

attending a town meeting, I can say with confidence that despite the insurgents' bombs and threats, democracy is on the way.

During our time in Iraq, my Senate colleagues and I were in a meeting with Prime Minister Allawi. In the middle of that meeting, he asked if we would be willing to go around the block or a few hundred yards away at a townhall meeting that he was conducting. We said yes. It was spontaneous, and we did not know what to expect.

We went with him in the middle of our meeting, and it was a meeting he had been holding over the course of the day. We walked into a room about the size of this Chamber, and it was packed. It was packed with more than 150 Sunni sheiks who were from the Sunni triangle area, the area where most of the terrorist activity has been occurring.

We walked into the room, and it was embroiled in activity. It was embroiled in debate. People were scrambling. Sheiks were scrambling for the microphone so they could express themselves. There was controversy, disagreement. It was orderly in the sense that one person talked at a time. This was really democracy at its best. It was spontaneous, not planned by us. The Prime Minister, in meeting with the sheiks, spent most of the day listening very patiently.

The presentations were passionate, and for me it captured the real contrast on that day when we saw free speech and full expression. Some were saying postpone the elections; others were saying, no, don't postpone the elections. This is the first step toward democracy. Others said America has done things perfectly, knowing we were in the room, and others said we should have done this or done that.

The point is, everybody was expressing themselves, and the Prime Minister was sitting before them listening patiently, taking the opportunity to comment. It was a striking contrast to the decades under Saddam where disagreement could lead, and frequently did lead, to torture and, in many cases, as we know, ultimately death.

So progress is being made. The will of the Iraqi people is, for the first time in decades, being heard. These elections will give an element of legitimacy of expression of the Iraqi people that heretofore has not been there to the degree that it should be and that it will be in the future. It is through the ballot box, the power of that ballot box that the Iraqis will begin this journey.

I need to comment again very briefly on a Tennessee angle to these elections because the Tennessee population of Iraqis is quite high and, therefore, Nashville, TN, has been chosen as one of the polling sites so that Iraqis, mainly a Kurdish community that has come to the United States, can express themselves in this election.

It was in 1977 that a professor named Franklin Jones agreed to sponsor the first Kurdish family in Nashville, al-

most 30 years ago. Now Nashville boasts the largest Kurdish community in the United States of America. Referred to by some as "Little Kurdistan," there are 5,000 to 8,000 Kurdish families living in Nashville, and on Sunday, 3,700 Iraqi Americans living in the Nashville region will go out to our Tennessee State fairgrounds where they will cast their vote. It is an out-of-country voting site that has been established. They will be participating in creating this new and free Iraqi government.

The story of Nashville's Kurdish community is a special one. After that first Kurdish family arrived in 1977, more and more Kurds came to Nashville. A number of our community and church organizations focused on the Kurds' plight and helped refugees adjust, settle in, and be assimilated into our wonderful city, Nashville.

During the 1980s, a small Kurdish community began to develop. You ask why. A lot of it is serendipity, but one of the answers you get is the climate in Nashville reminded them of the climate back home.

In 1991, during Desert Storm, a large contingent of Kurds fled to the United States, and many of them joined their brethren in Tennessee. Job opportunities were high, cost of living was low, and Nashville's unparalleled hospitality welcomed them and made them feel safe.

On Sunday, when millions of Iraqis go to the polls to vote for the first time in Iraq, they will be joined by their compatriots in Nashville. And among them, as an aside, will be Samir, the Iraqi-American translator who found Saddam Hussein down in his spider hole.

I am proud that early on the people of Tennessee welcomed Iraqis into their homes, into their communities, and gave them shelter and hope. I am honored the city of Nashville and the State of Tennessee will provide Iraqis across the region with the opportunity to express themselves on January 30.

It is a historic day for them and a historic day for the coalition that has invested so much in the Iraqi people, and a historic day for democracy. We will see young men and women going to the polls expressing themselves. People have been waiting a long time for this day.

In closing, we were all abuzz last week with the activities surrounding the 55th inaugural. It was a wonderful event for those of us who participated here in the Capitol and for those who watched it across America—the glowing lights, the banners. To have that peaceful transfer of the election process be realized is clearly remarkable for us all. But at its core, the inauguration was not for a party and not for a particular person. It was a celebration of the blessing of democracy and the freedoms we enjoy, freedoms I am confident one day will be ever much as common in Iraq as it is in the United States.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

#### MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, there will be a period for the transition of morning business until 10:30 a.m., with the first half of the time under the control of the Democratic leader or his designee, and the second half of the time under the control of the Senator from Kansas, Mr. BROWNBACK, or his designee.

Who yields time? The Senator from Washington.

#### KEEPING AMERICA'S PROMISES TO ITS VETERANS

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, this morning I rise to speak about one of the issues that is facing our country, an issue we need to understand and live up to, a promise that we made to the young men and women who serve us overseas. Since this election, we have heard a lot about the crises that are facing our country and what our obligation is and the discussions that will occur in the Senate and around the country about those as we move forward.

Next week, we will hear from the President on the State of the Union. I will be listening very carefully to hear if he addresses the issue that I think is clearly one of the most important issues our country needs to address, and that is how we treat the young men and women who are coming home, who have served us in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the globe, and that we have the services available for them to keep the promise we made to them when they went to serve all of us. I am talking about the veterans who have come home to our country throughout our time, who have served us well, who fought for our freedom, who have been there for every one of us, and who are now facing severe shortages of services. I am talking about the promises we made to them for their health care, to make sure they are reintegrated into society in the United States and given what we have promised them when they went to serve all of us.

This morning we woke up to the news of 30-some Marines who have been tragically lost in an accident. Our hearts go out to their families, to their loved ones, and to all who know them, and we owe them and their families a sincere debt of gratitude. It is a reminder to all of us today of the service that these men and women give us, of the ultimate sacrifice, so we can have the freedoms that are so important to us at home.

It is a reminder to all of us that we owe them more than rhetoric on this floor or promises when they leave but fulfillment of those promises when they come home. We need to fulfill the promise of services available so their health care needs are met and that they are given the full support of this country when they return.