Madam President, the issue that is paramount in the minds

of many Americans is the war in Iraq. It is a consuming issue for us

because we know that as we stand in the safety of the Senate Chamber or

in our homes across America, at the same moment in time, 144,000

American soldiers are risking their lives. Sadly, some are giving their

lives almost on a daily basis. Many are injured and come home to face a

different life than they ever imagined.

The cost of this war, of course, starts with the human accounting.

Over 3,013 American soldiers have died as of today, 23,000 have

returned injured, 6,600 seriously injured, with double amputations,

blindness, or traumatic brain injury of a serious nature.

This morning's Wall Street Journal, in an article by David Rogers,

talks about the real cost of this war in dollar terms. Many of us have

used the numbers of $380 billion, $400 billion, and some have come to

the conclusion that the number is really much higher and that when you

account for our obligations to our veterans and rebuilding the military

after this war, it will range in the hundreds of billions of dollars

more. This will affect our Nation. It will affect the quality of our

life. It will affect our spending on basics, whether it is the

education of our children, the health of our citizens, building the

infrastructure so our economy can expand, or creating higher education

opportunities so that the 21st century can be an American century, as

the 20th century was.

This war has taken its toll. It isn't the first war that has been

controversial in our history. Some of us are old enough to remember

another war not that long ago. It was October 19, 1966, on the floor of

the U.S. Senate, across the aisle, when a Senator from the State of

Vermont, George Aiken, rose to speak. George Aiken gave a speech about

the war in Vietnam. It is one that has been quoted many times since. He

said a lot about the war at that moment. Some of the things he said are

interesting in a historical context.

Senator Aiken said, in October of 1966, about the Vietnam war:

Of course, Senator Aiken went on to say that we should declare

victory and start bringing our troops home. He said:

Senator Aiken said--

He closed by saying:

When Senator Aiken took the floor and gave that speech in October of

1966, we began that year with fewer casualties in Vietnam than we have

already incurred in Iraq. Around 2,800 American lives had been lost in

Vietnam at the beginning of 1966. But 1966 was a bloody year in

Vietnam, and by the end of that year, we had lost 8,400 soldiers as

Senator Aiken gave his speech. Had we followed his advice, what a

difference it might have made. By the end of that Vietnam war, we

hadn't lost 8,000, we had lost 58,193 troops.

The President's call for increasing the number of American soldiers

who will be serving and fighting in Iraq is a grim reminder of the cost

of escalation. Instead of assessing where we are today in honest terms,

the President is continuing a strategy which has failed. He has

conceded that point. The President no longer says we are winning the

war in Iraq. He concedes we have made serious mistakes--mistakes which

all of us know have cost us dearly in human life and in the cost of

this war.

Now we face the reality of our politics in this town. In 2 weeks,

things have changed pretty dramatically here in Washington. If you

haven't noticed, with the hearings on Capitol Hill with the Democratic

Congress, there is a different tenor, there is a different approach.

Before, over the last 6 years, the President has had a compliant and

supine Congress, afraid to ask hard questions about this war. That has

changed. And the encouraging thing is that the hearings before the

Foreign Affairs Committee last week showed that not only is the

Democratic majority speaking out with important and relevant questions,

but now our Republican colleagues are joining us in what should be a

national and bipartisan chorus. This is a moment of accountability when

this President and the administration will have to answer for policy

decisions. It was a Republican Senator last week who made a statement

in that Foreign Affairs Committee, which sadly I have to agree with,

when he said that our invasion of Iraq was the greatest strategic

foreign policy blunder in recent memory. I think it may be one of the

worst mistakes in the history of our country, one we will pay for in

years to come.

Now I watch carefully for the reaction in Iraq as we are preparing to

send more soldiers, and I am waiting for signs and signals and

statements from the al-Maliki government that they understand this is a

new day, and I am still waiting. Until they are prepared to eliminate

the militias, whether they are going to disband them or destroy them,

there can be no security on the ground in Iraq. I read the statements

by our soldiers and the media where they say the Iraq Army and the Iraq

police force is a dead horse and we are not going to get anywhere by

kicking it. If that is a fact, then 21,000 American soldiers' lives

won't make a difference. That is the reality of what we face.

In the coming days ahead, very soon after we finish this debate on

ethics legislation, we are going to move into a more serious and open

debate on the war in Iraq. Initially, there will likely be a markup in

one of the committees on a resolution. It will come to the floor, and

we will consider it. I sincerely hope that, like the Foreign Affairs

Committee meeting of last week, it is a bipartisan resolution because I

will tell you, the sentiment about this war is strongly bipartisan or

nonpartisan across this country.

First and foremost, there are some basics we should make clear. No.

1, how much we respect and admire and will stand behind our troops.

These men and women in uniform, the best and bravest, have done

everything we have asked them to do--in fact, many times with displays

of heroism--and they have done more than we could ever expect from any

human being. They have been there. They have unflinchingly responded to

the call to arms and have served us so well. Their families stay home

with worry and prayer, hoping they will come back safely. For those

soldiers and their families, the first thing said is thank you, thank

you from a grateful nation for all you have given to this country and

continue to give.

Secondly, we won't turn our backs on these soldiers. Whether it is a

matter of the equipment they need now to be safe in Iraq and to come

home to their families with their missions completed or, if they come

home with a need, whether it is through the Veterans' Administration or

for college education or for some help in their lives, we need to be

there. They were there for us; we need to be there for them. That

almost goes without saying.

But I wish to make it clear from the Democratic side, and I am sure I

speak for my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, we will never

shortchange our troops. We will never shortchange their safety. For

those who suggest any disagreement with foreign policy of this

administration somehow is going to be at the expense of our troops,

they are just plain wrong. In the final analysis, we will keep our word

to our soldiers.

The other point I would like to make, though, is if we expect this to

end and end well, it can only end with a political solution in Iraq

driven by Iraqi leadership. We cannot superimpose a democracy on Iraq.

They have to come to this clear understanding that their future is in

their own hands. We can help them aspire to this goal, but ultimately

they have to take the difficult, painful steps moving toward it. That

means, of course, putting an end to the sectarian violence.

For 14 centuries now, the people of the Islamic faith have had a

disagreement about who were the rightful heirs to their great Prophet

Muhammad. We cannot resolve 14 centuries of this sectarian debate and

violence in one little country with more American soldiers. This is

something which will have to be resolved if Iraq decides their future

will be a democracy. They have to treat all Iraqis in a fair and honest

way instead of favoring one sect over another. They have to bring an

end to violence, whether it is inspired by Sunnis or Shias or others.

Whatever the inspiration, it has to come to an end.

The militias that now control parts of Baghdad and parts of Iraq have

to come to an end as well. You can't have private armies in a country

and expect the national army to have the strength to control the

situation. We need to see the police forces in Baghdad and other places

really emerge as professionals. When I was there in October, the

reports were very disappointing. It was said that if you went to a

police station, you could decide right off the bat whether it was going

to be a Sunni or Shia police station and then decide how they would

react to crime committed by their own. That has to end. We can't change

that by sending American soldiers into battle. We can't change that

with American lives and American injuries. Only the Iraqis can change

that.

As Senator Aiken said 40 years ago now:

We need to move this to a political level, and that is where I think

the President's recommendations last week are so wanting. He still is

in the mindset to believe that enough American soldiers can somehow

change the politics of Iraq. That is never going to happen. It has to

come from the Iraqi people.

So we face a challenge--a challenge which we accept--to have an

honest, nonpartisan, productive, and positive debate on our foreign

policy in Iraq. Those of us who disagree with the President really

stand in an awkward position in this regard. I sincerely hope the

President is right. I hope 21,000 American soldiers change the whole

contour of the debate and the future of Iraq. I don't believe they

will, but I want this to end and end well, and I don't care who takes

credit for it. But I believe--sincerely believe--that the only way to

convince the Iraqis of their responsibility is for us to start bringing

American troops home, as Senator Aiken called for in Vietnam in 1966

with 8,000 American lives lost, and that we start the phased

redeployment of our troops. Had America, had Congress, had the

President in 1966 followed the

suggestions of the Senator from Vermont, 50,000 American lives might

have been spared. By the end of the Vietnam war, almost 3,000

Illinoisans had given their lives in Vietnam. Some were my buddies in

high school, my friends with whom I had grown up. I still remember to

this day and wonder, if the Senate at that moment in time had made the

right decision, a decision Senator Aiken had called for, whether they

might be alive today. That is the reality of war, and it is the reality

of these foreign policy decisions.