Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak about the urgent need for the

United States to begin direct talks

with Iran about its nuclear program. Time is of the essence. The United

Nations reported last week that Iran has more enriched uranium than the

world knew and is now capable of building an atomic bomb if it continues

with its enrichment program. Iran also

recently put a satellite into orbit

showing that it has the ballistic missile capacity to deliver a nuclear weapon against an enemy.

The Iranians insist that their nuclear

program is for peaceful domestic purposes only, but their nuclear program

has raised fears in the Middle East and

made that region an even more unstable and dangerous place.

Mr. Speaker, Iran’s advanced nuclear

program shows that the Bush administration’s policy of refusing to talk was

a dismal failure. It called Iran part of

the ‘‘Axis of Evil.’’ Then for nearly 8

years the Bush administration’s approach consisted of saber-rattling and

threats of war, and look where that’s

gotten us. Absolutely nowhere.

As someone who strongly opposes nuclear proliferation, I urge that we

launch a vigorous diplomatic effort

aimed at getting Iran to behave more

responsibly. We must begin that effort

immediately before their nuclear program gets even more advanced. In the

days ahead, we can look for every possible opening to begin face-to-face talks.

This diplomatic effort must include a

strong partnership with the international community. The U.N. Security Council,

for example, has demanded that Iran suspend its uranium

enrichment program. So we must work

with the members of the Council to put

peaceful pressure on Iran to do just that.

I think that President Obama described the situation best last August

when he said, ‘‘My job as President

would be to try to make sure that we

are tightening the screws diplomatically on Iran and that we have mobilized

the world community to go after

their program in a very serious way.’’

So, Mr. Speaker, the President followed up on that, as we know, on his

first day in office. In an interview with

an Arabic language television station,

he said, ‘‘If countries like Iran are willing to unclench their fist, they will

find an extended hand from us.’’ This

received a positive response from

President Ahmadinejad, who said that

Iran was ready for ‘‘talks based on mutual respect.’’ Who knows what he really meant, but I think we should take

him up on this, call his bluff. Let’s test

him to see if he was serious. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has

said, ‘‘We won’t know what we’re capable of achieving with Iran until we’re

actually there working on it.’’

Mr. Speaker, Iran is currently suffering from tough economic times,

high inflation and international isolation. It is also threatening its people

miserably. We could take advantage of

Iran’s problems by offering incentives

and help with their problems if they

agree to pull the plug on their nuclear ambitions.

During the past administration, there was a great deal of talk about

bombing Iran’s nuclear facilities, but

we all know that would have led us

into another disastrous war in the Middle East, and thank heavens we did not

do that. But refusing to engage with

Iran hasn’t worked so far. It’s time for

a new policy that stresses international cooperation, conflict resolution, and humanitarian assistance.

With President Obama’s leadership

and willingness to talk and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s abilities, we

can push the restart button, the restart

button on our relations with Iran. We must now seize every single opportunity

to do so because it appears time might be running out.