Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to thank the

gentleman from Tennessee for having this hour this evening where we can

come and tell you what our observations are about Iraq. And also, I

would like to thank his family for the service of his nephew. I know he

is in our thoughts and prayers for his safe return. I would also like

to thank really the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have loved

ones who are serving. I would like to thank the very brave men and

women who are serving around the world for us today.

They truly understand the threat in the world, and they understand

the consequences if we were to just pull out, and I think this is one

of the most overwhelming things.

When you do make a trip like ours this year, it was my third trip

into Iraq, and this year was my first trip into Afghanistan, but when

you arrive in these Nations, the most overwhelming feeling immediately

is that every single one of the young men and women that you're looking

at serving in the U.S. military have volunteered to serve our Nation,

and that is an incredible feeling.

The first thing that we did on our trip, it was very early August, we

went into a neighborhood north of Baghdad. There was six of us on the

trip, and we had the opportunity to meet with four Iraqi sheiks, two

Sunni and two Shia. Now, like most Americans, I think I was of the

impression that Sunni and Shia would never even speak to each other,

much less work together to rid Iraq, their neighborhood, of the enemy.

Well, they were in that room together and they sat Sunni, Shia, Sunni,

Shia, as they talked to us about what they've done.

And the reason for what they've done, of course, is the incredible

amount of violence that is taking place in Iraq against Iraqi

civilians, executions, torture, and it's brought those sheiks into a

position to join together for their neighborhood, for their region and,

as they told us, for Iraq, that they did what they did for Iraq. They

joined with our military. They worked together for 2\1/2\ months, and

when they were ready, combined with our military, these four sheiks and

their citizens ridded that neighborhood of the enemy in only 4 days'

time. They were so proud of themselves.

They told us repeatedly how their children could go out and play. Our

military told us that this was the most dangerous street in northern

Baghdad, the most IED attacks of all of Baghdad. They told us that they

can go out and walk to the store now because of what's taken place.

What the incredible change that you're seeing in Iraq right now is

that our military is helping local leaders to develop the capacity to

govern at that very local level, the most important area, and to work

on a regional level to bring that about.

Now, those sheiks are a little bit disappointed in their national

government. I asked them about the Sunni members who had walked out of

the government. Their answer is my favorite quote of the entire trip,

and the quote was, they won't be reelected. I thought that's quick that

they learned that.

They're extremely concerned about the involvement of Iran and Syria.

Our military knows full well of the involvement of those two

governments and weapons that are coming in and help that's being

provided. They need services. Our military brought in the governor of

Baghdad to look at their neighborhood and to see what could be done

differently.

They also were very clear that they want their government to succeed,

and they were very clear in telling us that they need our help and they

want our help.

We also met with the Deputy Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister

Barham Shala, who is a Kurd. The Iraqi Government, and we don't ever

talk about this, is set up, when your prime minister is the Shia, your

two deputies, one's a Kurd and one's a Sunni. Your president is a Kurd,

so your vice presidents are Sunni and Shia so that you bring in all

three together to be able to have the involvement of all three sects

within the country. It's not just one person telling you what to do.

Of course, the Deputy Prime Minister expressed a little bit of

disappointment in how far the national government had come. There were

meetings that were taking place even while we were there. He was very

clear, and I thought this was very important, that he said their focus

is to establish the institutions of government so that their government

would continue, regardless of who was in power, and that no one would

be able to just grab power and do something different in Iraq, but that

they form a stable government just like here in the U.S.

When we had a shift in January from Republican control to Democrat

control, there was no change in the way our government functions. Our

courts functioned, and actually, Admiral Fallon, in addressing the

Senate just recently, made the same types of comments, how important it

is that we set up a rule of law, that we protect human rights.

So I was encouraged to hear him talking about that. He did stress

that it was going to take time, and I asked him, because it's been very

important here to us in America and our benchmarks, that there are

pieces of legislation that we want the Iraqi Parliament to pass. And I

asked him if it was true that he actually had the votes to pass that

legislation. His answer surprised me. He said, Oh, yes. He said, I have

75 percent approval for the legislation. I reminded him that in America

we pass major pieces of legislation with one vote.

But he looked at me and said something critically important. He said,

if I pass this legislation with 75 percent, it means I've cut out the

Sunni from the government. They would feel they had no power and they

would feel they had no voice.

Now, just today in the Armed Services Committee, we received the GAO

report on Iraq and the status of these 18 benchmarks. About six of the

benchmarks deal with legislation that we'd like to see passed, and we

failed on that, that that legislation has not passed, as we all know.

But there was another benchmark that was stressed in it, that there be

political involvement of minority parties and minority rights be

protected. Now, we've passed on that benchmark, but I would say to the

gentleman from Tennessee, to you, Mr. Speaker, that if we had passed

that legislation against the wishes of an entire group of people, that

we would have failed in meeting the benchmark that minority parties be

included.

He talked to us about Anbar and about how it's been stabilized. Our

trip was due to go there, and we weren't able to because we were

detained here in Washington for that extra day. But he talked to us as

well about the $10 billion that's been appropriated by the Iraq

Parliament for reconstruction efforts. That joins with the 60 countries

that have joined with America in our reconstruction efforts there.

There is $200 million that's been appropriated to use just in Anbar

province, and those contracts are now being let because the security

level there will allow those construction projects to go forward.

I'd also like to add that we do have a policy in Iraq, and that's

called Iraqis First. Whether you're an Iraqi company or you're an Iraqi

civilian, that if you're able to be hired by us, that we want to hire

Iraqi first.

The Deputy Prime Minister was clear that they are a country in

transition, and he did caution us that they would not meet their

benchmarks by September 15, but I would really want us to focus on not

did we meet 18 benchmarks but what are the goals and what are the

objectives and how do we develop a fully functioning Iraqi Government

and how do those benchmarks play into that, how do they make

responsible decisions there like I think they just did in not forcing

legislation that would have cut an entire section of their country out.

I think that's critically important. We all support benchmarks, but

we want those benchmarks to reflect achieving the goals that we've set,

and we want to show where are those positive developments, and people

are frustrated when they don't hear them, when American people don't

hear of the progress that's being made or four sheiks coming together

to stabilize their own region and asking that we not leave them and

that we give them their help.

We did meet with General Petraeus. We met with Ambassador Crocker. We

will receive their report on Monday. I know you have others who are

here to talk. I just wanted to close by talking about the last thing we

did that day.

We met with Iraqi security forces, and they were actually special

ops. They were so impressive that I would have thought I was here in

the U.S. watching special operation forces do a demonstration. Our

military was very clear that they are very easy to train, and the good

news that we haven't heard is that these Iraqi forces are able to train

their new recruits that are coming in. I want you to know they were so

proud of themselves.

Think of the risk to those men who are serving in Iraqi security

forces. In our country, we know our men and women are in harm's way.

That's painful for us as Americans, to have our men and women in harm's

way defending this Nation. But in Iraq right now, anyone who joins the

Iraqi security forces is in harm's way simply for joining, not in the

threat of battle but simply for joining.

So I want to thank you for letting me tell you about them, tell you

about what I saw on our trip to Iraq. It was critical for me to see

Afghanistan for the first time because there's a lot of similarities in

Afghanistan. We're doing the same thing.

We are looking at the local level now. We understand that that's the

way we need to win this fight, but the change that's come about is like

you have seen in Iraq, where local leaders join with us. Remember, they

have to make a choice. Are they with us and their national government

or are they with the Taliban in Afghanistan or with the al Qaeda in

Iraq.

And they have to make the right choice, because if they make the

wrong one, they're dead. And what's the message that we've sent to the

world is that we're going to leave? How do you choose us if we're going

to leave and you would be left there with an enemy? It's critical that

we establish political, economic and security measures in Iraq so that

this nation can function, can establish a government that will take

them into the future and not just short term.

I did ask one question, and your article made me think about it, in

armed services not long ago. We had witnesses come and talk about the

National Intelligence Estimate, and my question to them was what would

be the impact

on America if we were to leave, if we were to have done everything that

we've done but if we were to leave before that government can govern

itself, secure itself and develop itself economically? What would be

our standing in the world? Would we be a paper tiger? What would our

allies think of us? And would anyone ever trust us in the future?

The answer to me was we haven't studied that issue. Well, I think not

only do we need to study the issue. We need to make sure that Iraq has

made such progress that I've seen in my three trips. We need to make

sure that these people aren't the victims of the violence that will

take place. The Deputy Prime Minister pointed that out to us. He told

us the consequences that would happen if we were to leave. He told us

that Iraq is the heart of the Middle East and that everyone is watching

what we we're doing.

So thank you for letting me join you tonight and thank you for the

service of your nephew.