Mr. President, we have had a very good, healthy debate

in the Senate this week on the subject of the war in Iraq. Sometimes it

has been more spirited than usual. At times, it was spirited to the

point where some things were said that perhaps did not further a good

constructive debate but took the debate a little bit downhill. We in

the Senate recognize it is our job to bring forward the issues, to

discuss the very difficult considerations that are before us as a

Congress, but to always do it in a manner that reflects the level of

civility a truly good discourse, a good debate should bring.

I had an opportunity a couple days ago to speak with a general from

my home State. I asked him for his comments on what he was seeing as he

was watching our debate. He said: Senator, the debate has been good.

The debate has been healthy. There clearly are different perspectives

that are coming out on the floor, but through it all, no one has

foresworn the soldier. He said: That makes me feel good as an American,

certainly good as a military leader.

That is important to remember, that in the heat of debate, we not

foreswear our military, that we always honor and respect that which

they do in such an honorable way.

I personally want to thank Senator Webb, the junior Senator from

Virginia, for bringing forth an issue this week. This was the amendment

he introduced that related to the amount of dwell time, the amount of

time deployed versus the amount of time a serviceman stays at home. It

was important for us to focus on the support side of our military. We

know that those who are serving us over in Iraq and Afghanistan, and

truly in all parts of the world, where they are separated from their

families, are at their best and serving us to their fullest when they

are able to focus on their job.

For those families who remain behind, who miss not having dad or mom

at home or miss not having their husband or their wife with them, they

wish the circumstances were otherwise. But we know that the families

who have stood behind our service men and women, allowing them to

serve--it is these families, too, who are serving our country. We need

to recognize the sacrifices those families also make. They may not be

on the front lines, but there is no shortage of worry and concern and

true anxiety over the health and safety of their loved ones. We put our

military families through a great deal of stress at a time of war

particularly.

Just as we can never adequately tell our service men and women thank

you enough, neither can we say thank you enough to the families who

provide that support. I thank Senator Webb for reminding us of the

obligation we owe to the military families themselves.

We all have our own stories of the exchanges we have had with the

military families in our respective States. A situation that is very

clear in my mind, even well over a year later, was an incident that

happened in July 2006. This was, specifically, July 27 in Fort

Wainwright, AK, near Fairbanks, where it was publicly announced that

the men and women of the 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team were going

to be extended in Iraq for 120 days. There was some uncertainty as to

whether it was just 120 days or whether it would go even beyond. This

Stryker Brigade had been serving very admirably, honorably in a

difficult part of Iraq and had been there for a year. This decision

literally pulled the rug out from under the families and the community

in Fairbanks. It was a surprise, a shock to the service members and

their families.

At the time that extension was announced, some elements of the 172nd

had already returned home. They were back in Alaska. There were

airplanes that were transporting other elements back home that

literally turned around in midair when they got the notice of the

extension. Soldiers who had remained behind in Iraq were packing up the

unit. They had heard the rumors that they might be extended.

Unfortunately, they heard it from their family members back in

Fairbanks, who had heard it on the news and then contacted their loved

ones over in Iraq. They made some very difficult phone calls confirming

that, in fact, the rumors were true.

This was an absolutely unacceptable situation. It is one thing to be

prepared for an extension. It is one thing to know this is your

commitment. But when your family is anxiously awaiting you, when you

are anxiously awaiting your return after a year's service in combat, it

was horrible for the families.

I was in Fort Wainwright a couple days after the announcement of the

extension. At the front gate of the post they have a chain-link fence

that goes for a mile or so. In anticipation of the return of their

loved ones, families had pulled together the homemade banners saying,

``Welcome home, Daddy. We miss you, we love you, we can't wait to see

you.'' Those signs, some of them clearly in children's writing,

absolutely broke one's heart because those signs were made with great

anticipation and then put up on the fence. They were not going to be

seeing dad that next day or that next week. They were not going to be

seeing their husband as a consequence of the extension. As a

consequence of that extension, there were a few who never came home at

all.

This was a difficult situation, of course, for the families, for the

soldiers. It certainly brought me much closer to many of those military

families. It caused me to set in mind a singular goal: that we were

going to bring the 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team home without any

further extension. This was tough enough, this 120-day extension, but

we were going to make sure there was no further extension.

To the Army's credit, they stepped up to the plate. They brought a

very extensive menu of family support services that we had never seen

before.

The Fairbanks community, which has always been extremely welcoming,

loving toward our military--gave an outpouring of support. They truly

went above and beyond.

The other thing we saw at that time was the strength of the family

readiness groups, the women, the wives who had for a year been holding

everybody together, encouraging the younger wives who had never gone

through deployment. There was a great deal of camaraderie, a great deal

of support. The support from those family readiness groups helped them

get through the additional 120 days.

In December of last year, the 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team came

home. There was no further extension. They were able to be home for

Christmas. They were able to return because another unit that was ready

to go broke dwell and went over early to relieve the 172nd. That speaks

volumes about the sacrifices the men and the women of our military and

their military families make every day supporting our Nation and

supporting each other.

I was at Fort Wainwright in December when the returning soldiers were

arriving. I spent one afternoon greeting planeload after planeload of

soldiers. We were in a hangar where they were checking in weapons and

awaiting transport to greet the families. These soldiers, from the

junior enlisted up to the rank of colonel, were extremely positive

about the work in Iraq. They told me, absolutely, they were making a

difference. They were tired after 16 months of combat. They were

absolutely elated to be home. They were very proud of themselves, of

their colleagues, as we were proud of them.

As I was standing in line, there was one young man from North Pole,

AK, which is not too far from Fort Wainwright. I said: So you are home.

What are you going to be doing?

He said: I have a house. My house is going to be kind of the welcome

home, the party house, if you will, for all the single guys and all the

guys whose girlfriends have left them in the past year, for those guys

whose wives are not going to be here.

He got very serious in that conversation.

I said: Do you have a lot of those men who have come home to find

that their relationships are no longer intact?

He said: Yes, it is an unfortunate part. But we have been gone for a

long time.

He was a young man who was single. But that, too, pulls at your

heart, to know that you come home after serving your country and the

relationship you had worked so hard to build prior to your departure is

now no longer there.

The extension of the 172nd made me angry at that time, very angry,

very frustrated--and not necessarily because our soldiers were

extended. We know that it is the soldiers' creed that you put your

mission before yourself. You never quit.

But I was upset because our soldiers and our families were forced to

endure an abrupt reversal of what they had been promised. They had been

promised: You are going to be home in a year, and they were not back in

a year. Their families had been promised: You have to wait this long,

but it turned out not to be true.

I have young kids. The Presiding Officer has young children. The

Presiding Officer knows how children wait for something, whether it is

a holiday or school to start or school to end. They put it on the

calendar, and they count the days down. When the calendar has run out

and that much-anticipated episode is supposed to happen and it does not

happen, the disappointment of the child is very difficult. It is

difficult as an adult to bear it, but we see what our children go

through with extensions like this. It does make you angry that we

failed to keep our promise.

Now, I have had many opportunities to meet with the spouses of those

who are serving, both men and women. I have had an opportunity to meet

with the family readiness groups. I think probably the most difficult

meeting of any I have had with family members was a sitdown, literally

a sitdown on the floor of a classroom at an elementary school on post.

Children of the deployed military men and women got together for a

counseling session with the school counselor. I was touring the school

at the time and was able to meet with the kids and sit down in a circle

as they were drawing cards to send to their mostly dads over in Iraq--

there were a couple over in Afghanistan--and to talk to these children

about their life with their parent gone, and gone for a long time in a

child's eyes.

I talked to one little girl. She was 11 years old. Her dad has been

deployed seven times. Now, I did not ask her how

long each of those deployments was because when you are 11 years old,

seven deployments is a lot of time out of a young girl's life. We have

to remember not only--not only--what is happening in the military

fight, not only what is happening on the streets of Baghdad, but we

need to always keep in mind what our military families are doing in

their service to support their loved ones who are serving us. So these

were the considerations which were on my mind and wrestling with when

we took up the Webb amendment this week.

It is important for people to understand the U.S. Army has a policy

that one-to-one dwell time--in other words, 1 day deployed, 1 day

home--one-to-one dwell time is the minimum acceptable dwell. This is

not only to allow soldiers the opportunity to reset but also to meet

the training and force structure needs. It is the minimum necessary to

balance reliance on the use of the Active and the Reserve Forces.

I keep saying this is the minimum time. It is not an ideal period.

The Army would actually prefer to adhere to its existing policy of 1

year in combat, 2 years out for the Active Forces. But the Army knows

it cannot comply with its existing policy and meet the demands of

staffing our efforts abroad. The Army discovered it could not comply as

soon as this policy was announced.

When you think about that, you say: What does this say? What does

this mean as far as our level of preparedness? Being prepared for war

is not just making sure you have equipment you need. You have to have

that human equipment. When we talk about resetting our equipment, we

also need to be talking about resetting the human--the mind, the body,

the spirit, and the attitude.

So when the Webb amendment was before us, I reviewed it very

carefully. Contrary to some of the assertions made by some on this

floor that I was strong-armed by the administration, that was not my

situation. I sought out individuals whose judgment I trust. I did talk

with several generals to understand the implications of the policy that

was suggested--an inflexible policy, a policy that says it will be a

one-to-one dwell time but without any flexibility.

I was concerned that in an effort to make sure this administration is

paying attention to the military families, making sure we are giving

the time we need to reset the soldier, that we were not locking

ourselves into something that ties the hands of our generals, ties the

hands of our military planners, and, as a consequence, yields

unintended consequences that could possibly further jeopardize the

safety and the security of those who are serving us in Iraq.

I did have an opportunity to meet with two of the senior military

leaders. The senior Senator from Virginia had arranged for a meeting

for several of us who had questions about this issue: Tell us what the

implications of this policy are.

I sat down with one general who happens to be an Alaskan by choice,

General Lovelace. He served several tours over at Fort Richardson and

also with the Alaska Command at Elmendorf Air Force Base which is where

I had known him previously. General Lovelace and General Hamm described

the consequences our troops on the ground would face if the amendment

before us at that time had been adopted. They mentioned a shortage of

people to protect our troops from the IEDs, the improvised explosive

devices. They talked about a shortage of truck drivers and mechanics, a

shortage of infantry, quite possibly a shortage of senior

noncommissioned officers and midcareer officers, greater reliance on

Reserve and Guard than is presently contemplated, and possibly further

extensions of units that are presently in theater.

I thought about all of those, and while I do not know that all of

them would have come true if we had adopted the Webb amendment this

week, it concerned me greatly to think that through implementation of

this amendment you could have the further extension of the units that

are presently in Iraq, operating under an understanding they will be

home by X date, and their family is operating under that similar

assumption. That caused me great concern.

I made contact with the general who had been at Fort Wainwright at

the time the 172nd had been extended. He is now the general at Fort

Lewis with that Stryker Brigade unit. I asked him: Walk me through the

implications. What would it have meant to the 172nd? What can it mean

to your brigade at Fort Lewis? He reiterated several of the things I

had learned in my conversations with General Lovelace and General Hamm.

He also spoke to the strength of support that comes from the family

readiness units that operate as a unit.

One of the concerns that an inflexible policy would bring is you

would--in order to get some of these specialists I referred to, either

additional infantrymen or additional mechanics, in certain areas or

those who are skilled with the IEDs, disabling them--in order to make

sure you have enough on the ground, you would have to be plucking from

different units.

I thought back to what we learned there at Fort Wainwright. The thing

that held those families together when they learned their husband,

their brother, their son was not going to be coming home and instead

was going to be extended another 120 days was the strength of that

family readiness core unit. It had held everybody together.

If you separate those within the unit, you lose some of the strength

and support because one of the families that had been a key member of

that team has now been pulled to another unit. You lose some of the

strength we have to provide for our soldiers as they are serving us.

That is important to remember.

Supporting the troops, supporting their families means, first and

foremost, we want to bring our troops home alive. We know military

medicine is doing its part to treat those who have been injured,

treating them in an expeditious manner. We are saving lives in Iraq

today that would have been lost in Vietnam. That is a credit to so

many. But still, the best way to come home alive is not to be injured

at all.

This is what I had to come to grips with this week as we were

debating this issue--whether adoption of an inflexible policy that

might tie the hands of our military leaders, whether that would mean

there are fewer people who would be watching the backs of the service

men and women on the battlefield.

I do believe our current dwell policy must be revisited. For this

time, for 2007 and 2008, what we have in place, the 15 months that have

been accepted for this 12-month dwell period, it is not a perfect

solution at all. I do not like it. I do not think our military leaders

like it. They would prefer we were in a better place so we could

provide for that equal dwell time. So I think it is important that even

though the Webb amendment is no longer before us--it did not achieve

the 60 votes--that we do not just kind of move on now, go to another

aspect, and say the issue of dwell time is not important to us, is not

important to those who are serving and their military families who are

providing that support back home.

It has been suggested we could revise this policy as early as next

year without causing this chaos which has been described by some of the

generals. It is something we should be looking at. When we think about

how we support those who are serving us, we have to remember it is

unfair to our service men and our service women--who have already

encountered personnel policies that turn on a dime, with multiple

deployments and extensions--to endure safety risks that directly flow

from an inflexible policy that keeps qualified and competent people off

the battlefield. I said--and I will repeat--the current rotation may

not be ideal. I don't think it is ideal. The military needs to be

honest about not pushing people who are not fit for the battlefield

into combat, and it needs to be honest in compensating people who have

suffered debilitating mental health conditions and not take the easy

way out of discharging based upon personality disorders.

The military needs to address these issues on an individual basis,

and the Senate should hold them to it. We know the current rotation

policy may very well cause some individuals to leave the service

prematurely, but it will also cause others to step up and say: I have a

great deal more to give, and I am not going to abandon my buddy.

When the Nation goes to war, we promise each and every individual on

the battlefield that they will have the best support this Nation can

muster. When we take people who are capable of performing off the

battlefield, we have the potential to jeopardize the safety of those

who remain.

The Presiding Officer was not here when I began my remarks, and I

began those remarks by acknowledging what the Presiding Officer, the

Senator from Virginia, has done in focusing the Senate's attention on

the families of those who serve. I greatly appreciate that. I also

appreciate the level of debate, the level of concern, and the level of

genuine caring to make sure our policies do right by those who serve

this country, not only on the battlefield but for those who are serving

at home. I don't believe that debate or this discussion is over by any

stretch of the imagination, but as we continue to debate the direction

of this war, we should always make sure we are recognizing all who are

serving.

I want to take just a very brief moment, as I have had an opportunity

to join with my colleague, Senator Casey from Pennsylvania, in

introducing an amendment to the Department of Defense Authorization

Act. This amendment calls for a civilian and diplomatic surge in Iraq.

We spend a lot of time talking on this floor about the military

component, what our force strength is, the relative success or failures

in certain parts of Iraq. There has been a lot of focus on that aspect

of the war. Yet as we talk to our military leaders, we hear from them

that it is not a military solution alone. There must be a political

resolve as well, and that political resolve must come about through

diplomatic channels and resources and truly on the civilian side.

When General Petraeus was before the Foreign Relations Committee a

week or so ago, I asked him at that time if he believed the civilian

surge was adequate; did he have the assistance he needed to do the job,

to complete the task. He said certain elements of our Government are at

war, but not all of the others. We can use help in those areas, whether

it is the Ministry of Agriculture or Treasury. There are areas that can

be identified. So I have joined with Senator Casey in calling for an

equal push on the diplomatic front and on the civilian side. There is

more that we can do and more that we should do so we are able to see

the progress that all of us wish to see in the war in Iraq.