Mr. President, I have a few remarks to make on the Iraq

elections. I will proceed in sharing a few experiences that I had

recently, but really focus on what will occur on Sunday, January 30,

and that is that millions of Iraqis will, for the first time in

decades, vote in free elections.

I truthfully believe we will see the power of elections speak loudly

this Sunday. It is going to be with a lot of courage and a lot of

determination that those who vote will travel to over 5,000 polling

stations across the country. They will be casting their ballot for 275

national assembly positions that will, in turn, draft a new

constitution.

It is a historic event for the people of Iraq. It is, in the words of

historian Fouad Ajami,

Doomsayers and pessimists point to the terrorist attacks on the Iraqi

citizenry as proof that Iraqis are not ready for self-governance. They

say: Postpone the elections. They say: Iraqis have no history of

liberty. In other words, withhold freedom from the innocent and hand

victory to the guilty. Blame the victim, reward the criminal. It is a

cruel logic and one that, thankfully, the Iraqis have flat out

rejected.

Indeed, numerous candidates all over the country have entered the

elections despite the insurgents' and the terrorists' threats and

attempts at intimidation. Iraqi voter turnout on Sunday will be higher

than in many Western democracies.

Listen to the words of Iraqis themselves. Baghdad resident Ali Danif

tells an American paper:

Says his friend Kadhim Hassan:

On January 30, Iraqis will take those first momentous steps. No one

presumes the elections will be perfect, including the Iraqi people

themselves. The terrorists will continue their attempts to derail the

process between now and then. Unfortunately, the attacks, I believe,

are likely to increase during this period and quite possibly for some

time afterward. But the American people will stand with the Iraqi

people for democracy and for freedom.

I was in Iraq 2 weeks ago with a Senate delegation, and based on our

experiences in talking with the Iraqi people, in talking with the

leadership, and

attending a town meeting, I can say with confidence that despite the

insurgents' bombs and threats, democracy is on the way.

During our time in Iraq, my Senate colleagues and I were in a meeting

with Prime Minister Allawi. In the middle of that meeting, he asked if

we would be willing to go around the block or a few hundred yards away

at a townhall meeting that he was conducting. We said yes. It was

spontaneous, and we did not know what to expect.

We went with him in the middle of our meeting, and it was a meeting

he had been holding over the course of the day. We walked into a room

about the size of this Chamber, and it was packed. It was packed with

more than 150 Sunni sheiks who were from the Sunni triangle area, the

area where most of the terrorist activity has been occurring.

We walked into the room, and it was embroiled in activity. It was

embroiled in debate. People were scrambling. Sheiks were scrambling for

the microphone so they could express themselves. There was controversy,

disagreement. It was orderly in the sense that one person talked at a

time. This was really democracy at its best. It was spontaneous, not

planned by us. The Prime Minister, in meeting with the sheiks, spent

most of the day listening very patiently.

The presentations were passionate, and for me it captured the real

contrast on that day when we saw free speech and full expression. Some

were saying postpone the elections; others we saying, no, don't

postpone the elections. This is the first step toward democracy. Others

said America has done things perfectly, knowing we were in the room,

and others said we should have done this or done that.

The point is, everybody was expressing themselves, and the Prime

Minister was sitting before them listening patiently, taking the

opportunity to comment. It was a striking contrast to the decades under

Saddam where disagreement could lead, and frequently did lead, to

torture and, in many cases, as we know, ultimately death.

So progress is being made. The will of the Iraqi people is, for the

first time in decades, being heard. These elections will give an

element of legitimacy of expression of the Iraqi people that heretofore

has not been there to the degree that it should be and that it will be

in the future. It is through the ballot box, the power of that ballot

box that the Iraqis will begin this journey.

I need to comment again very briefly on a Tennessee angle to these

elections because the Tennessee population of Iraqis is quite high and,

therefore, Nashville, TN, has been chosen as one of the polling sites

so that Iraqis, mainly a Kurdish community that has come to the United

States, can express themselves in this election.

It was in 1977 that a professor named Franklin Jones agreed to

sponsor the first Kurdish family in Nashville, almost 30 years ago. Now

Nashville boasts the largest Kurdish community in the United States of

America. Referred to by some as ``Little Kurdistan,'' there are 5,000

to 8,000 Kurdish families living in Nashville, and on Sunday, 3,700

Iraqi Americans living in the Nashville region will go out to our

Tennessee State fairgrounds where they will cast their vote. It is an

out-of-country voting site that has been established. They will be

participating in creating this new and free Iraqi government.

The story of Nashville's Kurdish community is a special one. After

that first Kurdish family arrived in 1977, more and more Kurds came to

Nashville. A number of our community and church organizations focused

on the Kurds' plight and helped refugees adjust, settle in, and be

assimilated into our wonderful city, Nashville.

During the 1980s, a small Kurdish community began to develop. You ask

why. A lot of it is serendipity, but one of the answers you get is the

climate in Nashville reminded them of the climate back home.

In 1991, during Desert Storm, a large contingent of Kurds fled to the

United States, and many of them joined their brethren in Tennessee. Job

opportunities were high, cost of living was low, and Nashville's

unparalleled hospitality welcomed them and made them feel safe.

On Sunday, when millions of Iraqis go to the polls to vote for the

first time in Iraq, they will be joined by their compatriots in

Nashville. And among them, as an aside, will be Samir, the Iraqi-

American translator who found Saddam Hussein down in his spider hole.

I am proud that early on the people of Tennessee welcomed Iraqis into

their homes, into their communities, and gave them shelter and hope. I

am honored the city of Nashville and the State of Tennessee will

provide Iraqis across the region with the opportunity to express

themselves on January 30.

It is a historic day for them and a historic day for the coalition

that has invested so much in the Iraqi people, and a historic day for

democracy. We will see young men and women going to the polls

expressing themselves. People have been waiting a long time for this

day.

In closing, we were all abuzz last week with the activities

surrounding the 55th inaugural. It was a wonderful event for those of

us who participated here in the Capitol and for those who watched it

across America--the glowing lights, the banners. To have that peaceful

transfer of the election process be realized is clearly remarkable for

us all. But at its core, the inauguration was not for a party and not

for a particular person. It was a celebration of the blessing of

democracy and the freedoms we enjoy, freedoms I am confident one day

will be ever much as common in Iraq as it is in the United States.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.