Mr. Speaker, with mounting sectarian tensions and unabated

insurgent violence, I rise today to discuss the deeply troubling

situation in Iraq and its implications for the national interests of

the United States.

Sometimes it is harder to know how to end a war than to start one.

Just as it is important to think through the ``why'' of committing

troops to a conflict, we must also think through the ``why'' of ending

an engagement. Timing is a key element of both considerations.

Perspective is always difficult to bring to bear on events of the

day. Developments of this week, however, could provide Washington with

a seminal opportunity to stimulate a rethinking about the philosophical

basis for a war that we initiated, with the goal of assessing how a

great power can and should disengage.

Many people have noted analogies between America's involvement in

Vietnam and the U.S. intervention in Iraq. My sense is that a number of

these analogies are quite frail. But the one I am most concerned about

relates to America's extraordinary difficulty in disengaging from

Vietnam.

A key problem for Washington in trying to wind down its commitment in

Vietnam was how to develop a mutual accommodation with the other side

that would lessen the prideful pitfalls that often occur when political

figures are forced to reassess policies. In the end it was the Paris

Peace Accord which facilitated the withdrawal of American troops.

A negotiating avenue in a third-country capital does not appear to

lend itself to a resolution of the Iraqi situation at this time.

Nonetheless, I find it remarkable that in an autobiographical tome

Henry Kissinger wrote that in December 1968, shortly after Richard

Nixon had asked him to be his National Security Council Director, he

met with the President-elect to discuss the direction of the new

administration's foreign policy. They determined together, he noted,

that their policy would be to get out of Vietnam.

After reading this passage I asked him years later at a Library of

Congress symposium why they did not just proceed to do that. Kissinger

looked at me for a moment and then uttered words I will never forget.

he said,

I then asked him if honor required escalation. he

responded.

In the Iraq circumstance, the executive branch has provided three

broad rationales for American intervention. First, it hinted that there

was an Iraqi connection to the attacks on 9/11. Then

it suggested that America and the world faced an imminent threat from

Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. When these two justifications for

the U.S.-led invasion turned out to be without foundation, the

administration fell back on the goal of spreading democracy in Iraq and

the broader Middle East as the basis for ongoing U.S. engagement.

From an American perspective, the case for extending the reach of

democracy abroad always has a ring of validity, although many have

concluded that imposing democracy from the outside is not a proven or

necessarily compelling art form. Intriguingly, however, it would appear

that today in Iraq democracy building provides a credible rationale for

American disengagement even though it was a secondary and possibly

flawed basis for original intervention.

In the aftermath of elections held 3 months ago, the Iraqis have

finally formed a government which will have under its jurisdiction,

although perhaps not complete control, a newly formed Army and a

fledgling police apparatus. Based on three elements, credible national

elections, a new government and a new infrastructure of security, the

U.S. is positioned to begin and, almost as consequently, to announce a

steady process of disengagement.

In the middle of the Vietnam War, Senator Aiken proposed that we

simply declare victory and get out. This may have been good politics

then, but there is no basis for suggesting victory was at hand.

Ironically, the formation of a new government today may provide the

most promising claim of some success in Iraq. Not to take advantage of

the circumstance could be a lost opportunity. This may indeed be the

last timely movement for decisive decisionmaking.

Lyndon Johnson knew his Vietnam policy was failing, but he chose to

pass it on to a successor who proceeded to escalate an already

escalated conflict. To the degree there is relevance to Presidential

precedent, it would seem far wiser for this administration to set the

conditions and proceed with withdrawal rather than leave such a

decision to a future President.

The reason a democracy-based framework for disengagement needs to be

articulated is that it allows the United States to set forth a basis

for ending the occupation that is on our terms and on our timetable. If

we don't develop and announce a plan and a rationale for disengagement,

we could at some point find ourselves withdrawing with the other side

claiming it forced us out through destructive anarchy, i.e., insurgent

attacks and suicide bombings, or through the insistence of the elected

government in Baghdad.

Democracy implies consent of the governed and when a large percentage

of the Iraqi people want us to leave, as opinion polls indicate is the

case today, the U.S. should be hard-pressed to follow the original neo-

con strategy of establishing and maintaining a semi-permanent military

base in the country.

Here a note about the Crusades is relevant. While Americans use the

word loosely and conjure up quaint cartoon images King Arthur and his

knights, citizens of the Muslim world consider the Crusades living

history, and it is no accident that Osama bin Laden refers to us as

crusaders. For al Qaeda, the pushing out of U.S. forces would be an

extension of the Crusades, an act of multi-century consequences. That

is why it is so important to apply reason and public reasoning to the

disengagement process.

This war has precipitated a great loss of confidence in and respect

for the United States around the world. Quite possibly Iraq will be a

better country because of America's intervention. But if we hang around

too long, the Iraqi government and our government may suffer

consequences even more negative than has so far been evidenced. Indeed,

with each passing day of occupation, it appears our presence is

increasingly inspiring more instability than stability.

It is true that precipitous withdrawal might be counterproductive and

that precise timetables have disadvantages. But it is difficult for me

to believe anything other than the declaration of a credible plan and

reason for disengagement, coupled with a steady drawdown policy, is the

wisest course of action today.

In a novel development, Congress has required the establishment of an

``Iraq Study Group,'' under the aegis of the U.S. Institute for Peace,

to be chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former

Representative Lee Hamilton. At the risk of presumption, I would hope

the perspective outlined above will be one of the approaches it and the

Administration review. There are risks in too abrupt a departure; but a

prolonged occupation leads too easily to the kind of retributive

civilization clash that misserves America as well as peoples of the

region.