Mr. President, I rise today to speak briefly about the

progress on the war in Iraq and, importantly, the well-being and morale

of our troops in the field.

Last week, the State of South Dakota lost two of its sons in Iraq,

SSG Daniel Cuka, 27, from Yankton, SD, and SFC Richard Shield, 40, from

Tabor, SD. Both served in the 147th Field Artillery of the South Dakota

National Guard and were killed by improvised explosive devices while

riding in their humvees.

They were assigned the mission of assisting in the training of Iraqi

police. Three other members of their battery were also wounded. South

Dakota is now in the process of grieving for and honoring these two

brave men who answered the call of duty.

One week after this tragic loss, an historic event occurred today in

Iraq that gives particular meaning and value to the lives and sacrifice

of these two men. Today Iraq held a national election to fill

parliamentary seats and it appears that there was a massive turnout of

voters from each of the major ethnic and religious groups, including

from the Sunni population that only a few months ago rejected any

participation in the political process.

This election is only the latest in a series of milestones giving

testimony to the great progress that has already been made in our

effort to transform this country into a true democracy. Granted, it

will be a long road to the kind of democracy we have in this country.

But it was a long and bumpy road in our own journey. The fact that this

Iraqi election occurred at all, is amazing considering where the people

of Iraq were 5 years ago, without freedom to determine their future and

under the heel of Saddam Hussein's tyranny.

Despite the naysayers in this country, optimism among Iraqis is

becoming infectious. Of course, optimism and support for what we are

doing has always been prevalent among our troops. Thanks to them and

the sacrifices they are making, we are on the cusp of delivering

something very special into the hands of the Iraqi people--the ability

to shape and control their own lives, lives free from the tyranny of

dictators, free from radical Islamic intimidation, and free from

hopelessness.

Let us dispell the fiction that America is not making progress in

Iraq, right here and right now. Under United States training and

guidance, 97 Iraqi battalions are now conducting security operations

throughout Iraq. In July of last year, there were only 5 Iraqi

battalions equipped and trained to fight.

Currently, 33 battalions have assumed their own areas of operation.

Last year at this time, the Iraqi security forces did not have control

over any areas of operation. Iraqi border police are now manning 170

border compounds and 22 ports of entry. Over 75,000 Iraqi policemen are

patrolling Iraqi cities. In the last election in January, 130,000 Iraqi

security forces successfully protected polling sites all over the

country and inspired a wave of pride throughout the country and a sharp

increase in recruitment. We anticipate that in the election that

occurred today, over 225,000 Iraqi security forces provided security to

the polling places.

In the January election almost a year ago, 8.5 million Iraqis turned

out to vote, defying terrorists threats. In the October referendum, 10

million voters turned out. We expect significantly greater numbers in

this election, including from the Sunni population whose Mullahs are

now encouraging their people to get out and vote after opposing their

participation in previous elections. Progress is clearly being made. To

say otherwise is simply inaccurate and demoralizing to our troops in

Iraq who are risking their lives to achieve these great milestones.

I would like to read a portion of an email sent to me by the mother

of a South Dakota soldier stationed in Iraq.

The two fallen soldiers who are being honored today at a memorial

service in South Dakota gave their lives for a cause greater than

themselves. Those family members they left behind deserve to know their

sacrifices were not in vain.

We will win this war and Iraq will be a free independent democracy.

When our work is finished, Iraq will provide a vision and a clear path

for other countries in the Middle East to follow toward freedom and

democracy. As Americans, we cannot leave the Iraqi people with anything

less.

I ask unamious consent that a written statement honoring and paying

tribute to Sergeants Cuka and Schild, two American heroes, be printed

in the Record.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in

the Record, as follows:

Mr. THUNE. What they gave to the State of South Dakota, to this great

country and to the people of Iraq should never be forgotten.