Mr. President, I rise to speak about the recent historic

elections in Iraq--elections that had been anticipated by an anxious

global community for some time.

This election is the story of true patriots who knew the odds and

decided to beat them. This is the story of the millions of Iraqis who

defied the threats and the intimidation of `` terrorists to cast their

votes for a brighter future in Iraq.

News reports are flush with first-hand accounts from observers. The

reports paint a picture of a people acting on their innate desire to be

free.

One such account details the determination of Samir Hassan, who at 32

lost his leg in a car bomb blast last October. Hassan said,

The act of voting by ordinary Iraqis in the face of extreme danger

confirms President Bush's belief that people around the globe, when

given a chance, will choose liberty and democracy over enslavement and

tyranny. Human beings crave freedom at their core.

Early estimates by Iraq's Independent Electoral Commission show that

about 8 million of the nearly 14 million registered voters cast their

ballot on Sunday--a turnout almost equal to the number of Americans who

voted last November without the threat of snipers or suicide bombers.

In the words of Arkan Mahmoud Jawad, who came to vote with his mother

and younger brother,

These are people who were beaten down by the brutal regime of Saddam

Hussein. That is exactly why they want to reclaim their country through

these elections. They know what the cost of failure would be.

And they know all too well that tyranny breeds isolation. Any dissent

from Saddam Hussein's regime could result in torture or death.

Neighbors couldn't trust neighbors. Families were torn apart. All this

leaves scars on a nation that may take generations to heal.

I believe that voting is the first act of building a community as

well as building a country. With the election we saw a peaceful

majority reclaiming their birthright. We saw people gaining courage

from realizing that they were not alone--that their friends and

neighbors and relatives were going to vote--and that they could vote

too. Together they are building their future.

Here is one description of how voting progressed:

Voting was an act of defiance against the terrorists and an

affirmation that Iraqis control their own destiny through self-

government. The people of Iraq realize that a stable, successful,

democratic Iraq can only come about if average Iraqis are willing to

sacrifice to build it.

On Sunday, they rose to the occasion. Some lost their lives, but

their lives were not lost in vain. I am convinced that a country by the

Iraqi people and for the Iraqi people will be built on the foundation

laid down by the voters on Sunday. And having sacrificed to gain a

democratic Iraq, they won't let it go easily.

Baghdad's mayor was overwhelmed by the turnout of voters at city hall

where thousands were celebrating and holding up their purple ink-

stained fingers with pride. The mayor said,

It is truly a

new beginning for Iraq.

The election in Iraq clearly demonstrates that Iraqi people are like

people everywhere. They desire to create a future in an environment

that is safe and allows them to reach their full potential as human

beings, whatever that potential may be. The election did not occur in a

vacuum. It is the latest and most dramatic example of Iraqis taking

control of their country's destiny.

In less than a year, the Iraqi Regular Army and Intervention Forces

have grown from one operational battalion to 21 battalions, with six

more scheduled to become operational over the next month.

Last month, the Iraqi National Guard was incorporated into the Army,

making a total of 68 Iraqi battalions conducting operations.

Today, the Iraqi Police Service has over 55,000 trained and equipped

police officers, more than double the amount of just 6 months ago. More

than 38,000 additional police are on duty and scheduled for training.

As of last month, more than 108,000 local Iraqis had been hired to

work on U.S.-funded reconstruction projects, using as many local

subcontractors as possible.

Yes, things are, indeed looking up for Iraq and the Iraqi people. But

there is still hard work ahead. It is a difficult process to transform

a society that has never known democracy. One hopeful sign occurred

earlier this week when influential figures from the Sunni community

signaled their willingness to engage the new Iraqi government and play

a role in drafting the constitution. Thirteen parties, including a

representative of the powerful Association of Muslim Scholars and other

parties that boycotted the vote, agreed Thursday to take part in the

drafting of the constitution, which will be the transitional

parliament's main task. The leading Shiite candidate to be Iraq's new

Prime Minister welcomed these overtures and said he was willing to

``offer the maximum'' to involve Sunni Arabs in the new government.

Yes, change takes time, and only time will tell if the Iraqi election

will go down as one of the most important dates in modern history. I'm

inclined to believe it will. But between now and when the history books

are written it was enough, for me, to stand in awe of the courage of a

free people half a world away.