Mr. President, yesterday we saw a historic day in Iraq.

For the third time in less than a year, the people of Iraq did what

only a couple of years ago would have been a dream: they voted in free

elections. For those of us who have the appreciation of democracy as a

result of having lived where that is denied, the ink-stained finger,

the smiles, the celebratory atmosphere akin to a wedding is something

to give us all hope.

Yesterday was a relatively trouble-free day. Seventy percent of

Iraqis voted. Poll stations were open for an extra hour because of such

long lines. The turnout was so good that ballot shortages were

reported. This was clearly a successful day.

How does a date like this come to be? How do we go from a brutal

dictatorship that threatens its citizens to a society of free

elections? The answer is

that it is about choices. Do people want a way of life built around

tyranny, oppression, and terrorism, or do they want to embrace

democracy, freedom, and prosperity? Clearly, the people of Iraq have

chosen the latter. Yes, they have chosen the more difficult path, but

the rewards will be enormous.

I congratulate the people of Iraq for yesterday's historic elections.

History will judge these elections to be pivotal, vital to building

democracy, and part and parcel of our efforts in the war on terror.

As President Bush has highlighted in several recent statements, in an

unbelievably brief period of time, Iraq has made tremendous gains in

democracy and freedom. I commend the Iraqi people for these

unprecedented strides.

The administration has outlined a clear strategy for going forward:

three key tracks--political, economic, and security--with realistic

terms that avoid imposing unrealistic expectations and very dangerous

time frames.

I want to mention the story of a constituent of mine, a man who saw

his son go into the service of his country, who saw his son called to

war, and then sadly was here in Washington this week to lay that son to

rest at Arlington National Cemetery.

Bud Clay of Pensacola shared a letter from his son, SSG Daniel Clay

of the U.S. Marine Corps. Dan was one of 10 marines killed in Iraq by a

roadside bomb in Fallujah. Knowing the danger he faced, knowing the

unpredictability of war, Staff Sergeant Clay wrote a letter to his

family to be opened only in the event of his death.

He wrote in part:

Staff Sergeant Clay writes:

He concludes by saying:

SSG Daniel Clay was laid to rest Wednesday at Arlington National

Cemetery. He is a hero. We honor his sacrifice, just as we honor the

sacrifice of all those who have given so much in this war.

I conclude by again offering congratulations to the people of Iraq.

Congratulations for going to the polls, for taking another significant

step forward for your own future, and for embracing that glimmer of

hope that your country can be as free, peaceful, and prosperous as any

other society that rejects tyranny and entrusts its government to its

people.

Soldiers such as Staff Sergeant Clay are sustaining the development

of Iraqi forces. We owe them our respect, gratitude, and undying honor

as we demonstrate unwavering determination to complete this mission.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.