Mr. President, I rise in morning business to discuss a

recent trip I made about 2 weeks ago to Iraq. It was a trip I made, as

I have every year since I have been in the Senate, to visit Iraq, to

visit firsthand with Georgia troops on duty, Georgia troops who are

there standing guard for America, as well as to interact with the Iraqi

Government--the Kurds, the Sunnis, the Shias--and rank-and-file Iraqi

people to measure the progress of our effort in Iraq but, more

importantly, the progress of the Iraqis themselves.

I am delighted to be able to come and give a very unbiased and,

hopefully, unvarnished and very plain recitation of the remarkable

changes that have taken place in that country. We all know a year ago

in this body we had serious debate over the fate of our effort in Iraq.

There were calls for us to withdraw. There were declarations that we

had lost. There were other challenges that were brought forward. But

finally, though difficult, the decision by the President to commit to

an increase of troops for the surge and follow the anti-insurgency plan

of General Petraeus and put General Petraeus in charge finally became a

reality.

About midyear on the ground in Iraq the deployment was complete and

they began exercising the plan.

Let me try and give an idea of what Iraq today is like compared to

Iraq 1 year ago. When I landed at the Baghdad Airport, for the first

time I drove

by car--by armored vehicle--into downtown Baghdad. Every year before we

had to fly in on Apache helicopters because of the ground fire and the

danger. We arrived in Baghdad in the Green Zone and spent the night. On

every trip before to Iraq, they took us out to Kuwait City to a

Sheraton Hotel when darkness fell in Baghdad because it was so dark.

Twice during the course of the visit we got outside of the Green Zone

and into a Chevy Suburban in one case, and into an MRAP in another

case, and went out on two excursions. I would like to talk about them

for a second.

The first was in an MRAP. I have to pause here and pay great tribute

to Senator Biden. About 18 months ago, Senator Biden led the charge in

this body for us to fund the MRAPs to try and do away with the tragic

loss of life that was taking place through IEDs on the ground and on

the roads in Iraq and in Baghdad.

There is no question in this body that the most strident voice in

favor of that funding and that commitment was the Senator from

Delaware. Today, the soldiers of the United States of America and of

Iraq and of our coalition partners ride in the new MRAP vehicles, which

are remarkable. General Petraeus told me at the dinner I had with him

that in the first five hits where an IED exploded under an MRAP, there

was not a single scratch of an American serviceman. I know a week ago

we lost our first serviceman in an MRAP, but that serviceman was the

gunner above the turret at the time he was hit. It has a 100-percent

record in terms of those inside of the MRAP when moving the troops. It

is a marvelous transformation and a great testament to this body,

Republican and Democrat alike, to rise to the occasion to see to it

that when our men and women are threatened, if there is a technique, if

there is a technology, if there is engineering sufficient to bring

about a new product, we will do it, and we will fund it. We did it on

the MRAP, and today our soldiers are safer and our efforts stronger.

I rode in one of those MRAPs to a neighborhood known as Gazaria.

Gazaria was the neighborhood that was completely destroyed 2 1/2 years

ago. I went to a market that had about 20 shops, of which about half

were open, and traveled with a squad headed by a lieutenant colonel who

was making microgrants and microloans and measuring the progress of

previous loans that had been made to Iraqis who were reopening their

stores. Senator Cornyn, Senator Coburn, and myself stood in a bakery

and ate an Iraqi-type of flatbread and drank tea in a market that had

been totally destroyed and unoccupied for 2\1/2\ years. We went to an

auto repair shop where two brothers had reopened the shop and were

beginning to do repairs and had bought a generator to provide them with

reliable, continuous electricity. These are microloans made by the

United States of America to the Iraqi people to reinvest in themselves,

reinvigorate their enterprises, reinvigorate their employment.

Was it dangerous? Sure. We had on bulletproof vests, we had on

helmets, and we traveled in MRAPs. But heretofore you could never have

gone into downtown Baghdad as we did on this trip. Twice we ran into

local Iraqis: once two Sunnis who joined the awakening movement and the

CLCs who were taking up arms to guard the secured market to see to it

that no terrorist or insurgent could come in and do damage, and then

twice to refugee families who over 2 years ago had left Baghdad and

Gazaria with no intention of ever returning, but now, because of its

relative security, they returned.

The second trip was made by Chevy Suburban--not by armored tank or

not by MRAP--and we left the Green Zone and went through Baghdad to the

government building where we met with Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish leaders.

For the first time in my annual trips back there, the talk was

substantive and the inference on the part of the leadership was that

things were getting ready to get better. As all of us know, on

debaathification and reconciliation, things have started to happen.

As the President acknowledged in his speech last night, they will be

happening in terms of sharing the oil revenues and eventually a

hydrocarbon law for the entire country.

My point in bringing this story to the Senate and telling it

firsthand is the progress the President described last night is real.

It is tangible. Things are changing in Iraq, and they are changing for

the better for the Iraqis and for us. We have brought back two groups,

and as the President said, we will bring back five more without

replacing them this year. Our troop level will be going down. We are

going from a combat confrontation to an oversight role in terms of

helping and providing logistics to the Iraqis.

Have the Iraqis responded? Think about this: Remember about 6 months

ago when the Prime Minister of Great Britain said they were pulling the

British troops out of Basra, and the American press wrote about another

failure: One of our partners was leaving, so what were we going to do.

Nobody has written about Basra since then because here is what

happened: All the Brits who left were replaced by Iraqis--not by

Americans, not by coalition forces. Have you read about damage or

problems in Basra? No, you haven't because the army has performed

magnificently--the Iraqi Army.

Today we read of reports in Mosul, and we mourn the tragedy of the

loss of U.S. soldiers, but in that big attack going on against one of

the last strongholds left of the insurgents of al-Qaida, the spear of

that attack, the point of that attack was all Iraqi soldiers. I had the

privilege to meet with Iraqi generals who, for the first time, see

themselves energized, see themselves fully capable of assuming the role

that we have taken for so long: for us to move to oversight and for

them to move to the point of the spear.

The practical matter is, whatever mistakes may have been made in the

past, whatever differences we may have had, the young men and women of

the United States of America have performed magnificently. General

Petraeus has lived up to every single promise of hope we had for him.

In the name and in the memory of the tragic loss of life in Iraq,

Georgia soldiers such as Diego Rincon, LTG Noah Harris, SGT Mike

Stokely, and the other 119, the sacrifice they have made has not been

in vain, and we are on the doorstep, hopefully, of building and of

helping to have created a democracy that will last and endure in the

Middle East. Hopefully, it will be the first step of many to accomplish

the hope of peace, freedom, and liberty that we in this country so

often take for granted but the rest of the world cherishes.

So the President was right last night in his State of the Union

speech. We have made great progress. There is work left to be done, but

there is light at the end of the tunnel, and it is not a locomotive. It

is the light of hope, liberty, and peace and freedom because of the

sacrifice and the endurance of the fine young men and women in the U.S.

military serving in harm's way today in Iraq.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.