Mr. President, I rise today reflecting on the most

pressing issues on the minds of the American public--that of the

current situation in Iraq. We have been in Iraq for nearly 4\1/2\

years, and frustration is certainly understandable. I wish nothing more

than to see the United States reach a point where our soldiers and

sailors and airmen and marines are able to leave and the Iraqi people

can stand on their own. Our military has done an exceptional job. That

point cannot be debated. But as so many have said, victory and ultimate

success in Iraq cannot be completed solely through military strength.

I wish also to specifically point out the leadership of the ranking

member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator John McCain, on

this issue. Having just returned from Iraq, his pointed remarks on our

united efforts in Iraq and the importance of our mission are much

needed.

Senator McCain understands, as I do, that the terrorist threat in

Iraq will not stop, nor will our safety improve at home if our forces

leave. In their own words, these dangerous ideologues continue to make

bold and alarming threats worldwide, but even more importantly, they

are backing up their words with action. They will continue to strike

our allies in the gulf and they will continue to strike our friends in

Europe, and I believe they will not hesitate to strike America again,

as they did on September 11.

That said, I am extremely disappointed that more progress has not

been made on the political and domestic security from within Iraq. The

fact remains, Iraq is simply not ready to take over their own country

today, and if the United States were to leave, the consequences would

be nothing short of catastrophic. Al-Qaida is training, operating, and

carrying out their missions in Iraq right now. As evidenced in Britain

2 weeks ago, they are clearly still a threat and are still determined

to accomplish their goals of destroying western culture. That much has

not changed.

On July 12 the President issued a report as required by the fiscal

year 2007 Supplemental Appropriations bill assessing the progress of

the sovereign government of Iraq's performance in achieving the

benchmarks detailed in the bill. As we know, this report told us that 8

of the 18 benchmarks detailed in that bill received satisfactory marks.

While we are certainly disappointed that more benchmarks were not

achieved, it is important to highlight the success that is being made,

and how the Iraqi government is performing, as their success will

ultimately allow us to responsibly reduce our troop levels.

Specifically, the government of Iraq has made progress in forming a

Constitutional Review Committee to review the constitution. This is

important, just like in our Nation's history; we needed to create a

constitution that provided a standard for which to base our laws.

Though many contentious issues continue to exist, I am pleased that

significant progress is being made. If Iraq cannot form their

constitution, then it will be very difficult or impossible to move

forward onto other matters.

Also, the Iraqis have satisfied the requirements set forth to enact

and implement legislation forming semi-autonomous regions. This law is

set to come into effect in 18 months, but thus far this potentially

very contentious issue has not received much attention. This is

important as it further organizes and equips Iraq to take on the

responsibilities of a democratic government and this benchmark furthers

the necessary groundwork needed to build a responsible and legitimate

government.

Iraq has made progress to ensure the rights of minor political

parties within the legislature and maintain that their rights are

protected. Clearly this is important in obtaining legitimacy,

particularly given the historical and present conflicts between the

Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds.

On the security front, the Iraqis, with coalition support, have

successfully reached benchmarks establishing joint security stations

across Baghdad that provide a continuous security presence. These

stations are necessary as they can effectively combine American

technology and capabilities with the Iraqi presence on the ground in

order to counter insurgent threats where they begin. By mid-June, 32

joint security stations have reached initial operational capability and

36 combat outposts have reached initial or full capacity.

Also, the goal of providing three trained and ready Iraqi brigades in

support of Baghdad operations has been achieved and this complements

the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group. Certainly this is a major

priority as the development of a functional and effective Iraqi

fighting and security force is absolutely essential for the Iraqis to

further take the reins of their government, and I am pleased that these

goals are being accomplished thus far.

At the beginning of this year, the President changed the focus of

this effort. Decisions were made for a new direction. ADM William

Fallon was placed in charge as CENTCOM commander and the Senate

unanimously confirmed GEN David Petraeus as the new commander of our

forces in Iraq. The much talked about, and much criticized, surge of

28,000 additional troops has only been underway for just about 3 weeks

now.

Operation Phantom Thunder began on June 15 and already Iraq, and

particularly Baghdad, is a much different place than it was only 6

months ago. U.S. forces have begun working closely with Iraqis to bring

down sectarian violence of al-Qaida in country. So far the new

counterinsurgency has decreased Shiite death squad activity and many

militia leaders have been disposed of. Execution levels are at the

lowest point in a year, and al-Qaida hotspots in the city are shrinking

and becoming isolated from one another and supply lines are being cut

around the city.

For the first time in years the U.S. is operating freely in eastern

Baghdad as we are surrounding the villages and small towns around

Baghdad routing out insurgent bases. Already, total car bombings and

suicide attacks are down in May and June, and by the end of June,

American troops controlled about 42 percent of the city's

neighborhoods, up from 19 percent in April.

Initial military success certainly does not mean that operations are

complete, nor is political victory guaranteed. The fact remains that

this body unanimously confirmed GEN Petraeus with the knowledge that he

planned to initiate this surge that would ideally route out al-Qaida

and ultimately clear the path for internal change within Iraq. Again,

the surge began on June 15 and we owe it to our troops who are placing

their lives on the line not to pull the plug on them while they remain

in harm's way.

Our best and brightest military minds have worked to construct this

new strategy and we need to see it through. I would like to see our

troops come home today, but the harsh reality remains that this is not

a valid option, will not make us safer, and is not in our national

interest. If we leave, it is naive to think al-Qaida and our enemies

will just go away and we will no longer be threatened.

Additionally, I have heard many of my colleagues discuss on the floor

some of their new strategies in Iraq, strategies that I believe would

weaken us at home and abroad. What I find curious is that they keep

referring to finding a bipartisan resolution in Iraq, when only months

ago this body overwhelmingly approved 2 new military commanders in the

region and a new diplomatic leader in Ambassador Crocker. We also

approved, in a bipartisan manner, the new way forward in Iraq that

President Bush eloquently defended this morning. In that vote, this

body committed that we would allow the surge to go forward and would

give GEN Petraeus the time to enact the strategy. I cannot in good

conscience cut short a plan barely 3 months old.

As we all know, in September a complete review of Iraq policy,

including a detailed assessment of the surge will be presented. I look

forward to that assessment. I look forward to making the appropriate

decisions based on that report. It would be disingenuous to simply

discontinue the plans that our military leaders have planned and are

putting into place simply for political gains.

Remarkably, the Senate is in a similar situation that we were only

months ago when many in this body wanted to reject the strategy GEN

Petraeus proposed in Iraq, even before he has been given the full

opportunity to perform his mission. Well, we are at it again. For what

reason did my colleagues agree to the new strategy in Iraq but are not

willing to support our own self-imposed guidelines? I don't know the

answer to that, but I do know that I will not. I will continue to vote

against any legislation that sets arbitrary deadlines and thresholds in

Iraq--and plead with my colleagues to do the same.

Let's not stand here this week and prejudge what will come out of the

September 15 report, but more importantly, let's not prejudge the

talents of our men and women in Iraq. Let's give our military and

diplomatic teams the time they deserve, and which we had promised them.

I yield the floor. I suggest the absence of a quorum.