Mr. President, I rise today to try to bring

the focus of the debate about Iraq back to Iraq, specifically the Iraqi

Government's continuing failures to meet benchmarks for progress on

political, military, and security matters.

For the past several weeks, the news out of Iraq has been consumed by

coverage of the Blackwater security transgressions. To be sure, the

allegations against Blackwater are serious and need to be addressed.

Oversight needs to be tightened, actions should be taken to ensure that

security needs are being met, and force is used only when necessary.

By no means do I believe we should do anything but hold Blackwater

and its Government overseers responsible for their actions. But what is

happening is the Iraqi Government has successfully shifted the focus of

the debate from their failures in meeting benchmarks for progress to

the Blackwater security matter.

We need to refocus. Everyone here remembers, and the American people

remember, this past spring, during the debate on the supplemental, the

U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq

Accountability Appropriations Act, that during the deliberations on

that debate, Congress codified into law 18 benchmarks that were

identified by the Iraqi Government and the Bush administration.

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I pushed to

include benchmarks in this bill. Since returning from Iraq, having

spent Thanksgiving there with the troops in 2004, my second visit to

our troops in Iraq, I began to call for the Iraqi Government and U.S.

military leaders to establish a method of measuring progress on the

stated goals of standing up the military and security forces and

establish a functioning government.

During my third visit to our troops in Iraq, in April of this year, I

delivered a strong message to Iraqi leaders that they needed to show

progress on an oil agreement, quelling sectarian violence, and building

a functioning government very quickly or the United States would

continue to lose patience with the war.

This supplemental presented an opportunity to send that message and

codify it into law. It was the hope of the Senate to provide measurable

benchmarks that could provide an outline on progress in Iraq. As part

of the benchmarks requirement, Congress asked the White House to

provide an assessment in July and September. Congress also directed the

GAO to provide its own assessment on the Iraqi benchmarks. In July,

Congress received an assessment from the White House on the status of

the 18 benchmarks. At that time the White House indicated that

satisfactory progress on eight of the benchmarks had been made. On the

remaining 10 benchmarks, the White House indicated that the Iraqi

Government had failed to make satisfactory progress. In September, the

GAO review indicated that 3 benchmarks had been met, 4 had been

partially met, and 11 had not been met at all.

In September, the White House provided its final assessment of the 18

benchmarks. Of the benchmarks, satisfactory progress had been made on

10, 2 more than in July, and 8 benchmarks still received an

unsatisfactory rating, 2 less than July.

Everyone remembers that this is an important issue because of the

importance of making positive gains by the Iraqi Government. I visited

Iraq for a fourth time in September, just after General Petraeus

testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee but before the

benchmark reports were issued. Little had changed. Iraq's political

leaders were still entrenched. There was still very little hope for

progress on the benchmarks. I delivered the message that time was

running out on the blank check policy the administration seems to have

implemented in Iraq. At this critical juncture of U.S. policy toward

Iraq, the Iraqi policy toward the United States seems disjointed,

disconnected, and disassociated. The level of progress on the

benchmarks is debatable, but what is undeniable is the fact that

progress is needed on some of the most urgent issues to bring peace and

stability in Iraq.

The Iraqi Government has failed to enact a debaathification law, a

law on equitable distribution of hydrocarbon resources and revenues--

that is essentially the oil and the revenues they have collected--and

to provide three trained and ready brigades to support Baghdad

operations and the disarmament of the militias. The level of progress

is undebatable. The Iraqi Government has failed to deliver on these

three important benchmarks. These are fundamental failures by a

government that continues to expect the United States to invest in Iraq

with our soldiers and our dollars, and these failures are unacceptable.

We cannot continue on this path and cycle of Iraqi dependence on the

United States.

As we prepare to deal with another supplemental, bringing the total

off-budget additional war spending this year to just under $200

billion, making total off-budget spending on the war in Iraq nearly

$500 billion--off-budget spending in Iraq of nearly half a trillion

dollars--we need to refocus on what is happening in Iraq. We need to

reexamine these benchmarks and others. Those who called for another 6

months to allow more progress got what they wanted. The question is,

when will we get what we want? When will Iraq step up and take over?

When will we be able to bring most of our troops home? When will the

cycle of dependence end?

The answers to these questions lie in the benchmarks we established.

Progress on the benchmarks can give us a timeframe for the future. Lack

of progress on the benchmarks could only extend our commitment

indefinitely, if we allow it to continue.

Finally, we do need to focus on the Iraqi Government's progress on

the benchmarks and the lack thereof. If they had made more rapid

progress, we would not need private security outfits protecting

American assets and personnel. If they continue to fail to make

progress and meet the benchmarks, we will need to fundamentally

reassess what our future role might be in Iraq. We can't sustain this

pace forever. Our soldiers deserve better. Our taxpayers deserve

better. The Iraqi people deserve better from their own Government than

the failed leadership they have been shown to date.