Mr. Speaker, I have often had the opportunity to speak

on this floor on important issues, but none more important than this,

because today I am honored to sponsor this resolution in support of the

rights of all Iraqis.

It has been said that a nation reveals its character by the values it

upholds. In planting the seed of democracy in the deserts of the Middle

East, the United States and our allies hope for a rich harvest of

freedom for the people of Iraq. Having removed the dictator, the allies

have moved to put Iraqis in control of Iraq. Now, as they draft and

ratify their Constitution, we will indeed see the character of a new

Iraqi nation revealed through the principles it chooses to uphold.

That is why I urge the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly to create

a government worthy of its people, a government that represents every

Iraqi from every corner of Iraq, be they Sunni or Shia, rich or poor,

male or female.

Human rights are not a privilege granted by the few, they are a

liberty entitled to all, and human rights, by definition, include the

rights of all humans, those in the dawn of life, the dusk of life, or

the shadows of life.

Mr. Speaker, the women of Iraq have waited long enough. Having lived

in the shadows of Saddam's Iraq, they are eager for the sunlight of a

new nation and a new way of life. I have met these women, and I have

felt their courage. I have spoken to them, and, more important, I have

listened to them. I have heard more than their words, I have heard

their dreams; dreams of a peaceful nation where they can raise their

children and make decisions on their own and take part in society.

Mr. Speaker, a free nation must be based on human rights. Just as our

Founding Fathers built a new Republic based on life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness, so, too, the Iraqi nation must choose to uphold

the values of human rights for all. Indeed, most Iraqis seem to want

this.

In the run-up to the historic January 30 election, Iraqis insisted

that every third name on the ballot had to be that of a woman. The

result? Upon election, 31 percent of the Transitional National

Assembly's membership was female, nearly double the membership of the

U.S. Congress.

By any definition, this would be quite an achievement. But to

understand where Iraq's women are, consider where they have been. To

know the horrors of Saddam, look at how Saddam treated the most

vulnerable. In Saddam's Iraq, women were abused and assaulted, beaten

and battered, raped and relegated to second-class citizens. In Saddam's

Iraq, women could not own property; they were property.

Truly, Saddam Hussein was a criminal crying out for international

intervention. And these are people, the Iraqi women, crying out for

freedom.

History will record that Saddam got what he deserved. The question

is, will Iraqi women get what they deserve, what they have earned, what

they demand?

When I met with 20 of these women just weeks before the January

election, they explained that because they were women, they were

virtual targets of the people trying to stop the elections, because

they were running for office. More than half had had members of their

families kidnapped or assassinated. Almost all had to have bodyguards.

Many had been in exile for years because of their beliefs, their

education, and their choice to have a career. Yet they persevered.

They persevered because they knew their election was proof that

freedom works, and they persevered because they knew that the more

women elected, the less the chance of a Saddam-

style policy toward women would ever again come to Iraq.

Proudly, defiantly, and amazingly, these women had the courage of

their convictions and changed history. Some of the very women we met

with before the election who were so fearful of the outcome and

proposed violence led their village walking miles to cast their votes.

Then weeks after that vote, I led another delegation to join 150

Iraqi women who were leaders in their communities and their sects who

came to a conference to hear us talk about the principles and practices

of democracy.

Women all over Iraq were given the opportunity to apply to be a part

of that conference. Do the women of Iraq want democracy? Well, 1,200 of

them signed applications hoping to be chosen for this conference. That

is right: 1,200 Iraqi women put their names in a document stating who

they were and where they lived, that they wanted to learn about

democracy from the United States of America.

But while the election of so many Iraqi women last January gives us

great hope, recent reports about the drafting of the constitution give

us great concerns. With so many reports and rumors, perhaps it is best

to take inventory of what we know, as well as what we fear.

We know that Islam allows for rights for women, but we fear the

interpretation of religious law might unfairly discriminate against

women. We know that a policy of equal rights for women in the

constitution would safeguard Iraqi women today and for generations to

come, but we fear that extremist elements might prevent the passage of

such a constitutional protection.

And we note that the surest way to limit the future and the progress

of Iraq is to limit the rights and protections of women. But we fear

that women may not be allowed even basic rights on matters of marriage,

divorce, economic opportunity, or political involvement.

Mr. Speaker, the people of Iraq deserve better and the women of Iraq

demand more. Let me be blunt. American troops have come so far,

sacrificed so much, persevered so long to see the tyranny of an

unlawful dictator replaced by the tyranny of legal oppression for

women. A free Iraq must be free for all Iraqis.

A democracy in the Middle East must be more than a democracy in name

only; it must live out its principles. Freedom is not something that

can be limited or divided or restricted. It applies to anyone and

everyone anywhere and everywhere.

So I put forward this resolution and urge my colleagues not to just

stand with me but to stand with the women of Iraq, stand with women

everywhere who desire the freedom that we fought for and continue to

fight for in Iraq.

Those brave women are writing bold new chapters in the story of

freedom. In doing so, they are part of an ever-growing, ever-evolving

story.