As an article in Time magazine recently noted, a number of these ''concerned local citizens'' militias, organized and supported by the U.S. military, are now turning on each other in a contest for influence and territory. The Shia-led central government views these armed militias as undermining its central authority and has balked at integrating large numbers of Sunnis into the national Iraqi security forces. So at this point we must ask ourselves whether the U.S. Government, in service of a worthy but short-term objective of suppressing violence in Iraq, is only paving the road for a large-scale future conflict by arming sectarian groups separate from the national army and police. That is an important question we must consider.

Let me say, Mr. President, sometimes short and telling anecdotes tell a story. We have read recently that the Iranian President, Mr. Ahmadinejad, will make a visit to Baghdad next week for talks with Prime Minister al-Maliki and other officials. This visit has already been announced, with details of his itinerary available to the press and the public. By sharp contrast, when President Bush, Secretary Rice and/or Secretary Gates visit Iraq, they travel to Baghdad unannounced and rarely leave the fortified walls of the Green Zone.

Another example. When Senator DURBIN and I visited Iraq last August, we flew from the airport to the Green Zone in low-flying, fast-moving helicopters practicing evasive maneuvers. Here is a question we should ask ourselves: Why can the Iranian President drive in an open manner into Baghdad while U.S. leaders must sneak into the country under the cloak of darkness? Five years into our occupation of Iraq, what does this say about our role in Iraq and the security of that nation?

As Iraq continues to dominate the attention and resources of our Government, it clouds and confuses our long-term U.S. strategic priorities. I remain troubled, as so many others here remain troubled, that a ''Declaration of Principles'' signed on November 26, 2007, by President Bush and Prime Minister al-Maliki commits our Nation to ''providing security assurances and commitments to the Republic of Iraq to deter future aggression against Iraq that violates its sovereignty and integrity of its territories, waters, or airspace.'' That is what the Declaration of Principles says in part.

Although Secretary Rice assured me during a recent Senate Foreign Relations hearing that no such commitments will be extended to Iraq, I remain deeply skeptical. In concert with my colleagues, I will continue to exercise vigorous oversight to ensure that President Bush does not lock the United States into a binding and long-term security commitment to Iraq.

It is time to refocus our energies and our efforts on the ''forgotten war'' in Afghanistan. Our focus on Iraq has distracted from and undermined the central front in the war on terrorism.

ADM Mike Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently testified before Congress, and he said:

> In Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must.

With all due respect to Admiral Mullen, he has it wrong. We should do what we must in both places.

We know that 6 years ago America was fighting and winning the war in Afghanistan, and al-Qaida and the Taliban were on the run. But instead of staying and accomplishing our mission in Afghanistan by hunting down those who planned the 9/11 attacks, this administration diverted our attention to Iraq. Today, the Taliban has returned with a vengeance and controls more territory than at any time since its ouster in 2001. Afghanistan is on the brink of becoming yet again a failed state and thus a safe haven for al-Qaida to launch deadly attacks, including against the American homeland.

Three recent bipartisan reports on Afghanistan concluded that the situation on the ground is dire. One report, coauthored by retired general Jim Jones and Ambassador Thomas Pickering, puts it bluntly, and I quote in part:

> The progress achieved after 6 years of international engagement is under serious threat from resurgent violence, weakening international resolve, mounting regional challenges, and a growing lack of confidence on the part of the Afghan people about the future direction of their country. The United States and the international community have tried to win the struggle in Afghanistan with too few military forces and insufficient economic aid, and without a clear and consistent comprehensive strategy.

That is the Jones and Pickering report from which I am quoting.

When Secretary of Defense Gates is forced to go public with criticisms of the refusal of our NATO allies to deploy more forces in Afghanistan and his skepticism of their ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations, we must admit that the situation on the ground is getting worse in Afghanistan, not better. Military officials expect the coming year to be even more deadly, as the Taliban becomes more deadly and deploys greater numbers of suicide bombers and roadside explosives. U.S. forces remain largely isolated in Afghanistan, with key NATO allies refusing to provide ground support and imposing onerous restrictions on where and how they can fight. The end result is that the very future of NATO, the most successful alliance in modern history, is now in grave danger.

In a welcome display of straight-talk, Secretary Gates admitted that the very reason large segments of the European public do not support NATO operations in Afghanistan is due to their antipathy toward U.S. policy in Iraq. Secretary Gates recently asserted in Munich:

> Many of them, I think, have a problem with our involvement in Iraq and project that to Afghanistan, and do not understand the very different—for them—the very different kind of threat.

That is what Secretary Gates said recently.

Mr. President, let me conclude with this thought: The war in Iraq has indeed strained our military, limiting the number of combat divisions we can provide in Afghanistan. It has undermined our global leadership, depriving us of the moral authority to demand more of our allies, and it has diverted the attention of our senior military and civilian leadership, allowing the Taliban to mount a comeback under our very eyes. We are losing a war we cannot afford to lose in a futile and misguided effort to force success in another conflict that can only be won politically, not militarily. Our priorities are tragically mistaken, and our Nation is paying a severe cost.

Mr. President, I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

AUTHORIZATION FOR REPRESENTATION BY SENATE LEGAL COUNSEL

Mr. REID. Mr. President, S. Res. 460 concerns a civil action filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. The National Association of Manufacturers is challenging the constitutionality of section 207 of the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007, which amended the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 to strengthen the reporting requirements for coalitions and associations that engage in lobbying activities.

As amended, the law mandates that registrants disclose the members of their organization that contribute more than $5,000 in a quarterly period to the lobbying activities of the organization and ''actively participate in the planning, supervision, or control of such activities.'' Under prior law, disclosure was required of those members who contributed at least $10,000 for lobbying semiannually but only if those members ''in whole or in major part'' planned, supervised, or controlled such lobbying activities.

The plaintiff National Association of Manufacturers alleges that its members face sustained injury to their first amendment rights, including their right to anonymous policy speech, and seeks to prevent the enhanced disclosure requirements from taking effect