Mr. President, tomorrow and through the weekend, we will

be celebrating Veterans Day. I thought it was appropriate that I come

to the Chamber this morning for two purposes. First, as chairman of the

Veterans' Affairs Committee in the Senate, I have had the distinct

pleasure of working with the VA and working with veterans across this

country over the last year to not only provide them the services they

need to improve their lives but to recognize the changing scene of

veterans health care and the new veterans that are being created out of

the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan and the kind of care and service

those brave young men and women will need as they return home, some of

them certainly not as physically or mentally whole as we would like.

Because of their tremendous service to our country in the war on

terrorism, I can say very proudly that this Congress and our committee

and the Veterans' Administration have clearly stepped up to do what is

right and appropriate in the recognition of the time-honored care we

have provided for our veterans down through the decades and down

through the conflicts in which America found itself, in the

preservation of our freedom and the advancement of all peoples around

the world.

Idaho played a unique role this year, and I am here today to talk

about the Idaho National Guard 116th Brigade Combat Team that is now

returning from service in Iraq. For the last 18 months, these brave men

and women have made a tremendous sacrifice to be away from their

families and friends to defend our Nation and work to build a stable

and free Iraq. For that, I am extremely grateful to all of them.

It is important to remember that the soldiers of the National Guard

are civilians first and soldiers second. They are our doctors and our

business men and women, plumbers, farmers, teachers. Yet they have all

answered their country's call to action during this time of need. The

skills these civilian soldiers bring to the table have proven to be

invaluable as our soldiers work side by side with the Iraqi people to

restore the critical infrastructure, establish a thriving economy, and

promote a free and prosperous system of government.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege, once again, to visit Iraq--it

was my second time while we have been engaged there in the war on

terrorism--fulfilling a promise I had made to the 116th as I and the

delegation and the Governor saw them off now over a year ago. So I was

extremely proud to be there and to see this phenomenally enthusiastic

civilian soldier in his or her work area as they did what they do so

very well in a very courageous and skillful manner.

These civilian skills not only were essential to provide the security

for the Iraqi people, but they also provided the essential ongoing

construction efforts. I was humbled to have that opportunity to meet

with these fine young men and women on the battlefield in Iraq and to

express the gratitude of the people of the State of Idaho and our

Nation for these efforts.

I also have enormous respect for what they did, but what is

phenomenal is the feedback we received from the Iraqi Government

officials regarding the work of the 116th. As I say, these are unique

soldiers. The Iraqi people saw that and understood that these were

really civilians who had tremendous talents in civilian life, and they

incorporated that not only in the protection and the soldiering that

went on over there but in the rebuilding of the infrastructure about

which I talked. These soldiers faced a very difficult and dangerous

task of maintaining the peace and stability in some very hostile

environments. Yet they continued their mission, and they handled it

with tremendous honor.

The members of the 116th have spent 12 months in Kirkuk and other

areas within that region. Their mission was to provide for the security

of the people of Iraq against insurgents and terrorist attacks,

establishment of self-reliant government institutions, and the

reconstruction of the basic and critical infrastructure. Their two

overriding missions were overseeing the successful national elections

in January and the national referendum vote on October 15. Both of

these missions were tremendously successful. We know about that. This

is exactly what our President had proposed and laid out before us.

While Americans and Members of Congress are tremendously anxious

about the war currently going on in Iraq, the reality is we are on

schedule and on course to do exactly what we set out to do to help the

citizens of Iraq in standing up for government, providing a

representative form of government, and stabilizing that area of the

world. The 116th from Idaho, these tremendous civilian soldiers,

participated in that, and I must tell you that in representing the

largest deployment from the State of Idaho that has ever happened to

our National Guard, we stand as Idahoans today tremendously proud of

the work they did.

The good news is, they are coming home, and most of them will be home

for Thanksgiving. We will be glad to see them back with their families

and back in their communities and reassuming their civilian lives and

doing that not only for the Idaho National Guard but for all guardsmen

and reservists around the country. As chairman of the Veterans' Affairs

Committee, working with the Secretary of the VA, holding hearings in

Idaho and other places around the country, we want to make sure that

this transition back into civilian life is as seamless as possible.

These are men and women who have been at war. To simply step out of a

war zone and step into their community is not going to be an easy task.

Yet that is exactly what a civilian citizen soldier does. Whether it is

the Idaho 116th or whether it is the tens of thousands of other guards

men, women, and reservists around the country, we owe them a phenomenal

debt of gratitude for the work they have done.

You see, we have a system within our military that it is not just the

active soldier who serves so well, but it is that citizen soldier, our

friends and neighbors in our communities across the country, such as

the 116th of Idaho, who continue to serve and, in a time of war, serve

with honor and dignity.

As we celebrate Veterans Day tomorrow and this weekend, recognizing

those who have stood in harm's way and in many instances have given

their lives so our lives could be freer, let's remember those currently

serving in Iraq, be it the active soldier or be it the Guard or

Reserve, for they are all one and their missions are all the same. The

116th of Idaho Brigade Combat Team has made Idaho extremely proud.