Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the conference

report on H.R. 1591, the Supporting Our Troops and Veterans' Health

Care Act.

This legislation will support our troops and veterans, hold the Bush

Administration and Iraqi government accountable and begin withdrawing

our troops from Iraq by October 2007 or sooner. It will also provide

emergency funding for critical programs that have suffered from years

of neglect.

This supplemental appropriations bill provides emergency funding for

critical programs that have long been underfunded by the Republicans.

It includes $650 million to correct the funding shortfall in the State

Children's Health Insurance program so that hundreds of thousands of

children will not lose their health care. It provides $6.9 billion for

Gulf Coast hurricane relief and recovery. The bill also adds $400

million to LIHEAP (Low Income Heating Assistance), as well as providing

$1.8 billion to remedy the unconscionable state of our military and

veterans' health care systems. All of these issues are emergencies in

their own right and rise to the level of inclusion in this emergency

supplemental spending bill.

The U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability

Act requires the Iraqi government to meet the security, political and

economic benchmarks established by the President in his address of

January 10th, including improvements in the performance of the Iraqi

security forces, a greater commitment by the Iraqi government to

national reconciliation, and reductions in the levels of sectarian

violence in Iraq.

In the bill, the President must determine that substantial progress

is being made on security, political, and reconstruction benchmarks by

July 2007. If the President cannot certify progress, redeployment must

start by July with a goal of being completed within 180 days. If the

President can certify progress by July 2007, redeployment must begin by

October 1, with goal of completion within 180 days.

The bill ensures that our troops have the tools and resources they

need to do the job they have been asked to do. It prohibits the

deployment of troops who are not full trained, equipped and protected

according to current Department of Defense standards. The President can

only deploy unprepared troops if he certifies, in writing, to Congress,

that deploying those troops is in the national interest. He must make

similar certifications to lengthen troop deployments beyond DoD

standards or to send troops back into battle who have not had enough

time between deployments. The bill also provides funding so the

Veterans Administration can meet the obligations of a new generation of veterans, particularly by ensuring that they will have

the medical care they need.

I have been an outspoken opponent of military action against Iraq

since the day the administration started beating the war drums. My

preference would have been to vote for a stronger bill with a binding

date certain for ending the war. I would have preferred not to include

waivers to allow the President to send less than fully equipped and

rested troops into battle. I have additional concerns about the section

of the bill that allows an unspecified number of U.S. troops to remain

in Iraq after the March 2008 deadline to train Iraqis and fight

terrorism.

However, I support this legislation in spite of these deficiencies

because I believe it is an affirmative step towards our ultimate goal

of ending the war. This bill is not everything that I would have liked,

but it represents a critical turning point. No longer will this body

uncritically hand over billions of dollars for the President to wage an

endless war. Congress has a Constitutional responsibility to provide

accountability--a responsibility that was shirked for the first 6 years

of the Bush presidency while Republicans controlled Congress. Today, we

have followed through on that critical duty. We will send a bill to the

President that would definitively change our course in Iraq. Mr. Bush

should make the right decision and support our plan for change that is

overwhelmingly endorsed by the American people. If he follows through

on his veto threat, he will be the one who has failed to provide our

troops and our veterans with the resources they need. He will be the

one who has rejected his own benchmarks to measure success in Iraq. He

will be the one responsible for the ongoing loss of American life in

Iraq.

The President and most Congressional Republicans ask that we continue

to fund this war with ``no strings attached.'' But the United States

cannot afford an open-ended commitment to a war without end. It is the

responsibility of this Congress to devise a means to end the U.S.

combat role in Iraq so that we can reclaim our position of leadership

in the world and direct our resources back towards urgent needs here at

home. I believe that this bill moves us towards these goals in an

effective and responsible way.