Mr. Speaker, the initial reports of yesterday's Iraqi

election all point to it having been a remarkable day for the Iraqi

people. Although Iraq's security situation remains precarious and the

country's economy and much of the infrastructure have yet to be

repaired, the past year has seen important progress in the country's

political development.

More than 11 million Iraqis went to the polls to cast their votes for

a new parliament and a new future. Iraq Sunnis who boycotted the

polling in January, turned out in force to ensure their voices would be

heard in the new legislature. For weeks, Sunni imams had been imploring

their congregants to vote and their calls were heeded. Election

observers estimated that turnout was in excess of 70 percent nationwide

and the turnout was matched by pre-election polling that showed a high

degree of enthusiasm for and optimism about the elections and what they

mean for the future of Iraq.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of yesterday's voting was the

absence of violence. Across the country, only 52 attacks were recorded,

and there were no mass casualty incidents. This stands in marked

contrast to the January election when voters in polling stations were

hit by more than 300 insurgent attacks.

Yesterday's relative calm was due to the men and women of our Armed

Forces. Our troops and their commanders did a magnificent job over the

past months to prepare the country for this crucial election. Even as

we celebrate the success of the voting, we cannot overlook the

incredible sacrifice of our military men and women. They have performed

magnificently, but at an enormous cost.

While the election itself was a remarkable achievement, we, our

coalition partners and the international community, must move quickly

to ensure that Iraq's fragile, nascent democracy is able to flourish.

Two days ago I was invited to the White House, along with a number of

my Democratic colleagues, to meet with the President and senior

administration officials on preparations for the elections and next

steps in Iraq. I appreciated the President's efforts to reach across

the aisle for unity, and we had a far-reaching discussion on how best

to move forward in Iraq. I hope that the President's recent willingness

to engage with Members of Congress, and especially Democrats, augers

more consultations with the Hill on Iraq and the broader array of

national security challenges that confront us.

Counting the votes will take days and perhaps weeks, given the sheer

number of ballots cast for the more than 300 political parties that

registered to compete in the election, as well as the bifurcated nature

of allocating seats by province and nationwide.

As we move forward, I see a series of five steps as crucial to Iraq's

future.

First, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, who has done a remarkable job in

Kabul and in Baghdad, must work with the Iraqis to assemble a new

government that will include the diverse array of Iraqi voices in order

to maximize the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the Iraqi

people while minimizing the prospects for the dissolution of Iraq. The

apparently strong showing by the secular Iraqi National List, headed by

former interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, may be an early indicator

that a broad-based government may be possible.

Second, we must work with a new parliament and help them execute the

revisions to Iraq's Constitution that were promised in the days leading

up to the October referendum. Constitutional changes that strengthen

the power of the central government and ensure that the Sunnis are able

to share in the nation's oil wealth will do much to allay the concerns

of Iraq's Sunnis.

Third, we must ramp up our efforts to train and equip Iraq security

forces so that a significant portion of American forces can be

redeployed from Iraq with the remainder of American troops adopting a

much lower profile. This will allow us to better safeguard the lives of

our troops even as we continue to act as the ultimate guarantor for the

new Iraqi state.

Fourth, we must fracture the insurgency in order to weaken it. The

Iraqi insurgents are made up of three distinctly different groups. The

first group, the foreign jihadis, must be destroyed. The second group,

which is made up of the hard-core Baathists, is also likely to fight to

the bitter end. The third wing of the insurgency is composed of

disaffected Sunnis who are motivated primarily by the loss of their

status in Iraqi society.

Yesterday's election and the consolidation of a broad-based

government should be instrumental in diminishing the threat from this

faction.

Finally, we must redouble our efforts to reconstruct Iraq. While

there has been some progress in restoring basic services and providing

opportunities for Iraqis, there is much work yet to be done. This is an

area where we should make a new effort to reach out to the

international community and engage them in Iraq's future.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday's voting was a triumph for the Iraqi people,

for the cause of democracy in the Arab world, and for our Armed Forces;

but now we must act quickly and effectively to solidify these political

gains.