Mr. President, I returned 2 days ago from Iraq. There was

an article in yesterday's Hill magazine that was erroneous--there will

be a correction printed--where they inaccurately stated the number of

times I have been over to Iraq. It has actually been 10 times. I have

been doing this not because I am a member of the Senate Armed Services

Committee, but because I believe it is our constitutional

responsibility to see firsthand that our guys over there are getting

the equipment they need to prosecute the war, and they have been.

I want to share with you what happened the first of this week because

even though the vote took place yesterday, on Thursday, the vote for

the Iraqi security forces actually took place on Monday and Tuesday. We

had a chance to go up there and visit with them.

The interesting point is, we saw this coming. There have been a lot

of politicians coming back and talking about how bad things are over

there. I can't figure out where they get their information because as

we have been approaching these elections over the last few months, we

have noticed the IED incidents have been down 30 percent and suicide

bombs have been down 70 percent.

There is a road that goes from where we get off the C-130s to go into

the Green Zone. Mr. President, you have been there. We were averaging

about 10 terrorist incidents on that road each week up until June. We

haven't had one since June. So we see all these good things are

happening, and then the unexpected quality of the training we are

getting for the Iraqi security forces. These guys right now--and I

think this is significant because people keep asking, What is the exit

strategy? I can tell you what I believe. One Senator believes we are

going to be out.

Right now there are 214,000 Iraqi soldiers who are trained and

equipped. At the end of this month, while we are drawing down--we are

drawing down probably 15,000 to 20,000 of ours troops--they are going

to increase to 220,000. By the end of 2006, it is anticipated they will

be at 300,000. The goal is to get 10 divisions of Iraqi security

forces. Ten divisions of Iraqi security forces equal 325,000 troops.

That will happen by July of 2007.

In terms of the way we are functioning now, we will be out of there,

but there will still be some troops there. We still have troops in

Kosovo and in Bosnia, but the heavy lifting will be over. They will be

taking care of themselves.

I see the incredible courage of these people. Up in Fallujah 3 nights

ago, I had all of the Iraqi security forces that had voted that day

come in. They were all rejoicing, and I said to them--this is kind of

funny. I said to them, through an interpreter: When is it going to be

that you are going to be able to be on your own without our support? Is

that going to be in the near future?

And they said: No, no--which broke my heart when I heard this. Then I

found out, in the Iraqi language, ``yes'' means ``na'am.'' So they are

saying, ``Yes, yes,'' and when they shake their head this way, it also

means ``yes.'' Anyway, a little advice in case that happens to anyone.

These people are ready. They are so proud of the level of training

they have had. Keep in mind, this is in the Sunni triangle. These are

the Sunnis who are supposed to dislike us.

Several weeks ago, I was there and I met General Mahdi, who is in

charge of the Iraqi security forces in Fallujah. He had been in

charge--under Saddam Hussein he was a brigade commander. He hated

Americans until he started working with the Marines. He said he learned

to love the Marines so much that when they rotated them out, they all

got together and they cried. That guy right now, General Mahdi, is now

over the eastern one-third of the entire city of Baghdad. We do not

have our military there. It is all under Iraqi security. We have half

of the city under security now. It is going to be up to 75 percent in a

very short period of time.

I think, when we see the successes--and even if that were not true,

if one stops and realizes the bloody regime of Saddam Hussein, yes, the

targets for the terrorists right now are not Americans, they are

Iraqis, and they are killing some of the Iraqis, but when one stops and

puts it on a chart, during the 10 years that Saddam Hussein had his

bloody regime, on a monthly basis he was torturing to death more people

than the terrorists are killing today. When one looks at the way that

they have done it, the forms of torture, include gouging out of eyes,

severe beatings, electric shocks--there is a testimonial here about a

3-month-old baby girl who was taken, and they gouged her eyes out in

front of the father, smashed her head and broke it open against a

concrete wall.

There is a lot of talk on the other side of this issue about prisoner

abuse. We do not have prisoner abuse. The documentation is right here

about what they do with their prisoners. They will put them in

shredders. If they are lucky, they will shred their head first. If they

are unlucky, they will put their feet in there. This is what has been

happening over there, but it is all over now, and they are in charge of

their own destiny.

I have enjoyed so much visiting with the members of Parliament who

were going to be up for election. This would have been on Wednesday,

and they were going to be up the next day. One lady was quite outspoken

and quite negative in terms of what her people were saying to her. I

said: Did it ever occur to you 5 years ago that there would be an

opportunity for a woman to serve in Parliament, let alone to talk the

way you are talking? She stopped and said: You know, I think that is

right.

So we are seeing such a change now in the attitudes. The polls look

so good. The polls are showing that 70 percent of the people in Iraq

are appreciative of the Americans being there. They want them to stay

and get out when they are able to stand up on their own.

I met with the election commission, and to handle the election the

way they did was totally unprecedented. We could never have predicted

how smoothly things would go. We talked to the people, and I want to

particularly pay tribute to IFES, the International Foundation of

Electrical Systems. They have done a great job. They had people on the

ground, and they have truly been able to conduct an election that is

actually comparable and better than many other mature countries,

maturing democracies. It has been a great success. I am rejoicing with

all the people of Iraq today and with the people of America.

Lastly, I pay tribute to the brave people of Iraq who for the third

time this year have gone to the polls in record number to vote for a

brighter and more democratic future in Iraq. The early reports indicate

that across the 18 provinces of Iraq, Iraqis again turned out in

massive numbers to vote

in favor of a democratic Iraq. In doing so the Iraqis demonstrated to

us all the importance of voting.

Earlier this week I was in Iraq and had the opportunity to see first

hand the preparations for the historic election on December 15. I even

had a chance to witness some of the early voting that took place in

Iraq. It was a moving experience and one that demonstrated that the

great sacrifice that America has made in Iraq helped to free people

from tyranny and start them on the road to a democratic future.

While in Baghdad, I met with the Chairman of the Independent Election

Commission of Iraq, IECI, Isadin Al Mohamaady and the members of the

commission. I had an opportunity to see first hand the extensive

preparations that were being undertaken by the Iraqis. I was impressed

by the sacrifice made by the members of the commission and their staff,

many of whom have paid the ultimate price for democracy with their

lives. However, the spirit that I found in Baghdad, Fallujah, and

everywhere I went, was one of determination, professionalism, and a

dedication to making sure that Iraqis could freely select their future

leaders at the ballot box.

It is important also to recognize the work of the International

Foundation for Election Systems also known as IFES that has played a

critical role in helping advance free and fair elections in Iraq and in

120 countries around the world. With the support of U.S. taxpayers,

IFES was able to provide critical assistance that helped to make these

elections possible.

I stand here to salute the brave Iraqis who at great personal risk

sent an important message to the world about the triumph of the ballot

over the bullet. Iraqis of all ethnic groups have joined together with

unity and determination to freely choose their leaders in a free and

fair election. They have sent a message around the world that the best

way to defeat tyranny is at the ballot box, the source of power of the

people, by the people and for the people.