Mr. President, I thank the Chair and thank my friend

from South Carolina for his generous words.

Obviously, what turned the tide in Iraq was a vision, a commanding

vision by General Petraeus about what had to happen to succeed with a

new counterterrorism strategy and tremendous support from the men and

women of the American military, a generation that volunteered, that

stepped up to the call, that rightfully should be called America's

``new greatest generation.'' They are an inspiration to us.

Of course, we lost a lot of them there. The Iraqi military fought

hard and now, increasingly, has shown its capability to defend its own

nation, which is what we had hoped and prayed and fought for. So my

friends from Arizona and South Carolina had the same reaction I did

yesterday. We began to talk to each other by the end of the day as we

came back to Washington, to what was originally a FOX News story, that

the decision had been made in the administration to go down to 3,000

troops. We reacted that way because it was lower than any number we had

ever heard from anybody we had confidence in about what was necessary

to secure all that we have gained and all the Iraqis have gained.

The papers today report it as a fact. Secretary Panetta says no

decision has been made. I hope not because in these matters--I

understand there is politics in Iraq as well as here, but what has to

be put at the top of the list is what is best for our national security

and, of course, for the Iraqis, what is best for their national

security.

To me, if the number is right, and it is only going to be 3,000 more

there after the end of this year, I don't see how we can feel confident

that we can protect what we have spent a lot of American lives--a lot

of Iraqi lives, a lot of our national treasure and theirs--securing.

And I don't see how we can help to avoid a kind of possible return to

civil war, particularly on the fault lines my friends have mentioned,

between the Kurdish areas and the Arab areas.

This is a decision ultimately for the President. I want to say this

about doing the right thing: The President, obviously, took a position

for withdrawal of American troops from Iraq during the campaign of

2008. I think there were a lot of his supporters who felt, who hoped,

who dreamed that pretty much the day--we are hearing a lot about day

one these days, a lot about day one after the next election. But I

think a lot of President Obama's supporters expected that on day one of

his administration he would begin a full withdrawal from Iraq. To his

great, great credit, he did not do that because I think he understood

he had a goal, which was to pull our troops out of Iraq but that

America had an interest and he as President had to protect that

interest in not losing in Iraq, not letting it fall apart, and not

letting us suffer the loss we would to our credibility and strength

around the world.

My friends and I traveled a lot together. We have been in places far

away from Iraq--Asia, for instance--where, when it was uncertain about

whether we were going to stick to it in Iraq we heard real concern from

our allies in Asia. They said: You know, Iraq is far from here, but we

depend on American strength and credibility for our security and

freedom in Asia, in the Asia-Pacific region. If you are seen to be weak

and lame and not up to the fight in Iraq, it is going to compromise our

freedom.

The President, to his credit, understood all that and put us on a

slow path to withdrawal. But I don't think anybody would fault the

President if we--and I think the expectation has been that we have

achieved so much that we could--leave a core group there to continue to

train the Iraqi military so they reach their full potential, to be

there to assist them in a counterterrorism fight because that is

essentially what is going on in Iraq now. The war is basically over,

but the extremists, the Shia militia, some remnants of al-Qaida, are

carrying out terrorist attacks. Those are the explosive--literally

explosive--high-visibility attacks.

We have special capacities in the U.S. military to work with the

Iraqi military to prevent and counter those terrorist attacks.

Then the final part of the mission has to be to protect the American

personnel there, civilian personnel. I don't know what that number will

be. At one point--we already have the largest----

I thank my friend. At one point somebody indicated to

us--we were in Baghdad--that the American Embassy, which is already the

largest U.S. Embassy in the world in terms of personnel, could go up as

high as 20,000. It could be that high. Those are a lot of civilians

committed to working in the country that we need to have forces there

to protect.

We are all coming to the floor today to appeal to Secretary Panetta,

to the President: It would be shortsighted. If it is really going to be

3,000 and only 3,000, and, frankly, we are not going to tuck some away

in those civilian personnel numbers in the embassy or somewhere else,

covert operators--if it is really only 3,000, they are not going to be

able to do the job that needs to be done. Not only that, they are going

to send a message of weakness, lack of resolve, anxiousness to get out

to the Iraqis' enemies and ours in the region, and that particularly

includes Iran.

I join my colleagues. We have been together on this for a long time.

I don't want us to squander what we have won, and we will, I am afraid,

if we only leave 3,000 American troops there.

Mr. President, I want to say in response to something

Senator McCain said, somebody in the military said to me: If we are not

going to leave enough to do the job, we might as well not leave anybody

there.

Of course, we don't want that to happen. There are a couple of

alternatives here. One is that the 3,000 is not the number. Hopefully

we will have clarification. It is more than that. In all our trips to

Iraq, talking about repeated teams of leadership, never has there been

anyone who said to us that we needed less than 10,000 American troops

there to do this job. I want to repeat this; there is a kind of sleight

of hand here. Maybe it is 3,000 here and a few more thousand tucked

into the civilian workforce at the embassy and a few more somewhere in

the special covert operators. If that is the game plan here, it is a

mistake. We ought to see exactly how many troops are leaving there. It

gives confidence to our allies in the region, particularly in Iraq, and

it will unsettle our enemies, particularly in Iran.

Dr. Ken Pollack has a piece in the National Interest that is out now

about this situation. He is concerned about the small number of troops

that may be left there and agrees that there may be some Iraqis who

might be pushing for a smaller post-2011 force with a more limited set

of missions. Dr. Pollack says:

That is what we are saying.

The final point here is Dr. Pollack argues in this piece that the

United States, if this is in response--giving the benefit of the doubt

for a moment--to Iraqi political concerns, that the U.S. has the

leverage to avoid this dangerous outcome. He writes:

That is the question I believe my colleagues from Arizona and South

Carolina are asking today: Will we bargain with our Iraqi allies that

this is the problem to be able to work with them for another chapter to

secure all we have gained together up until now?