Mr. President, over the Memorial Day recess my

colleagues from Idaho and South Carolina joined me on a trip to Europe

and the Middle East to review political and economic developments in

emerging democracies, and U.S. security and foreign assistance

activities that support the march of freedom in those regions. I want

to take a brief moment to share with my colleagues some of the trip

highlights.

Our first leg took us to Latvia, where Senators Crapo and DeMint and

I met with senior government officials and President Vaira Vike-

Freiberga. Although a young democracy, Latvia is unquestionably headed

in the right direction. A painful and horrific past under Soviet

occupation has seemingly steeled in that country's national

consciousness a drive and determination toward freedom and free

markets. Not surprisingly, Latvian officials today are keenly aware of

events in neighboring Russia, and expressed concern with what they

perceive as growing authoritarianism in Moscow.

A member of NATO and the EU, Latvia recognizes that while it

continues to make forward progress at home, including passage of

important money-laundering legislation, it has an important role to

play in the region and beyond. I again want to express my heartfelt

appreciation to the people of Latvia for their support of military

operations in Iraq and democracy in neighboring Belarus, Ukraine, and

Georgia.

U.S. Ambassador Cathy Bailey and her staff, particularly Mark Draper,

deserve praise for representing America's interests in Riga ably,

continuing to strengthen U.S.-Latvian bilateral relations, and

providing outstanding support throughout our visit, including setting

up a meeting with the Belarusian opposition. I am particularly proud of

Cathy as she is a Kentuckian; she is doing the Commonwealth proud.

From Latvia we traveled to Russia, where the contrast between the two

countries was immediate. Although Moscow has physically changed since

my last visit in 1993, a bumbling Soviet-era bureaucracy and suspicion

of the United States unfortunately remain.

Cooperation on issues of mutual importance to the United States and

Russia must continue, including countering terrorism, preventing the

proliferation of weapons and materials of mass destruction, and dealing

with the challenges of Iran and North Korea. However, concerns

expressed in Latvia--and later in Ukraine--on the rollback of democracy

in that country were underscored in a meeting we had with a dynamic

member of Russia's Duma, and the 9-year prison sentence handed down

to ex-YUKOS tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky while we were in Moscow.

I echo the calls by President Bush and Secretary of State Rice for

greater support and respect for democracy and the rule of law by

President Putin and

the Russian Government. I would only add that with respect to regional

relations, it is in Russia's interest that its neighbors are

democratic. It is my view that greater freedom can provide the

stability that the Kremlin apparently seeks in Ukraine, Georgia and

elsewhere.

In Ukraine, we met with a broad range of government and former

government officials to discuss the Orange Revolution, and the need for

critical economic reforms that Ukraine must implement in order to

fulfill its aspirations for entry into the WTO, EU and NATO. While it

is clear that President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Tymoshenko

understand the hard work that lies ahead, they--and other key leaders--

must keep their collective noses to the grindstone to implement

economic reforms as quickly as possible.

As a long time Ukraine-watcher, it is my hope that Yushchenko and

Tymoshenko do not repeat the mistakes of previous governments that led

to massive corruption and political shenanigans following independence

in 1991. The recent failure of the Rada to pass intellectual property

rights legislation--which is essential to WTO entry--is a cause for

concern. However, Ukrainians should know that America is ready and

willing to help further freedom in their country. This was no more

clearly demonstrated than through the $60 million provided for Ukraine

in the recently passed emergency supplemental.

I know my fellow Senators will agree that U.S. Ambassador John Herbst

and his staff deserve recognition for doing a great job. They made sure

that our visit included differing views on the Orange Revolution,

including those of former President Leonid Kravchuck and Yushchenko-

challenger Viktor Yanukovych, both of whom were at dinner one night at

the Ambassador's house, and had very different views, obviously, than

those expressed by the President and Prime Minister.

From Ukraine we traveled to Jordan where we met with King Abdallah.

We discussed regional issues, particularly Iraq and prospects for peace

on the West Bank and Gaza. King Abdallah is clearly engaged on both

issues and we appreciate that he continues to be a valued partner for

peace.

Given aircraft mechanical problems, our visit to Iraq was somewhat

abbreviated. Nonetheless, we departed Baghdad with an unmistakable

conclusion: 2005 is a critical year for the future of democracy in that

country--and for our own country's efforts to help the Iraqi people

secure the blessings of liberty. The Iraqi people face a number of

looming deadlines, including drafting a new constitution by August 15,

holding a national referendum on the constitution by October 15, and

conducting national elections to form a new government by December 15.

So they have several deadlines ahead of them on the road to democracy.

The participation of Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish representatives in this

process is absolutely imperative. According to an Iraqi parliamentarian

we met, the Iraqi people are up to this challenge. They should know

that America will continue to stand with them.

In Baghdad, we met with David Satterfield, our Charge d'Affaires,

General George Casey, and General David Petraeus. The view expressed by

our general officers in Baghdad--that the Iraqi Army has made

considerable progress--was shared by the Commander of the Second Marine

Expeditionary Force in Fallujah, General Steve Johnson.

In Fallujah, we met with a task force of Marines determined that the

heroic combat operations required to take the city should be followed

by successful reconstruction efforts. They told us that Iraqi forces

are combat ready, and determined in the face of enemy opposition.

Recent press reports regarding Operation Matador, and the discovery of

an insurgent underground bunker system, reveal only a small part of the

great work that our forces are doing in Anbar province.

On a personal note, in Fallujah I was reunited with 2LT Joe Bilby of

the Third Battalion, Eleventh Marine Regiment. This young officer once

worked on my staff here in the Senate, heard the call of duty, and

earned a commission in the Marine Corps. His unit is executing a

mission critical to our success in Iraq. The people of Kentucky, and

the rest of the country, should be proud of Lieutenant Bilby and his

Marine band of brothers.

Let me close by pointing out that critical to the success of freedom

in any country is strong and effective leadership that includes the

political will to implement needed political, economic and legal

reforms. As in previous years, my staff and I will be using this

measurement as we put together the fiscal year 2006 State, Foreign

Operations, and Related Programs appropriations bill in the weeks to

come.