Mr. Speaker, before I begin I would like to

just have a moment of silence for the fallen students of Virginia Tech

and our colleagues, who were with them today, the people of Virginia,

and the people of the United States of America.

Thank you.

As I begin this 5 minutes, I believe it will be the challenge of this

body to find a way to confront the issue of violence through physical

acts and violence through words. Many of us will propose new gun

legislation, some of us will look to outreach, but we will also seek

understanding. That understanding I think leads me to join with the

Chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus as I acknowledge the

outstanding women of the Rutgers University basketball team, to thank

them for their dignity, their diplomacy, and their excellence; and to

speak, just a very short brief word, of my agreement with the final

action on Imus and his unfortunate and destructive words.

Many of the first amendment advocates, of which I happen to be one,

are up in arms. Many have said the punishment was too harsh. But I use

the age-old teaching tool for those of us in constitutional law classes

around the Nation. And though the first amendment is pure, the right to

association, the freedom of religion is pure, but it is qualified by

the Supreme Court that indicates that we cannot call ``fire'' in a

crowded theater. And so it is obvious that unfortunately what Imus did

with these words, these women athletes, these academically excellent

students is that they cried ``fire.'' And fire cannot be allowed to

burn, and the fire had to be extinguished, and Imus and his ugly words

had to be taken off of the public airwaves, wishing him well for

hopefully a reformation and a rebirth so that young people all around

America can, one, not be subjected to the violence of words, and they

cannot be subjected to the brutality, the violence of guns.

Let me move, Mr. Speaker, quickly to an additional cause for my

standing here today. And that is to salute my colleague, Congresswoman

Lynn Woolsey, who tonight will give her 200th statement in opposition

to the war in Iraq. I join her today, sadly, because again young

people, valiant, patriotic young people are on the front lines of Iraq.

They have not protested, they have not said, I will not go, but they

look to their leadership, policymakers to have the courage of

conviction.

My friend from Texas is right, this is an unending and unsuccessful

political action; 3,309 are dead, the violence over the weekend has

been unspeakable. The cleric, al-Sadr, has taken out his ministers from

the government. That means the coalition government is on the brink of

collapse. Why? Because the prime minister is stubborn and will not sit

down with his cabinet and parliament and ask in a respectful and

collaborative way for the United States to be thanked for its valiant

work of its military and asked that we stand down so that Iraq can

stand up.

What a tragedy: ego over commonsense. What a tragedy: the continued

loss of life over big egos.

And so I say to the administration, we will not give you an unending

mandate to continue the terrible loss of life of our troops, and the

reason we will not do that is because we declare a military success.

I wear on my lapel the flag of the POWs, the celebration and

commemoration of men and women still lost at war, still missing in

action, some now who have come home, soldiers that are lost. There is a

military success, a legislative initiative of H.R. 930 that I have

declaring a military success, the discovery of no weapons of mass

destruction, disposing of Saddam Hussein, and many other valiant

efforts of our military. And then we must now move to diplomacy.

It is time now to recognize lives and patriotism rise stronger than

egos and bluster and the sadness of the debacle in Iraq.

Mr. Speaker, as a proud member of the Progressive and the Out of Iraq

Caucuses, I rise to speak about the current situation regarding the

Iraq War. But before I do, let me express my condolences to the

families and friends and neighbors and loved ones who suffered such

horrific losses yesterday. I speak of Virginia Tech University, one of

the Nation's great land grant colleges, where we witnessed the most

senseless acts of violence on a scale unprecedented in our history.

Neither the mind nor the heart can contemplate a cause that could

lead a human being to inflict such injury and destruction on fellow

human beings. The loss of life and innocence at Virginia Tech is a

tragedy over which all Americans mourn and the thoughts and prayers of

people of goodwill everywhere go out to the victims and their families.

In the face of such overwhelming grief, I hope they can take comfort in

the certain knowledge that unearned suffering is redemptive.

The war in Iraq has also caused a lot of unearned suffering in Iraq

and here at home. This is the same war, Madam Speaker, whose proponents

misrepresented to the Nation would last no more than 6 months and

likely less than 6 weeks. This same war in Iraq, we were led to believe

by the Administration, would cost less than $50 billion and would be

paid out of the ample revenues from Iraq's oil fields. The war in Iraq,

the American people were promised, should have ended years ago with

Americans troops greeted as liberators by jubilant Iraqis throwing rose

petals at their feet.

As I and my colleagues in the Progressive Caucus and the Out of Iraq

Caucus forecast at the time, the starry-eyed, rosy scenarios laid out

by the President, Vice-President, and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld would

come to pass in fantasy land, but not in the cold, hard world of

reality which they refused to live in.

To date, the war in Iraq has lasted longer than America's involvement

in World War II, the greatest conflict in all of human history. But

there is a difference. The Second World War ended in complete and total

victory for the United States and its allies. But then again, in that

conflict America was led by FDR, a great Commander-in-Chief, who had a

plan to win the war and secure the peace, listened to his generals, and

sent troops in sufficient numbers and sufficiently trained and equipped

to do the job.

As a result of the colossal miscalculation in deciding to invade

Iraq, the loss of public trust resulting from the misrepresentation of

the reasons for launching that invasion, and the breath-taking

incompetence in mismanaging the occupation of Iraq, the Armed Forces

and the people of the United States have suffered incalculable damage.

The war in Iraq has claimed the lives of 3,309 brave servicemen and

women (64 in the first 16 days of this month). More than 24,600

Americans have been wounded, many suffering the most horrific injuries.

American taxpayers have paid nearly $400 billion to sustain this

misadventure.

The depth, breadth, and scope of the President's misguided,

mismanaged, and misrepresented war in Iraq is utterly without precedent

in American history. It is a tragedy in a league all its own. But it

was not unforeseeable or unavoidable.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 1591, the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health

and Iraq Accountability Act the House passed last month provides real

benchmarks and consequences if the Iraqi Government fails to live up to

its commitments. First, it requires the President to certify and report

to Congress on July 1, 2007 that real progress is underway on key

benchmarks for the Iraqi government. If the President cannot so

certify, redeployment of U.S. troops must begin immediately and be

completed within 180 days. If the President fails to certify that Iraq

has met the benchmarks on October 1, 2007, a redeployment of U.S.

troops would begin immediately at that time and must be completed

within 180 days. In any case, at the latest, a redeployment of U.S.

troops from Iraq must begin by March 1, 2008, and must be completed by

August 31, 2008.

I have to say, Mr. Speaker, the Iraqi Government is not off to a good

start. The Green Zone surrounding Baghdad remains insecure. Earlier

this week, a suicide bomber managed to penetrate the security perimeter

of the Iraqi Parliament and detonated a bomb that killed at least three

members of the Iraqi parliament and wounded scores of others.

Additionally, the market represented by Senator McCain as an example of

the improved security situation in Iraq was turned into a killing field

within days after Senator McCain's visit.

And yesterday we learned that radical Shiite Muslim cleric Muqtada

al-Sadr has reasserted his political power by yanking his loyalists

from the Cabinet, a move aimed at showing his supporters he retains his

credentials as an opposition leader and which increases the pressure on

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to loosen his embrace of the U.S.

occupation, which many Iraqis blame for violence in the country.

These developments, Mr. Speaker, illustrate the wisdom of requiring

benchmarks the Iraqi Government must meet to justify continued American

blood and treasure in Iraq. Moreover, because those benchmarks are

established pursuant to President Bush's policies, it is passing

strange indeed that he would threaten to veto the bill since it

necessarily means he would be vetoing his own benchmarks for the

performance of the Iraqi government. He would be vetoing his own

readiness standards for U.S. troops. The President demands this

Congress send him an Iraq war bill with ``no strings.'' But the only

``strings'' attached, Mr. Speaker, are the benchmarks and standards

imposed by the President himself.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to the enormous financial cost, the human

cost to the men and women of the United States Armed Forces has also

been high but they have willingly paid it. Operation Iraqi Freedom has

exacerbated the Veterans Administration health care facility

maintenance backlog; placed an undue strain on the delivery of medical

treatment and rehabilitative services for current and new veterans; and

exacted a heavy toll on the equipment, training and readiness

requirements, and the families of the men and women of the United

States Armed Forces.

The emergency supplemental acknowledged the sacrifices made by, and

the debt of gratitude, we and the Iraqi people owe to Armed Forces of

the United States. But more than that, it makes a substantial down

payment on that debt by providing substantial increases in funding for

our troops.

The supplemental includes a total appropriation of $2.8 billion for

Defense Health Care, which is $1.7 billion above the President's

request. The additional funding supports new initiatives to enhance

medical services for active duty forces and mobilized personnel, and

their family members. Included in this new funding is $450 million for

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder/Counseling; $450 million for Traumatic

Brain Injury care and research; $730 million to prevent health care fee

increases for our troops; $20 million to address the problems at Walter

Reed; and $14.8 million for burn care.

Unlike the Republican leadership of the 109th Congress and the Bush

Administration, the new Democratic majority is committed to America's

veterans. What's more, we back up that commitment by investing in their

well-being. For example, the supplemental bill we passed included $1.7

billion above the President's request for initiatives to address the

health care needs of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and the backlog in

maintaining VA health care facilities, including $550 million to

address the backlog in maintaining VA health care facilities so as to

prevent the VA from experiencing a situation similar to that found at

Walter Reed Medical Center.

We provided an additional $250 million for administration to ensure

there are sufficient personnel to support the growing number of Iraq

and Afghanistan veterans and to maintain a high level of services for

all veterans; $229 million for treating the growing number of Iraq and

Afghanistan veterans; $100 million for contract mental health care,

which will allow the VA to contract with private mental health care

providers to ensure that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are seen in the

most timely and least disruptive fashion, including members of

the Guard and Reserve; and $62 million to speed up the processing of

claims of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mr. Speaker, when American troops are sent into harm's way, America

has an obligation to do all it can to minimize the risk of harm to the

troops. That is why it was so important that we included additional

funding above the President's request to support our troops. We

provided $2.5 billion more to address the current readiness crisis of

our stateside troops, including ensuring that they are better equipped

and trained. We included $1.4 billion more for military housing

allowances and $311 million more for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected

(MRAP) vehicles for troops in Iraq. And there is included in the

supplemental $222 million more for infrared countermeasures for Air

Force aircraft to address the growing threat against U.S. air

operations in Iraq and Afghanistan

Equally important, Mr. Speaker, the supplemental contains language

directing the President to adhere to current military guidelines for

unit readiness, deployments, and time between deployments.

In the supplemental we passed, the Defense Department is required to

abide by its current Unit Readiness policy, requiring the chief of the

military department concerned to determine that a unit is ``fully

mission capable'' before it is deployed to Iraq. The President may

waive this provision by submitting a report to Congress detailing why

the unit's deployment is in the interests of national security despite

the assessment that the unit is not fully mission capable.

The Defense Department is also required to abide by its current

policy and avoid extending the deployment of units in Iraq in excess of

365 days for the Army and 210 days for the Marines. The provision may

be waived by the President only by submitting a report to Congress

detailing the particular reason or reasons why the unit's extended

deployment is in the interests of national security.

Mr. Speaker, to reduce the incidence of combat fatigue and enhance

readiness, it is important that our troops have sufficient ``time out

of the combat zone and training between deployments. That is why we

require the Defense Department to abide by its current policy and avoid

sending units back into Iraq before troops get the required time away

from the war theater. The President may waive this provision by

submitting a report to Congress detailing why the unit's early

redeployment to Iraq is in the interests of national security.

Mr. Speaker, the American people spoke loudly and clearly last

November when they tossed out the Rubber-Stamp Republican Congress.

They voted for a New Direction in Iraq and for change in America. They

voted to disentangle American troops from the carnage, chaos, and civil

war in Iraq. They voted for accountability and oversight, which we

Democrats have begun to deliver on; already the new majority has held

more than 100 congressional hearings related to the Iraq War,

investigating everything from the rampant waste, fraud, and abuse of

Iraq reconstruction funding to troop readiness to the Iraq Study Group

Report to the shameful mistreatment of wounded soldiers recuperating at

Walter Reed Medical Center.

And we will not stop, Mr. Speaker, until we are clearly on a glide

path to the day when our troops come home and where we can ``care for

him who has borne the battle, and for his widow and orphan.'' And even

then our work will not be done. For we must still be about the business

of repairing the damage to America's international reputation and

prestige. But this Democratic majority, led by the Progressive Caucus

and the Out of Iraq Caucus, has ushered in a new era of oversight,

accountability, and transparency to defense and reconstruction

contracting and procurement.