Mr. Speaker, I will vote for this Defense

Supplemental conference report.

Earlier, when the House considered the Defense Supplemental bill

itself, I voted for it to ensure that America's soldiers get the

equipment and resources they need and the top-quality health care they

may require when they come home.

And I think the conference report is an improvement on that House

bill.

As I said when the House debated the initial bill and again during

debate on the motion to instruct conferees, I did not believe it was a

good idea for the bill to include a date certain for withdrawing U.S.

combat troops from Iraq. So I'm glad that language has been made more

flexible in the conference report. It includes a goal of March 2008 for

completing the redeployment of U.S. combat troops, and allows

sufficient troops to remain to protect U.S. military and civilians in

Iraq, conduct counterterrorism operations, and train Iraqi Security

Forces. I remain convinced that we should steer clear of arbitrary

public deadlines for military actions and focus instead on realistic

diplomatic and political goals. Our military needs flexibility to be

able to link movements of U.S. troops to the realities of the situation

on the ground, and successful diplomacy requires such flexibility as

well.

My vote for the conference report is not a vote to support the Bush

administration's policy in Iraq. We are 4 years into a war the Bush

administration assured us would be short and decisive. The

administration's misjudgments, lack of planning and poor leadership

have made a bad situation worse--and the tactic of increasing troops

for a temporary ``surge'' is no substitute for what is needed, namely,

a strategy for containing civil war and a wider regional war.

But whatever may be said about the wisdom of invading Iraq 4 years

ago--and I am one who believed it was a mistake to do so--the fact is

that we are still deeply engaged in Iraq. So long as our troops are in

the field, we must provide them what they need. Beyond supplying our

soldiers, however, we must extricate them from what objective defense

experts have characterized as an emerging civil war.

Disengaging from that civil war is the purpose of the provisions in

the conference report designed to hold the president accountable to the

benchmarks set by his own administration and the Iraqi Government--

including enactment of a hydro-carbon law; conducting of provincial and

local elections; reform of current laws governing the de-Baathification

process; amendment of the Constitution of Iraq; and allocation of Iraqi

revenues for reconstruction projects.

I strongly support that approach because I am convinced that holding

the president and the Iraqi Government accountable for achieving these

benchmarks will provide us with the leverage necessary to pressure the

Iraqi Government to forge the political solution we all know is

required. In fact, Defense Secretary Gates has acknowledged that this

provision in the House-passed bill has been helpful by showing the

Iraqis that American patience is limited.

This conference report is an important step toward what I think must

be our goal--a responsible end to the war in Iraq, based on a strategy

of phased withdrawal of troops, accelerated diplomacy and redeployment

that is based on Iraqi stability and not arbitrary deadlines.

The conference report fully funds our troops, providing $4 billion

more for the troops than the president requested. It honors our veterans, providing $1.8 billion

more for our veterans' unmet health care needs, including additional

funds for treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic

Brain Injury care and research. It strengthens our military, providing

$2 billion more to create a Strategic Readiness Reserve and address the

serious readiness crisis our military is facing.

It also protects our troops by limiting deployment schedules and

setting minimum readiness standards--based on current Defense

Department standards--for U.S. troops deploying to the region. The

president could waive these requirements but only by certifying in

writing to Congress that waiving them would be in the interest of

national security.

The conference report also provides $52.5 billion for military

operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and provides $9.7 billion for the

Afghan and Iraqi Security Forces to help them assume greater

responsibility for their nations' security.

And the conference report includes $3.1 billion to fully fund the

Pentagon's FY07 request for the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure

Commission's recommendations, which is vitally important for Ft. Carson

as it prepares to expand and for other military installations in

Colorado.

On the non-military side, the conference report includes critically

important funding for farmers and ranchers in southeastern Colorado who

were recently hit hard by winter storms. Thousands of cattle were

killed in storms worse than the October 1997 storm that killed

approximately 30,000 cattle and cost farmers and ranchers an estimated

$28 million. The struggles that family agriculture producers and small

counties face are significant and are having a negative impact on the

livelihood of hundreds of farmers and ranchers and their communities.

So I am pleased that the Colorado delegation was successful in

persuading the conferees to include financial assistance for farmers

and ranchers, including for those affected by Colorado's recent

blizzards.

Mr. Speaker, many of us who voted against authorizing the President

to rush to war in Iraq were worried that while it would be easy to

eliminate the Saddam Hussein regime, the aftermath would be neither

easy nor quick. Sadly, our fears have proven to be justified. And now,

as the Pentagon has finally admitted in its most recent quarterly

report, the situation in Iraq is ``properly descriptive of a civil

war.''

Insisting on keeping our troops in the middle of that kind of

internecine war is not a recipe for victory; it is only a prescription

for quagmire. And as a new Foreign Relations Council report notes, we

bear responsibility for developments within Iraq, but are increasingly

without the ability to shape those developments in a positive

direction.

We need to be scaling back our military mission in Iraq. We need to

make the U.S. military footprint lighter--not in order to hasten defeat

or failure in Iraq, but to salvage a critical measure of security and

stability in a region of the world that we can ill afford to abandon.

But as we do so, we must work to avoid a collapse in the region--not

only because we have a moral obligation to the people of Iraq, but also

because our national security has been so badly compromised by the Bush

administration's failures there. The President's decision to take the

nation to war has made our country less safe. We need to change course

and chart a path that enhances our national security and sets the right

priorities for the war on terrorism and struggle against extremists.

This conference report begins to chart this path, and I will support

it. I hope the president will reconsider his stated intention of

vetoing it.