Mr. President, very briefly I will comment on what has

been a very historic occasion in Iraq, something that has been

symbolized on television and by pictures so vividly by the image of

that blue ink-stained index finger which is being held up in triumph.

Two days ago, people did not even think of that image and today it

symbolizes freedom and liberty, those basic elements of democracy that

we all cherish.

Yesterday, the Iraqi people, 8 million strong, went to the polls to

participate in the first free Iraqi election in decades. We were in

Iraq 3 weeks ago, and before we went to Iraq even at that time people

were saying there is no way these elections are going to be successful,

nobody is going to show up for these elections, and to jump 3 weeks

ahead to today and yesterday and to see those ink-stained fingers in

the air and the fact that approximately 8 million voted is truly

spectacular. I think all of us should feel real pride for the

courageous men and women who risked their lives for freedom. Those

pictures on the news really captured it.

The people who voted came by foot, bus, van. They were old and they

were young. They were men and women. It was all in defiance of the

intimidation by terrorists, thugs, and assassins. In spite of the

critics and the doubters,

millions of Iraqis stood in line and cast their vote. As they came out,

we saw those pictures of those ink-stained index fingers, the symbol of

the power that is captured in that vote of freedom and democracy.

The Iraqi people yesterday showed their bravery, their boldness,

their courage, and their heart. They showed the world that Iraqis, like

all people, do yearn to be free. Baghdad's mayor was so overcome with

emotion that he told one news agency:

This morning, and over the course of yesterday, I received numerous

e-mails, letters, and written communication. The following letter from

an Iraqi voter describing his elation at participating in this historic

moment for his country really captures the essence of what the

elections were all about. He writes:

I also will want to applaud President Bush and the American people

for their steadfast commitment, support, and encouragement of freedom

in Iraq. Peace has not come and is not coming easily. We have suffered

tough days and we all know there will be tough days ahead. We know the

terrorists are committed to their violent campaign, but they will not

succeed.

As we saw yesterday, Iraq is moving forward with the heartfelt

support of free peoples all around the world. One of the people who

will be instrumental in helping Iraq secure its freedom is our new

Secretary of State, Dr. Condoleezza Rice. Last week, this Senate voted

overwhelmingly to support her confirmation, and that was a proud and,

indeed, historic moment. We are all fortunate to have a leader of her

talent and intellect helping Iraq take each momentous step toward

democracy.

It was a meaningful and productive week, as I look over the last

several days. The Senate also confirmed former RNC Chairman Jim

Nicholson to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Michael

Leavitt to lead Health and Human Services. Both are talented, gifted,

and highly qualified men, and I know we all look forward to working

with them.

Great tasks indeed are before us. We have much to accomplish,

including, as I mentioned earlier, the confirmation of Judge Alberto

Gonzales.

As we think about the week ahead on this Monday, it is appropriate to

pause and take note of yesterday's historic achievement for the Iraqi

people and for the cause of democracy. As the President said in his

inaugural address:

Yesterday, we did come one step closer to realizing this great

vision. Yesterday in Iraq we saw that liberty can light even the

darkest corners and inspire great acts of bravery. We saw the proof of

our deepest held principle: That all people do aspire to be free.