Mr. President, as we approach this weekend, I thought

I would give some thought to what occasions this commemorative holiday

and what I think about as we approach Memorial Day. I want to recall

some of the incidents, the results of war and its consequences.

It has been a historic week in the Senate. We averted a showdown that

could have permanently damaged this institution and destroyed the

unique American system of checks and balances that makes our Government

the greatest in the history of the world. This was the topic of nonstop

television coverage and a forest worth of newspaper articles.

In short, the story about the Senate's procedure for approving

judicial nominees totally dominated the news, but there was another

story this week, a story that did not receive much attention. It was

the story of at least 14 brave American soldiers who died in Iraq since

Sunday. These deaths came as a wave of bombings and suicide attacks

engulfed Baghdad and other cities.

While we go about our business in the Senate, while other Americans

go

about their daily lives, the war in Iraq drags on. It has been a month

since the Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari announced his new

government, and during that time at least 620 people have been killed

in Iraq, including 58 U.S. troops. During that time, it has been a

painful recognition for families across America and across my State.

Sadly, the American people have become so numb to these deaths that

they are no longer considered major news, and the administration has

not helped matters by continuing its questionable policy of banning

photographs or video images of the flag-draped coffins of our heroes

making their final trip home.

I have to ask a question: Is the purpose of this policy to hide the

sacrifices of our soldiers and their families? I am hard-pressed to

think of any other reason. This is an issue I have discussed on the

floor of the Senate before. It stuns me that at the moment of the

return of the remains of a family member, that casket covered in honor

by the flag of our country is hidden from the public. No photos are

allowed, no photographs allowed, and no attention paid.

As a veteran of an earlier war, I am very conscious of our

responsibility to veterans and to those who are fighting the battle for

all of us, and I wonder why the administration continues its policy of

banning photographs or video images of the flag-draped coffins of our

heroes making their final trip home. It seems as if they want to

conceal the sacrifices of our soldiers and their families. I am hard

pressed to think of any other reason.

As have most of my colleagues, where there has been a loss of life in

the State that they represent, we have gone to a funeral or a ceremony

acknowledging the sacrifice that these individuals have made and the

pain their families undergo. I was at a funeral ceremony at Arlington

when one of our New Jersey soldiers was buried. His family was present,

mother and father. He was a young man, in his early twenties. I watched

the ceremony as the Honor Guard escorted his coffin to the place of

burial. It was covered with a flag. The Honor Guard was so precise and

so immaculate in their appearance, so honorable. They took the American

flag and folded it so gently but ever so precisely until through eight

escorts and the captain of the Honor Guard, they made the folds so

carefully until they got it into a triangle, and the captain of the

Guard walked over to the man's mother and presented it to her. It was

such a touching ceremony, this recognition of honor, this understanding

of what this soldier who perished had done for his country.

I cannot understand why it is that we are not allowed to photograph

these coffins when they come home with the remains, when they come to

the Dover Air Force Base in Delaware before they go to the mortuary

where the families have an opportunity to make certain that it is their

family member who is being buried. But there is no identification of

name, there is no ceremony. No family needs to feel as though its

privacy is being invaded.

So I question that. I think it would be appropriate on this Memorial

Day to start off after the Memorial Day recess and say, yes, anyone who

is returned in a flag-draped coffin is entitled to receive the honor

and the respect of the country that sent them there, our country. It is

appropriate.

The pain goes on almost every day--reports of car bombings, roadside

bombs, suicide attacks. They kill soldiers, they kill civilians, they

kill children, sometimes in the double digits in a single incident, 20,

30 people. What they are trying to do is crush the spirit of the Iraqis

who have been through so much at this point. Our people continue on

bravely serving their country, serving the orders that they get from

their Nation.

Within the last week, military leaders, however, had a change of tune

when the leading general in charge of our operations in Iraq described

as a sober assessment the situation in Iraq. That is the first that we

have heard about that. We have heard continuously that we have enough

troops to do the job, that the Iraqis are learning what they have to do

to take over. It is not true. I was in Iraq approximately a year ago

and saw how slowly the job of preparing policemen to take over was

going. It was painfully slow. Often the recruits were found to be

hopelessly untrained for the assignment, without the ability to drive a

car, no driver's license, not literate. They were training something

like 80 every 6 weeks.

So it is going to take a long time at the rate of 80 in 6 weeks to

get 50,000 policemen trained.

According to the assessment that we heard from the commanding

general, the bottom line was that American troops will probably be

there for years to come. For the 140,000 who serve there today, there

is no quick end in sight.

I do not take the floor to debate the wisdom of the war in Iraq or

the way it has been prosecuted. Today I speak to honor the more than

1,600 American soldiers who have given their lives in Iraq and more

than 170 who have died in Afghanistan.

In front of my office in the Hart Building there are pictures of

those fallen heroes identifying them by name as a reminder of what is

going on even as we discuss issues of some critical relevance and some

not so important. The most important thing is that we have people who

are in their young years paying with their lives for the battle in

which we are engaged in the Middle East.

Monday is Memorial Day. It is a day when our Nation honors the fallen

heroes of all of our wars. I hope every American will pause for a

minute during the day and reflect on the price that is being paid for

our freedom and on those who have paid that price. The wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan so far have claimed 56 sons of New Jersey, sons who died

pursuing the battle in Afghanistan. Thirty were killed since last

Memorial Day. Eleven have died this year. The wars have produced

funerals and wakes and I have met the grieving families.

One of the most recent funerals I attended was for PFC Min Soo Choi.

Here is a picture of the young man. His family came to America from

Korea 5 years ago, in search of a better life. I have met his parents.

I saw them this week again.

His story struck a chord with me because many years ago my parents

were also immigrants, and I also enlisted in the Army as a young man. I

enlisted when I was 18 years old. Min Soo was killed by a roadside bomb

in Iraq on February 26. He wasn't even a U.S. citizen, but he loved

this country and what it stands for.

At Min Soo's funeral I heard about what a unique individual he was. I

felt the void that his death had left in the lives of his family and

friends, and that is true of every 1 of the 1,600 who have died in this

war. Each death leaves an ache that will never heal in the heart of a

parent or spouse, brother or sister, or a small child. So on this

Memorial Day I will pause not only to remember our fallen soldiers but

also the loved ones they have left behind.

Mr. President, I know the hour is late, but I hope you will indulge

me by allowing me to read into the Congressional Record, where they

will be enshrined for all times, the names of the 56 soldiers with New

Jersey connections who have given their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan:

I also want to mention two civilians from New Jersey who were killed

while supporting the war effort in Iraq: Paul M. Johnson of Eagleswood,

and Thomas Jaichner of Burlington City.

I know each of my colleagues will join me this weekend in paying

tribute to the brave soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for our

country.