Mr. President, I rise to comment on the U.S. war in Iraq,

which thankfully is coming to an end this month. Secretary of Defense

Leon Panetta made this historic declaration on Thursday at a formal

ceremony in Baghdad.

This means many things to many people, but I am certain that it can't

mean more than to the families of the brave men and women who will be

coming home for the holidays--home from Iraq for good. To those men and

women I would like to say: We are proud of what you have accomplished--

you deposed a dictator and gave the people of Iraq a singular

opportunity to chart their own future.

And to the families of these brave servicemembers, thank you for the

loneliness and longing that you endured while your loved ones were

away. And to those whose loved ones did not return, one can hardly

imagine your loss.

The United States has been at war in Iraq for almost 9 years.

President Obama made a promise to bring this war to a close--and I am

proud to say he delivered on that promise.

Tens of thousands of troops have handed over security

responsibilities to their Iraqi counterparts. The U.S. Embassy in

Baghdad will take the leading role, continuing our engagement through

diplomatic channels. Our remaining 4,000 troops will be home by the end

of the year.

Whether you voted for or against the initial authorization for war--

and I was one of the 23 to vote against it--we can all agree that its

toll has been higher than many could have imagined.

The disproportionate strain this war placed on our servicemembers and

their families has been enormous--at times almost unbearable--in back-

to-back deployments, in post-traumatic stress, lost loved ones, and

debilitating injuries.

Many are living with life-changing injuries.

Nearly 4,500 American service men and women have paid the ultimate

price for their country, including 116 brave men and women from

Illinois. Another 1,100 Illinoisans have been wounded physically--just

some of the tens of thousands nationwide. Untold numbers still suffer

from post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries.

And many brave civilians in our Foreign Service and NGO and

contractor communities also suffered death and injury.

Incredibly, more than 1.5 million Americans served in Iraq. It has

cost the country almost $1 trillion--considerably more when we factor

in the long-term costs related to the war.

But even as we bring our military deployment in Iraq to a close, it

is important to remember that two critical commitments remain.

The first is the commitment to our men and women in uniform. They

have sacrificed so much for the Nation they love--sometimes

everything--and we will not retreat from the sacred pledge we make to

each and every servicemember to provide for their needs and for the

needs of their loved ones.

The second is the enduring political commitment that the United

States continues to make to Iraq as a partner and ally and to the Iraqi

people. Iraq has also paid a high price--over 10,000 Iraqi soldiers and

police lost their lives in the war, and over 100,000 civilians. And

Iraq still faces significant leadership and governance challenges on

the path to a stable and peaceful future.

Yet, ultimately much of this future will depend on Iraqis and their

political leadership. We have given them a unique--a historic--

opportunity to govern themselves with tolerance, openness, and freedom.

We have done that with the precious blood and treasure of our Nation.

We hope that in the end Iraq will follow this path--that it will be

an ally to the United States and a responsible democratic voice in the

region.

Through Foreign Service Officers at our Embassy, USAID projects

around the country, or U.S. foreign assistance--America will continue

to stand with our Iraqi allies in the years ahead.

Mr. President, amid this hopeful news that the Iraq war is over, I

want to also mention the 1-year anniversary of a brutal election

crackdown last December 19 in Belarus.

I, Senator Lieberman, and others have come to the floor a number of

times this year to talk about the tragic events of that day--the

barbaric crackdown that ensued and that continues today.

Last December, after decades of misrule by Belarusian strongman

Alexander Lukashenko, there was a glimmer of hope that perhaps this

last dictator of Europe would ease his authoritarian regime and finally

allow the Belarusian people to freely choose their own President in an

honest and open election.

Tragically, those hopes were quickly dashed when Lukashenko claimed

another term as President amid elections described by international

monitors as seriously flawed.

Lukashenko ordered his police force--incredibly still called the

KGB--to brutally suppress opposition candidates, activists, and

supporters who gathered in protest on election night in Independence

Square in downtown Minsk.

Most of the political opponents who ran against him, along with

hundreds of their followers, were arrested. Those with suspected ties

to democratic parties and groups, human rights organizations, and what

remains of the independent media in Belarus were targeted by the KGB

for months afterward.

I visited Belarus just weeks following the so-called elections. I met

with many of the family members of the jailed activists. Their stories

were heartbreaking. Missing fathers, mothers, sons, and brothers--

locked away in a Belarusian jail for the crime of running for public

office or peaceably protesting a rigged election.

Too often those detained were tortured and denied basic legal rights.

But that wasn't enough for Lukashenko.

Families of the detained were also harassed and Lukashenko even had

the temerity to try to seize the 3-year-old son of two activists he had

imprisoned on bogus charges.

Listening to these heart-wrenching stories, I couldn't believe that

such Soviet-era tactics were still being used in Europe today.

Lukashenko's actions this past year have pulled the country into

isolation and made it the subject of international scorn.

Our Nation has joined efforts with the European Union to toughen

sanctions on Belarus, including freezing the travel and assets of

Lukashenko and his enablers and henchmen.

I worked with Senators Lieberman, Cardin, McCain, Kirk, and others

earlier this year to introduce S. Res. 105, which passed unanimously,

condemning the sham elections and calling on the Belarusian regime to

release all political prisoners.

The resolution also called for new elections in Belarus that meet

international standards, supported the tightening of sanctions against

the Belarusian state-owned oil and petrochemical company, and urged the

International Ice Hockey Federation to suspend the 2014 Ice Hockey

Championship in Minsk until all Belarusian political prisoners are

released.

Let me add that former National Hockey League Hall of Famer and EU

Parliamentarian Peter Stastny; chair of the House Hockey Caucus,

Representative Mike Quigley; and I wrote to International Ice Hockey

Federation President Rene Fasel urging him not to give the dictatorial

Lukashenko regime the prestige afforded by the World Ice Hockey

Championship while political prisoners continue to languish in his KGB

prisons.

So far the federation has ignored this commonsense appeal.

Today, a year after the election crackdown, at least 60 candidates

and/or activists remain imprisoned or face harsh restrictions on their

freedoms, including limits on their travel, the ability to work in

certain professions, and to freely participate in the political

process.

For example, Presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov remains in a KGB

jail. His family--which is granted only sporadic contact with him--

suspects that he has been tortured and pressured to sign a letter

asking for pardon.

Mikalai Statkevich, Zmitser Dashkevich, Eduard Lobau, Paval

Seviarynets, and Zmitser Bandarenka--just to name a few--are also still

in jail for their participation in demonstrations during and after the

December elections.

I hope the Ice Hockey Federation's corporate sponsors for the Minsk

championship also recognize the potential stain to their image by

sponsoring this event while Lukashenko continues to imprison and

torture these innocent people.

On the 1-year anniversary of the brutal crackdown we must not forget

the Belarusian people and those detained who only wished to exercise

their basic rights of free speech and expression. That is why I am

pleased to see that just this week the Senate passed the Belarus

Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011, which I hope the House will do

as well before we break for recess.

Through legislation such as this and unwavering pressure on the

Lukashenko regime to open its political system, the people of the

United States will continue to stand by the Belarusian people and

support them in their efforts to bring justice to their country.