

member of the NATO Alliance to help the Afghan people defend their young democracy. And we will ensure that that country never becomes a safe haven again for terrorists who seek to launch attacks on America or our allies. (Applause.)

Another front in the same war against the extremists is Iraq. We removed a brutal dictator who murdered his own people, who paid the families of suiciders, who invaded his neighbors, who was an enemy of the United States, who repeatedly defied the United Nations. Because we acted, the dictator is gone and 25 million Iraqis are free. Removing Saddam Hussein was right then -- and it is right today. (Applause.)

In 2006, as you well know, the situation in Iraq was deteriorating. Some back in Washington said the war was lost. They were willing to give up on the mission. They were willing to leave a struggling democracy to its own fate. But failure in Iraq could have spread chaos across the region, emboldened Iran, emboldened the terrorists, and given them a new base from which to launch operations against America and allies. I believe this would have been a disaster for America -- and so do the men and women of the VFW. (Applause.)

Early last year, after consultations with our commanders -- and the Commander-in-Chief must always listen to the commanders and not the latest opinion poll -- (applause) -- I ordered a surge of forces into Iraq. I remember briefing the leaders of the VFW on my decision. Since the surge began, violence in Iraq has dropped; civilian deaths and sectarian killings are down. Slowly but steadily, political and economic progress is taking place. Iraq is a rising democracy. Iraq is an ally against these extremists. And our troops have become home -- begun to come home under our policy of return on success. We all look forward to the day when even more of our troops come home. And the VFW understands that the only way to bring them home is with victory. (Applause.)

To ensure that we have the capabilities to prevail in Iraq and Afghanistan, or wherever the terrorists make their stand, we've transformed the United States military. Our branches of the military are working together better than ever. We've more than doubled funding for our Special Operations Command so our forces can hunt the terrorists no matter where they hide. We've increased the number of unmanned aerial vehicles in our arsenal. We're moving American forces from Cold War garrisons in Europe and Asia so they can deploy rapidly anywhere in the world. We're going to increase the size of our ground forces. We'll make our troops more lethal and more agile so they can remain on the offense against the enemy. America's future leaders must remember that the war on terror will be won on the offense -- and that's where our military must stay. (Applause.)

We're keeping the pressure on the enemy. As we've done so, we've defended this homeland. Nearly seven years have passed without another attack on our soil. This is not for the lack of trying by the terrorists. Our intelligence and law enforcement professionals have worked with our allies to stop major al Qaeda attacks, including a plot to blow up transatlantic flights from London, and a plan to strike the tallest skyscraper in Los Angeles. We owe these fine professionals our thanks. And we owe them something more -- the tools necessary to be able to do their job.

Since 9/11, we've given American defenders what they need. We formed a new Department of Homeland Security. We overhauled the nation's intelligence community. We shifted the FBI's focus