Mr. President, I find it troubling that the war in Iraq is

not being equated to the overall war on terror. Polls have shown

evidence that Americans are not making the connection. So the question

at hand is, Was removing Saddam's government a positive step in the

overall war on terror?

Our ability to turn over control to a peaceful and sovereign Iraqi

government is an integral part of the overall war on terror.

Collaboration of Iraq's former regime with terrorist groups and its

funding of them have not been in question. Yet few critics and

naysayers have passed up the chance to undermine a link between Iraq

and al-Qaida.

Despite recent media reports that have clouded, or even

misrepresented, the facts, there is compelling evidence that al-Qaida

and Iraq have been linked for more than a decade. Democratic cochairman

of the 9/11 Commission, former Representative Lee Hamilton of Indiana,

told reporters there were connections between al-Qaida and Saddam

Hussein's government.

In a speech earlier this afternoon, former Vice President Al Gore

accused President Bush of lying about a connection between al-Qaida and

Iraq. This is the same Al Gore who was a member of the same Clinton

White House that first made charges about the dangers of Iraq passing

chemical or biological weapons to al-Qaida. Those charges formed the

basis for the missile strikes against alleged terrorist targets in

Sudan in August 1998, according to on-the-record statements from no

fewer than six top Clinton administration officials.

Documents discovered recently by U.S. forces at Saddam's hometown of

Tikrit showed that Iraq gave Abdul Rahman Yasin both a home and a

salary. Yasin was a member of the al-Qaida cell that detonated the 1993

World Trade Center bomb. Is this not a clear example of Iraq not only

having a relationship with al-Qaida but also harboring and rewarding a

terrorist, a person who was directly involved in a terrorist attack on

our soil?

Let me highlight the case of Zarqawi, arguably the most dangerous

terrorist in the world today. He and his men trained and fought with

al-Qaida for years. Zarqawi's network helped establish and operate an

explosives and poison facility in northeast Iraq. Not only was Zarqawi

in Baghdad prior to Saddam's ousting, but nearly two dozen members of

al-Qaida were there as well. One al-Qaida associate even described the

situation in Iraq as good and stated that Baghdad could be transited

quickly.

Let me be clear. Mistakes have been made in Iraq, and this operation

has been far from perfect, as evidenced by the fact that Zarqawi and

other terrorists continue to wreak havoc throughout Iraq. But those who

undermine the rationale for our mission in Iraq for political gain make

our mission even more difficult and certainly do not boost the morale

of our men and women in uniform.

Many of these young men and women are from my home State of North

Carolina. They seek to assist the Iraqi people in transforming a

country that harbored and gave safe haven to terrorists, a country to

which terrorists traveled to consort with one another about how to

produce weapons and how to inflict them on a common enemy. The

terrorists know what is at stake, which is why they are pulling out all

the stops to derail our efforts. They understand that a free and

democratic Iraq is a serious blow to their interests.

I want our men and women in uniform to know that this Senator

understands and appreciates the importance and the magnitude of the

great work they are doing in Iraq. As my colleague, Senator Lieberman,

stated very succinctly this morning, the war in Iraq is the central

battleground in the war on terror. Because of the efforts and eventual

success of many brave men and women, the American people and the world

are much safer.