Mr. President, there was an event that occurred yesterday

in Iraq which is significant. A decision was made by the Iraqi

Government to order a private security firm known as Blackwater USA to

leave the country. It involved the fatal shooting of eight Iraqi

civilians following a car bomb attack against the State Department

convoy. I don't know the circumstances of that attack, nor do I know

the circumstances that led to the killing of these innocent civilians.

Only a thorough and fair investigation will bring us to any kind of

closure on this particular matter.

What happened yesterday is going to dramatize to the American people

something significant that has occurred in this war in Iraq. For the

first time, we are seeing massive numbers of private security

contractors who are at work for the U.S. Government in Iraq. They are

in a security or quasi-military capacity. I have been to Iraq three

times. They are often dispatched to provide security for visiting

members of the Cabinet and Members of Congress. I will say at the

outset that although I have serious misgivings about Blackwater as an

organization, the individual men who have dedicated their lives to this

service are risking their lives in the process, and their courage and

bravery to step up is something that should be acknowledged and never

diminished.

But what this matter will bring to light is the fact that this

security contractor, Blackwater, has enjoyed a charmed existence with

the Bush administration from the start. This is another example of a

firm which has been given millions of taxpayers' dollars to do a job in

Iraq without accountability, without the kind of disclosure--basic

disclosure--which American taxpayers deserve and demand. The

circumstances of these contracts, the particulars involved in them, and

the standards that are applied to them are in a shadowy world that has

been kept away from the public eye by the Bush administration from the

start. That is not only unfortunate, it is unfair, and we need to do

something about it as a government.

This operation, Blackwater USA, started by Mr. Erik Prince of

Michigan, has been politically affiliated with this administration for

a long time. Now that there have been questions raised about the

conduct of their operations, they have brought in some of the biggest

political heavy-hitters in Washington to keep their operations cloaked

in secrecy and veiled so that the American people don't know what they

are all about. They do it in the name of security and classified

information at a time when we need more transparency and more openness

and more accountability.

These security contractors are often paid three times what ordinary

soldiers receive. The rules they operate under are much different than

those our military faces every single day in Iraq. They are given

mundane tasks in many instances and paid enormous sums of money to

perform them--to transport kitchen equipment, for example--in Iraq at

great expense to our Government.

Several years ago in Fallujah, there was a terrible incident

involving several Blackwater contractors. These contractors were

guarding kitchen equipment that was being transported across Fallujah

when they were ambushed and killed. It is hard for anyone to forget the

images that followed. Their bodies were dragged out of their vehicles,

and they were beaten and burned and hanged on a local bridge. There

were newscasts and videotape around the world of this heinous and

barbaric act. As a result of it, our Government made an invasion of

Fallujah and put at risk thousands of American troops to bring some

order to that scene.

What is not well known is that the families of those Blackwater

security forces--contractors--who were killed in Fallujah believe their

loved ones were put in harm's way by this company, by Blackwater.

Blackwater had promised to these contractors that if they would come to

Iraq, they would be given armored vehicles, adequate protection, and

adequate equipment. In fact, that was not the case. Many of the same

contractors who were at risk were complaining about this. In fact, one

who died that day had made a formal request of the leadership of

Blackwater to make good on their promise to protect their employees who

worked for Blackwater. They lost their lives.

Their families then went to court trying to make sure Blackwater was

held accountable. As the mother of one of these contractors and former

Navy SEAL said, it wasn't about the money, it was about accountability

and to make sure Blackwater, a company that was very profitable through

this administration and this war, actually protected its employees.

Well, I need not tell you that they faced an uphill struggle with their

lawsuit, which is still pending. Blackwater refused discovery, refused

to disclose information, made every effort they could to keep material

witnesses away from this trial and this proceeding, and unfortunately,

the facts have never come forward as they should for all of us to

understand.

Where the Blackwater security contractors were promised armored

vehicles, in fact, they were given SUVs with little protection. Where

they were promised to have groups to protect them, they were sent into

harm's way with inadequate numbers of forces.

Time and again, this contractor, profiting from our Government,

profiting from this administration, didn't provide the basic protection

it promised to its own employees.

I believe it is time for this Congress to open this door, to lift

this lid and look inside, about the security contractors who are at

work in Iraq today at the expense of our Government. We need to know

how many are working. We need to know what rules they operate by. We

need to know what incidents they have been involved in. America is held

accountable for their conduct. Even though they may be private sector

employees, for every Iraqi, I am sure they look at them as symbolizing

and representing the United States of America.

It is our responsibility to ask the hard questions about these

security contractors, what they are doing, and whether anything

improper has occurred. The Iraqi Government has reached this conclusion

and asked them to leave. I will be surprised at the end of the day if

they do leave. They are so closely connected to the highest levels of

this administration, it is hard to imagine they will actually leave the

country even after the Iraqi Government has called publicly for that to

happen.

So I have asked the leadership on the Democratic side to look into

the security contractor arrangements, as well as the Blackwater USA

company in particular, to get down to the bottom line and the basic

question as to whether these people who are involved in this conduct

have done things that really don't advance the cause of peace and

stability in Iraq. That is a legitimate question which should be asked

of every contractor involved in business in Iraq.

We know for the last 5 years on Capitol Hill hard questions were not

asked. There was little or no oversight by this Congress asking whether

our taxpayers' dollars were being well spent, whether the right

decisions were being made. Sadly, we find ourselves mired in a war that

has cost us almost 3,800 American lives, with more than 30,000 injured,

with no end in sight. It has been a colossal foreign policy mistake--

one that we will pay for for generations.

Despite the heroism of our men and women in uniform day-in and day-

out, policymakers in Washington have let them down. This President made

an appeal to the American people the other night to allow him to stay

the course until he can leave office. To think that 130,000 soldiers

will still be in Iraq next year is really unacceptable. We have pushed

our military to the absolute limit. I have been there. I have talked to

them. I have met with their families. I have talked to the support

groups back home. I have visited the veterans hospitals. I have seen

these soldiers on the battlefront as well as back home, and they have

paid a heavy price for this war. The President suggests that we just

keep 130,000 troops there indefinitely until he finds what he can

define as success, but that isn't good enough. We have to make sure we

are sensitive to these soldiers and the toll that is being taken on

them personally.

I am sorry to report that the divorce rates among American enlisted

personnel now are twice what they are normally, and among officers

three times. The suicide rate is the highest it has been since Vietnam

and, unfortunately, those who are subject to multiple deployments come

back and face many needs for health care and counseling. That is the

reality. We are now paying the highest cash incentives ever in our

history for people to enlist and to reenlist. Mr. President, $10,000 is

common. If a 19-year-old soldier will agree to show up in 6 weeks or

so, they double it to $20,000 in cash--to someone fresh out of high

school. We have changed a lot of rules of eligibility for service in

our military. Unfortunately, we are pushing them to the absolute limit.

That is part of the reality of where we are today in Iraq. It is a

reality which the President did not address when he spoke to the

American people last week.

This event yesterday, where Blackwater was expelled by Iraq's

Government, should be a wake-up call to this administration and this

Congress to provide the kind of meaningful oversight of these private

security operations, to ask whether these men and women who were under

our employ, as employees of our Government through private contractors,

have stood up and done the right thing for our Nation. Many have, but

those who have not have to be held accountable.

Mr. President, SPC Darryl Dent died in Iraq on August 26, 2003, when

an IED exploded under his humvee. Specialist Dent--21 years old--had

hoped to go to medical school one day. He was the first National Guard

member from his hometown to die in combat since Vietnam.

LCpl Greg MacDonald died in Iraq on June 25, 2003, when his humvee

rolled as he and six other marines raced to rescue American soldiers

caught in an ambush. Lance Corporal MacDonald--29 years old--had a

master's degree and hoped to make a career in foreign affairs and help

create peace in the Middle East.

MAJ Kevin Shea, a veteran of the first gulf war, was killed by rocket

fire in Al Anbar province on September 14, 2004--his 38th birthday. He

was promoted posthumously to lieutenant colonel, making him the

highest-ranking marine killed in the war in Iraq at that time.

Army Reserve LTC Paul Kimbrough was a lawyer who once worked for a

Member of the House of Representatives and even ran unsuccessfully for

a House seat himself. He was in Afghanistan, overseeing improvements to

living conditions for our soldiers at Bagram Air Base, when he suffered

a fatal heart attack on October 3, 2003. He was 44 years old.

CAPT Darrell Lewis grew up in a tough housing project, earned a

scholarship to a private high school and another scholarship to

college. He graduated, joined the Army and rose quickly through the

ranks. Three months ago, on June 23, he died in Vashir City,

Afghanistan, when his unit was attacked by insurgents using RPGs,

mortars and small arms fire. Captain Lewis was 31 years old.

What did these five fallen warriors all have in common, besides their

devotion to duty and to our Nation? A hometown. At the time of their

deaths, all five were residents of the District of Columbia. They died

trying to bring democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq, but they did not

have the legal right to participate fully in our American democracy.

That is wrong. This week, we have an opportunity to right this wrong.

This week, for the first time in nearly 30 years, the U.S. Senate

will take up a bill to grant the citizens of the District of Columbia,

our Nation's Capital, a voting member--one voting representative--in

the U.S. House of Representatives. I am one of the cosponsors of the

bipartisan District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act of 2007.

Our aim is to not to strengthen the hand of either political party,

but to strengthen American democracy. For that reason, the DC House

Voting Rights Act would also create an additional House seat for the

State of Utah.