Ms. DeLAURO. Mr. Speaker, 1 month ago the American people stopped to

remember the third anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq war. We

thought first and foremost of the selflessness, patriotism and heroism

by our troops, our National Guard and Reserves.

We also remembered those who have been wounded in battle, and who

need our support more than ever. And we never forget those whose

service meant giving their lives for their country.

Americans are united in this remembrance, but so, too, Mr. Speaker,

do Americans understand that we need a new direction in Iraq, that

Congress must take up its responsibility and demand that our policy be

based on honest assessments from our own military.

For too long the U.S. military's leadership has been ignored and

stifled by a White House motivated by its own political and ideological

agenda. Indeed, when General Eric Shinseki told Congress in 2002 that

we would need almost 400,000 troops to ensure a short and peaceful

occupation, administration officials said he was wildly off the mark

and quickly forced him into retirement.

Earlier this year, when General Casey conceded that U.S. forces were

stretched, the Pentagon rushed to issue a clarifying statement. And

when six former generals who worked closely with Secretary Rumsfeld

called for his resignation, the President wasted no time reiterating

his unyielding support for Mr. Rumsfeld.

Mr. Speaker, I wish I had confidence that this White House and

Secretary of Defense could look beyond their ideological agenda to do

what is right for our national security and our troops, but I do not,

which is why I believe the responsibility to take the lead on Iraq now

falls to the Congress.

Yes, Congress was delinquent for too long in its oversight

responsibilities in the prosecution of the war, writing blank checks to

the administration with no requirements for progress or accountability

to the taxpayers, but in declaring that 2006 should be a year of

transition in this year's defense appropriation bill, and in finally

requiring regular status reports from the administration, Congress at

last showed that it might be serious about handing over the security of

Iraq to the Iraqi people.

Unfortunately, 4 months into 2006, as insurgent violence occurs

daily, that process has still not begun, with no regular hearings,

calls for accountability or investigations. The result is that American

troops find themselves increasingly in the crossfire of warring

religious groups. Just last weekend eight more U.S. troops lost their

lives. And the President now says our troops will be in the middle of

this Iraqi civil war at least until 2009.

Mr. Speaker, as we go into the fourth year, it is well past time for

a firm plan to redeploy our troops. This is consistent with the views

of our troops, nearly three-quarters of whom say 2006 is the year to

succeed or reassess. It is the view of the top U.S. commander in Iraq,

General George Casey, who told Congress, our troops are

So the starting point for new policy is to be serious about making

2006 a year of transition, and signaling to all of the parties in Iraq

and the region that they must take responsibility.

We must hear the advice of our own military about how to best reduce

troop levels without fear of reprisal from the administration. We must

have a timetable for a phased reduction of our troops, ensuring a

minimal presence within 12 months, with most redeployed by the end of

2006. We must expand the training of Iraqi military and police units,

and demand that they be linked to a reduction in American forces.

We must establish a contract, as we did in Bosnia, requiring the key

powers in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Jordan, to be more

actively involved in security and reconstruction. Iraq's neighbors must

understand that they have a stake in its success.

We should redeploy our National Guard to help with homeland security

efforts. In coping with disaster, bird flu or another terrorist attack,

our National Guard must be prepared. But a third of Louisiana's Guard

was in Iraq during Katrina, slowing relief efforts with deadly

consequences. And over 500 of my State's National Guard troops are

deployed in Afghanistan, because the regular Army remains in Iraq in

such large numbers.

And with respect to Afghanistan, where the Taliban is resurgent since

U.S. troops were diverted to Iraq, we should refocus our efforts there

and resume our work to stabilize a country that has provided the base

for global terrorism.

Taken together, this new policy will produce a minimal but flexible

U.S. troop presence in Iraq within a year. That is how we best maintain

a strong military, while making America more secure. Our troops deserve

a Congress that takes its oversight responsibilities seriously, not one

that acts as a rubber stamp for a White House who is clearly off track.

Our troops are bearing the burden of our indecision. We owe them a

full and open debate and a new direction. It is not a matter of

partisanship, but a matter of patriotism of our country's stewardship

and security.