Mr. President, with enormous enthusiasm and pride I rise

today to commend President Bush and his national security team for the

continually strong leadership they are providing in the ongoing global

war on terrorism, and particularly as they assist the Iraqi people in

their imminent transition to sovereignty.

Almost 1 year ago, a coalition of nations, led by the U.S. Armed

Forces, and, indeed, those from Great Britain, liberated the Iraqi

people from decades of repressive, tyrannical rule at the hands of

Saddam Hussein. That day, April 9, will long be celebrated in the

history of Iraq.

Our President did the right thing--he did the right thing--in

gathering a coalition of nations to rid Iraq of a leader who had used

weapons of mass destruction against his own people, who had a regime of

over 30 years of tyrannical oppression, murdered indiscriminately. This

individual simply had to be brought to the terms of accountability,

accountability to his own people. That orderly process is now under

way. He defied international law for over 12 years. Clearly America and

the world are safer today, and Iraq is a better place with a hopeful

future as a result.

Tragically, the effort to make America and the world safer and to

defend freedom around the world is not without an enormous cost to this

Nation in terms primarily of lost lives and those who bear the scars

and the wounds of war, and their families who must bear these losses.

They have our deepest compassion. I extend my heartfelt sympathies to

the families of the loved ones of those who have died and those who

bear the wounds of combat. We are fortunate as a Nation to have

dedicated citizens who willingly volunteer to make such great

sacrifices to defend this Nation's liberty.

Just weeks ago, together with the distinguished Senator from Alaska

and the distinguished Senator from South Carolina, I went to Iraq and

Afghanistan and again looked into the faces of those brave young men

and women and thanked them on behalf of the people of this Nation.

In just 3 months--91 days to be exact--the sovereignty that has been

held in trust by the Coalition Provisional Authority since Iraq was

liberated on April 9, 2003, will be returned to the Iraqi people. This

will represent an important milestone on Iraq's path to freedom and

democracy, but it is a path fraught with continuing dangers.

The recently adopted ``Transitional Administrative Law'' states that

upon

the assumption of sovereignty by an Iraqi Interim Government on June

30, 2004. The TAL further states that this Iraqi Interim Government

Yesterday, the Armed Services Committee, which I am privileged to

chair, received testimony from several Department of Defense officials

regarding on-going military operations and activities in Iraq, and

preparations for this transition to sovereignty. While some concerns

about details of the transition remain, I was greatly encouraged by the

testimony the Committee received. A coordinated process of deliberation

and consultation with the Iraqi people is underway by the Coalition

Provisional Authority, the Iraqi Governing Council, and representatives

of the United Nations to define and select an Iraqi Interim Government.

Much remains to be done in this process, but it is a process that

must not be delayed. The moment has arrived for the coalition to move

from occupying power to partner. The moment has arrived for the Iraqi

people to assume responsibility for their destiny.

The path to full freedom and democracy in Iraq will not be without

difficulty and missteps. That is to be expected, but we must not be

afraid to continue that journey. Symbolically, much will change on June

30. Iraq, after 30 plus years of isolation, will rejoin the community

of nations and resume responsibility for its actions and relations with

other nations. In terms of the reconstruction and security efforts

initiated by the Coalition Provisional Authority and coalition forces,

little will change on July 1. Ongoing training of Iraqi Security

Forces, assistance in restoring security, revitalization of essential

infrastructure, and institutionalization of democratic processes will

continue.

Two weeks ago, I traveled to Iraq, together with Senator Stevens and

Senator Hollings. I was impressed by the progress that has been made

since I last visited that nation in July. The challenges ahead are

daunting, but the

spirit of our men and women in uniform, and that of the Iraqi people,

was reassuring and inspiring.

While the progress made in Iraq is substantial, it must be viewed in

the context of the entire Middle East. Iraq can serve as an example and

a beacon of hope, but much more complex issues must be addressed.

During my recent trip to the region for consultation with both U.S.

and foreign leaders, there was a consistent expression of concern about

the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The lack

of progress toward a peaceful resolution continues to fan the flames of

discontent across the entire region. The continuing violence breeds

more violence that will undermine positive developments anywhere else

in the region. We must redouble our efforts to find common ground on

this difficult issue, if we are ever to achieve a peaceful world and

triumph over terror and violence.

There are more challenges ahead, and there will be disappointments.

That is clear. It is equally clear that President Bush and his national

security team are up to the challenge. President Bush has provided

steady, strong leadership in troubled times and will lead us to a

safer, more secure future.

I yield the floor.