Mr. President, I rise

today to discuss the situation in Syria

and the historic choice facing this Congress

and America. I have been deeply

concerned about the situation in Syria

since March of 2011, when thousands of

Syrians from all backgrounds peacefully

protested for a change in the politics

and the economy of their country.

I think many of us believed these

peaceful protests would lead to the end

of an autocratic Asad regime, just as

other despots have fallen in other parts

of the Arab world.

Yet President Bashar al-Asad, like

his father before him, Hafez al-Asad,

instead responded with horrific violence

to suppress the aspirations of his

own people. With the disturbing help of

Russia, Hezbollah, and Iran, Asad has

managed to hang on to power and turn

his country into a humanitarian nightmare.

I met with the Russian Ambassador

to the United States here in my office

in Washington on this issue. I visited

the refugee camps along the Turkish

border. I talked with the moderate Syrian

opposition in Istanbul. I discussed

this situation with the Turkish President,

Mr. Gul, and their Foreign Minister,

Davutoglu, and met with many

Chicago-area Syrian Americans.

I hoped diplomatic and economic

pressure would bring an end to the

mayhem and human suffering in Syria.

I know the American people feel a responsibility

for those overseas in need

and those who are struggling to find

freedom. But I also know something

else about the people of my State of Illinois,

and I believe of this country:

They are weary of war.

Then came the August 21 chemical

attack in the suburbs of Damascus in

the middle of the night. At that moment

an important challenge was

thrown down to the international community.

That is not in any way to diminish

the violence that has taken

place in Syria over the last several

years. Over 100,000 died in that violence.

But when it comes to the use of

chemical weapons, the world made a

decision almost 100 years ago about

their use—even in war. How did we

reach this international consensus on

this horrible weapon? We saw firsthand

what it could do. The large-scale use of

chemical weapons in World War I

killed many and left many wounded

and disabled.

Those who have some memory of this

war—either from a history class or

having spoken to someone who served

there—understand what it meant.

These photos can’t do justice to the

devastation of chemical weapons and

poison gas, but this is a German gas attack

on the Eastern Front in World

War I. We can see that as the gas

billowed, the victims were anyone who

happened to be in its wake.

This is also a photograph of British

troops from World War I who were subjected

to the poison gas, the chemical

weapon of the day, and blinded during

the battle of Estaire in 1918. These

photos show just a snapshot of the use

of poison gases which don’t reach the

level of virulence of those used today.

Yet maybe even more poignant are the

audio recordings of the actual former

World War I British soldiers maintained

by the BBC for generations so

the experience would not be forgotten.

This is one excerpt of British troops

struggling to cope with the effects of

chemical warfare:

This BBC report went on to say:

Another soldier recorded by the BBC

said:

As a result of the horrors of World

War I, in 1925 the Geneva Protocol prohibited

the use of chemical and biological

weapons in war. It was drawn up

and signed at a conference held in Geneva

under the auspices of the League

of Nations, the precursor of the United

Nations. This happened in June of 1925,

and it became a force of law in February

of 1928. Syria was a signatory to

this agreement.

Let me read the opening of this protocol.

It is even relevant today.

What the world was saying in 1925

was clear: These chemical weapons

would never, ever be accepted in the

civilized world. This message was reaffirmed

by the Convention on the Prohibition

of the Development, Production,

Stockpiling, and Use of Chemical

Weapons, which went into effect in 1997

and to which almost every country in

the world has signed—almost every

country. Those who have not signed:

Angola, Egypt, North Korea, South

Sudan, and Syria.

While not completely taken off the

world’s battlefields—notably in the

case of Iraq, which used poison gas

against Iran and its own Kurdish people

in the 1980s—the global prohibition

against using chemical weapons has

been largely upheld for almost a century,

that is, until last month in Damascus,

Syria. Syria has one of the

largest stockpiles of chemical weapons

in the world.

At our hearing last week, I asked

General Dempsey whether the reports

which we have from the French were

accurate. They reported the Syrians

now have almost 1,000 tons of chemical

agents and hundreds of tons of the

deadly gas sarin, which has been detected

in the pathological investigation

of those who were victims on August

21 in Damascus, Syria.

Despite all international warnings

not to do so—the Syrian Government is

literally a superpower when it comes to

chemical weapons and has an arsenal

on such a large scale—on August 21, in

the desperation of war, Bashar Asad

unleashed these chemical weapons in

his own city on his own people.

These are horrible pictures of what

happened as a result of that attack. I

have seen worse. One room of children

stacked like cordwood—victims of

these chemical weapons. We don’t believe

it was the first time he has used

them, and his father used them before

him. But it is the largest scale we have

ever seen of the use of chemical weapons

by Asad in Syria.

Syria has crossed the line the civilized

world said must never be crossed.

Not only has the community of nations

agreed that such weapons are never to

be used but other regimes with weapons

of mass destruction or plans for

such weapons—including North Korea

and Iran—are undoubtedly watching to

see what the world will do now.

Now that Bashar Asad has used

chemical weapons in Syria, now that

the world has reported it, now that the

photos are there for the world to see,

and now that the pathological investigations

are completed, what will the

world do? Ideally there is a place to resolve

it—the U.N. Security Council.

But, sadly, both Russia and China have

said they will veto not only any effort

to hold Asad to account, they have literally

vetoed efforts to even pass resolutions

condemning the use of chemical

weapons without specificity in

Syria.

Russia’s behavior is incredible and

particularly perverse given the thousands

of Russian soldiers who were victims

of chemical weapon attacks in

World War I. In May 1915 alone, Russian

soldiers on the Eastern Front suffered

9,000 casualties—1,000 of them fatalities—

as a result of German chemical

weapons.

Today I was in the airport in Chicago,

and the news was flashing about

an overture made by President Putin

to try to put an end to this controversy.

I, of course, salute and applaud

any effort to resolve this the

right way and verifiable way, and to do

it with dispatch.

What I understand this proposal to be

is that the Syrians will somehow destroy

their cache of chemical weapons

and, of course, forswear never to use

them. That would be a good opportunity,

but it will be a difficult outcome

because investigating with a

third party, such as the United Nations,

verifying where these weapons

are, removing them from Syria in the

midst of a civil war, is particularly

challenging. If there is a way to do this

diplomatically, safely, and to do it in a

fashion where we can be certain this

type of atrocity will not occur again,

we absolutely have a responsibility to

pursue it.

I don’t understand how Russia and

China can be signatories to the 1925 Geneva

Protocols and the Convention on

the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,

and then turn around and protect Syria

in the Security Council of the United

Nations. If there is one international

agency that should be involved in any

major diplomatic effort to resolve this

peacefully, it should be the United Nations.

We should call on Mr. Putin to step

forward with the leaders in China and

say they will work with the Security

Council to execute any diplomatic policy

that can avoid further military

confrontation. Until then, make no

mistake, President Putin’s proposal

today, and the activities we are seeing

and hearing from Syria, are a direct result

of President Obama’s leadership.

He has stepped up—even though it is an

unpopular position with some in this

country—and said we cannot ignore

this redline created by the world when

it came to chemical weapons. It is time

for others to stand and join us in stopping

the advancement and use of chemical

weapons once and for all.

I have been listening to this Syria debate,

and I cannot say how many times

I have harkened back to that time 12

years ago when we debated entering

the war in Iraq. It was another one of

those votes that come along in the

course of a congressional career that

keeps you awake at night.

I was serving on the Intelligence

Committee in the Senate. I sat through

hour after hour of hearings about the

suspected weapons of mass destruction

in Iraq, but it never came together in a

credible way as far as I was concerned.

There was such a rush to war 12 years

ago. Twenty-three of us voted no—22

Democrats and 1 Republican. I can recall

the scene. It was late at night,

after midnight, right here in the well

of the Senate when three of us were

left. It was Kent Conrad of North Dakota

and, of course, from Minnesota

our friend, the late Senator who served

with so much distinction and spoke out

so many times on issues of morals and

ethics. We cast the vote no and waited

in this empty Chamber.

I thought about that vote so many

times. I think it was the right vote to

vote no, but there comes a moment in

history when we have to stand as civilized

nations and say to those who are

willing to ignore the rules and to break

the rules that a line cannot be crossed.

I hope we can get that done, and not

just for the memory of Senator

Wellstone and Senator Conrad, but in

memory of so many who served here

and faced these challenges in the past

in our history. I hope we can find a diplomatic

solution that will avoid any

military use, but I know the reason we

have reached this point in diplomacy

with this Putin overture has more to

do with the President being determined

to stand for a matter of principle than

almost anything else. We have to continue

to make it clear that we find it

unacceptable to use these chemical

weapons. We paid a bitter price for the

war in Iraq as a nation when we were

misled as to weapons of mass destruction.

I have seen the evidence in briefings

of this deadly attack in Damascus. I

think the evidence is overwhelming

and convincing. I think at this point

many Americans are reluctant to even

consider the use of military force. So

we sat down and drew up a resolution

in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

last week. There are strict limitations

within this resolution about

the President’s authority and power.

He has 60 days to execute a military

strategy—if nothing else intervenes, 60

days. He can extend it 30 days, but even

Congress can object to that if it wishes.

He can use military weapons but only

for the purposes specified. No troops on

the ground. No troops in combat operations.

As Senator MCCAIN said yesterday,

that will be part of the law. The

President has already said that is his

standard as well. So for those who are

worried about mission creep and where

this might lead us, if, God forbid, we

are faced with that possibility, this

resolution strictly limits what the

President can do.

It was about 8 days ago that I got a

phone call I will never forget at my

home in Springfield late on a Sunday

night from the President himself. We

talked for about half an hour. We

talked about a lot of things because we

go back a long way. He talked to me

about his thought process and what he

is taking under consideration in trying

to lead the world in this response to

chemical weapons.

I was one of the early supporters of

this President. I believe in him. I believe

in his values. I believe he has

been honest with me and with the

American people about the situation

we face. I know the options are not

good. They never are under these circumstances.

But I also know that if we

turn our backs on this situation, there

will be some dictator in Iran or North

Korea who will be emboldened to do

even more—to perhaps use not just

chemical weapons but even nuclear

weapons. There comes a point when we

have to take a stand.

I understand when the people I represent

across Illinois have said to me

so many times in the last week: Why is

it always the United States? Why is it

that we have to be involved in this so

many times? Why do we have to be the

policemen to the world?

Well, there is a basic answer to that.

I would like to believe we have values

the rest of the world looks up to. Oh,

we have stumbled in our own history,

and we will continue to do so, but we

continue to fight for those basic values

all around the world.

Secondly, if someone is in trouble in

their country somewhere in the world

and they have one 9–1–1 call to make,

they pray to God the United States

will answer because we have the best

military in the world. We have responded

to challenges around the world

throughout history, and seldom do we

leave a residual power base behind. We

go in, we do the job, we come home.

That is something we can’t say for a

lot of nations. It is an awesome responsibility.

I think the President is doing the

right thing. I think his appeal to the

leaders around the world and his appeal

to the American people is consistent

with our values as a nation.

The President doesn’t come quickly

to war. He is a person who understands,

as I do, the heavy price that has to be

paid, and he understands there are moments

when a leader—a commander in

chief, a person with the responsibility

of protecting his nation in a dangerous

world—has to step forth and lead. If

the United States did not take this onerous

leadership role, I doubt anyone

else would have.

I take very seriously the President’s

promise that he won’t be putting boots

on the ground in Syria. I have been to

too many funerals and visited too

many disabled veterans to ever want to

see us do that again, except when it is

absolutely necessary for America’s survival.

I think what we are doing this week

in the Senate is a step in the right direction,

and I believe it is a step that

can move us toward a safer world. If we

can find, because of the President’s

leadership, a diplomatic response that

avoids further military conflict but

keeps us safe from these deadly chemical

weapons, we should pursue it.

Mr. President, I yield the floor, and I

suggest the absence of a quorum.