned in. So if we compare

it with Iraq, which is comparatively modern in its infrastructure, it

is not what we would accept, but compared to Afghanistan it is

striking.

We were flying around in Iraq. We would fly over big power lines, the

same kinds that we have here. They just do not exist in Afghanistan. So

Iraq with its mighty rivers, the Tigress and the Euphrates, with its

extensive oil resources, with an infrastructure which is at least a

start, it is in a much better position, going in position, than is in

Afghanistan. So all those features and the proximity to a contemporary

organized culture has really inspired the Iraqi people to step up and

realize their freedom.

As the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. Gingrey) knows, these men and

women are more than aware of the dangers that are surrounding their

democratic efforts, but they believe that the promise of liberty is a

worthy goal. There is a wonderful picture in the newspaper, and I saw

it on television, of an Iraqi woman who is looking in the camera and

raising her hand in the sign of victory with the ink, the indelible

ink, on her finger that shows that she voted. We need to remember that

that does not wash off. That is the purpose of the ink. And the ink on

her finger identifies her as someone who defied the intimidation and

went to the polls.

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman would continue to yield,

that is it exactly, and is that not a beautiful sight? Just her bravery

and her determination and that of millions of Iraqis who went to the

polls in the face of an unimaginably brutal campaign of intimidation to

cast their votes and take this important step towards democracy and

taking control of their own destiny.

And part of that taking control of destiny, a subject much discussed

of late, is what the Iraqis are doing in taking charge of their own

security. We had, as part of our visit to Iraq, the opportunity to

visit with General Casey, the American commander there, and with

Lieutenant General Petraeus, who is the American general who was the

commanding general of the 101st Airborne in the first operation in Iraq

and now is the man in charge of training the Iraqi security forces. It

is very clear that he understands that they have a big job, but they

are making progress, not only based on his accounts but in our

discussions with American Marines and soldiers and American commanders,

and their growing confidence in the ability of the Iraqi battalions and

the Iraqi police who are now being well-trained and well-equipped to

step up and start taking responsibility for their security.

We saw it on Election Day, did we not? The Iraqi security forces were

at the polling places, and with the help of the American forces and

other coalition partners who did some terrific planning going into this

election, the elections were held with, yes, some brutal attacks but

with an amazingly high degree of security that allowed those millions

of Iraqis to go down and vote.

It is fair to say that really strict security measures were imposed

for that election day. Traffic was stopped. And that led to some even

more amazing stories of some Iraqis walking up to eight miles, eight

miles, to vote. And, sadly, most of us are not willing to walk half a

mile to vote. We want to get in the car and when we get there, if there

is a line, we grumble about it. In fact, I have to admit that on our

own Election Day, Vicky and I arrived at the polling place and there

was a long line of people and we said, Oh, my gosh, we are going to

have to wait a half hour to vote.

Mr. Speaker, I did have the opportunity to vote for

myself, so that is encouraging to make one stay in the line. But think

about what these Iraqis did, how long they waited and how far they

walked and what incredible pressure they were under not to vote, and

yet they did. And those some 125,000 trained and equipped Iraqi forces

stepped up. They voted themselves, in some very heartwarming stories,

voted and then went out and took up their positions to provide

security. It really is a wonderful story of a march to freedom.

I think that if I can go back and look at a quote from President

Ronald Reagan, who, as my colleague knows, I had the great honor of

serving in his first administration, in thinking and talking about a

kind of an obstacle to freedom, the Berlin Wall, President Reagan said,

``Freedom leads to prosperity. Freedom replaces the ancient

hatreds among the nations with comity and peace. Freedom is the

victor.'' And I think that that is what we saw in Iraq on Sunday.

Freedom was the victor.

The intimidation, the resistance, was not a barrier, it was an

obstacle. And it was a tough obstacle, and the Iraqis stepped up to

remove that obstacle and go in incredible numbers against incredible

odds and start to take charge of their own destiny. As interim Prime

Minister Allawi said, their job now is to rebuild their nation and the

world is watching. And we are watching, and, frankly, Mr. Speaker, I am

proud of what we are watching.

I am proud of what we, the American forces, and our coalition

partners and allies have been able to do in working with the Iraqis;

and I am just brimming over with pride and with enthusiasm and with

optimism and hope for the Iraqi people; and that picture by the

gentleman's side I think epitomizes that. I wish that we would not have

any partisan rancor that is associated with this. We and free nations

around the world ought to be dancing in the streets with joy and moving

forward to do what we can to help those people take charge of their own

destiny and their own freedom. I have a great deal of optimism.