Mr. President, this past weekend, the people of Iraq

voted on their new constitution. Soon they will participate in

parliamentary elections that will provide for a fully constitutional

government. By any measure of history, the nation of Iraq has made

remarkable progress in the past 2 years despite the criticism of

naysayers who seem, in some instances, intent on scoring political

points more than encouraging our brave comrades to win the war in Iraq

and assist us in winning the larger global war on terror.

Iraqi participation in this election yesterday was strong, including

Sunnis who boycotted the January election. The election was also more

peaceful than the previous election, in large measure due to the

determination and professionalism of the new Iraqi security services.

If 3 short years ago someone would have predicted the Iraqis would vote

on a constitution in the near future, the same critics who are

today calling for retreat would have scoffed.

However, the critics have consistently underestimated the Iraqi

people, the American military, and, I might add, the American people as

well. America must remain engaged in stabilization efforts in order to

ensure the triumph of democracy over the return of tyranny.

Since the beginning of the war on terror, members of our military

have been asked to execute both difficult and dangerous work. As

always, the good men and women who serve have met these challenges with

determination, courage, and honor. They are a credit to our Nation and

deserve our deepest respect and gratitude.

We all know there remains difficult work to be done in Iraq.

Terrorists regard this country as the central battle ground in the war

on terror, and these enemies acknowledge no standards and no rules

governing warfare. Their stated goal is to bring great harm to any

government or country that opposes their actions. We in the United

States, of course, are a primary target, and we must therefore continue

to show leadership and courage in the fight.

Some critics have said that we should cut and run, that we should

leave according to some arbitrary timetable, claiming that the Pentagon

and the administration have failed to be realistic about the problems

that exist in Iraq and the challenges that lie ahead. I firmly

disagree.

President Bush and other members of the administration have

consistently told the American people that our efforts in Iraq will

require much sacrifice, but that we must stay the course. We must not

let the politics of the moment undermine the path to democracy in Iraq.

We should consider, though, the alternative: what would happen if our

troops left Iraq prematurely. The country would likely face a civil war

or would fragment in a dangerous way. Terrorists such as Ayman al-

Zawahiri, al-Qaida's No. 2 operative and Bin Laden's deputy, and Abu

Masab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaida's chief terrorist in Iraq, and others who

vow to destroy America could be counted on to seize power in at least a

portion of the country. At a minimum, they would find patronage in any

regime to plan attacks and train terrorists and offer them harbor and

material support.

The consequences of a U.S. pullout and coalition pullout from Iraq

should not be in question, as a letter from Zawahiri and Zarqawi

released this week by the Pentagon makes clear. In this letter,

Zawahiri tells Zarqawi when the United States leaves Iraq that al-Qaida

must be prepared to claim the most political territory possible in the

inevitable vacuum of power that will arise.

Yes, Iraq would be more dangerous, not less, if we fail to finish the

job. Failure in Iraq would empower and embolden the enemy. Failure to

stay the course and lay the foundation of a functioning democracy would

result in more, not fewer, terrorist attacks, including here at home.

I must also express disappointment with those in this country who are

trying to use the situation in Iraq to score political points or

undermine America's resolve.

Last week, the leadership in the Senate on the other side of the

aisle put out a statement claiming that we do not have a plan for

victory in Iraq. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For the record, the Senate has been briefed numerous times by our

military leadership regarding the plan in Iraq and the war on terror.

This weekend's successful election was a key element in that plan to

build a stable and self-governing Iraq. Sadly, the claim by political

partisans that we do not have a plan in Iraq is nothing more than

politics at its worst. To imply that our military leadership does not

understand what it takes to win in Iraq is simply wrong and even

insulting.

I trust the wisdom and experience of GEN John Abizaid and GEN George

Casey over the many armchair generals inside the beltway who seem to

pontificate with great frequency. They understand the facts on the

ground and what is necessary to achieve victory.

Finally, some critics are fond of comparing Iraq to Vietnam. Yet the

differences far outweigh the flawed comparisons some attempt to make.

The only obvious and striking similarity is that the enemy is counting

on American public opinion to force a retreat. In fact, Zawahiri noted

in his letter that

Al-Qaida

understands that they cannot win on the battlefield against the spirit

of determination of America and our allies. Prematurely leaving Iraq

would have catastrophic consequences far greater than those we saw in

Vietnam, as retreat would, in effect, hand the Iraqi people over to the

terrorists who have stated their intention and proven their ability to

launch horrifying attacks.

Yes, we have seen significant progress in Iraq, and our confidence in

the desire of the Iraqi people to self-govern is well placed as we have

seen the value that they place on liberty. We have seen record numbers

show up at the polls, more than 60 percent, despite threats of car

bombs and other acts of terrorism. We have seen Iraqi elected officials

vocally defend the values of freedom and democracy at their own peril.

In 2\1/2\ years, this country has moved from the rule of a tyrant to

implementing the rule of law. They have held national elections, and

they were followed by the writing of a constitution. They are

formulating their own military and security forces that grow more and

more capable.

While much remains to be done, much has been accomplished. To ignore

these strides forward would be to diminish the good work of both the

Iraqi people and the United States and their contributions that have

allowed this effort to occur. Yes, we must stay the course. In so doing

we honor both the ideals upon which this great Nation was founded and

our own national security interests. America has sacrificed much in

this global war, and we do not yet know the trials that will come. We

can be confident that there will be a struggle and a greater sacrifice,

but we can also be confident that in the midst of this struggle and

sacrifice there is hope.

We are encouraging democracy, freedom, progress, free markets, self-

governance, and the rule of law and the Iraqi people are reaching out

and taking hold of that hope.

So we must stand confident and strong, shoulder to shoulder with the

Iraqi people in the defense of their nascent democracy, confident that

freedom will, in the end, triumph.