Mr. Speaker, I rise today to offer my support

for H. Res. 612, which expresses the commitment of the House to

achieving victory in Iraq.

The situation in Iraq has been the subject of much debate recently,

and on the occasion of the successful Iraqi election yesterday, I think

this resolution is both timely and appropriate.

We all agree that the U.S. faces a difficult task in the coming days

and months ahead in Iraq. We must maintain enough of a presence to

allow the newly elected government to survive, but not so much as to

undermine its legitimacy. Thus, the plan is to turn over control on an

aggressive schedule, as soon as Iraqi forces are able to handle the

jobs themselves.

The objective is to create a democratic government that is able to

manage its own affairs and keep the civilian population safe. This

entails a gradual turnover of responsibility to Iraqi troops and an

incremental redeployment of American forces. The schedule of

withdrawals must be based solely on the Iraqis' ability to handle the

job, not an arbitrary timetable. Furthermore, the message from elected

leaders must be that troop withdrawals are part of a plan, not due to

the fact that we are tired of being there.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, there have been many successes in Iraq

notwithstanding the violent insurgency that seeks to thwart democratic

change. There has been economic progress in every sector of Iraq, and,

as we have all witnessed there has been significant political progress

as well. Yesterday, approximately eleven million of the fifteen million

eligible Iraqi voters participated in their national elections. This

represents over 70 percent voter turnout--even larger than the 10

million who participated in the referendum on the new constitution in

October, and the eight million who voted for their interim government

last January. We can view this as yet another positive sign that the

disparate ethnic and religious sects have opted to engage in the

political process rather than civil war.

In fact, 82 percent of Iraqis polled believe their lives will be

better in a year, and there is reason to share their optimism. However,

there is also the need to have realistic expectations. Although they

are making progress, Iraqi troops are not yet self-sufficient.

Iraqi forces do control and police more than one-third of Baghdad. In

addition, Iraqi forces also secure Fallujah, Mosul, and Tal Afar, and

most of the Syrian border.

American military commanders estimate that approximately 100,000

members of the Iraq military are able to work independently on

operational matters with logistical support from U.S. troops. They

expect this number to double in the next year. Thus, it is quite

possible that a significant number of American forces will be able to

leave the country in the coming year. However, it is also likely that

we must maintain a sizeable American presence in the region for years

to come.

Our efforts in Iraq must also be viewed from a broader Middle Eastern

perspective. Other countries in the area have taken steps toward

openness and democracy. Lebanon recently elected a new Prime Minister

and forced Syria to end its long occupation. Afghanistan elected a

president; the Palestinians new leadership; and Kuwaiti women won

suffrage. The politics of this region have been characterized by

autocracy and repression for millennia; thus, even these steps can be

viewed as revolutionary. These countries' experiences also provide a

cautionary tale that change does not come easily. Witness the continued

assassinations of political figures and members of the press in

Lebanon. Also witness the Egyptian elections, which began with promise

but have devolved into disgrace. There are many groups in that part of

the world who have a profound interest in the status quo and will do

anything to maintain it. In Iraq, these include Saddam loyalists and

Islamic radicals, all of whom have different but universally

unappealing visions for the region.

The progress in Iraq to date would have been impossible without an

American military presence. If our troops were to pull out immediately,

violence would not decrease and the economy would not blossom. Rather,

the government would collapse and Iraq would devolve into chaos.

Instability would spread throughout the region, threatening our allies

in the area, such as Jordan's King Abdullah. Iraq itself would become a

haven for international terrorism, as Afghanistan once was, and Iran,

whose government is hostile to our interests, would gain an exponential

increase in regional influence. America's credibility would suffer a

crippling blow, resulting in any number of unfavorable geopolitical

consequences.

The Soviet Union and communism in Europe ended largely due to the

policy of glasnost, or increased openness. Openness and democracy could

well be the demise of the current predominant global threat, radical

Islam. Thus, we have a great deal at stake in Iraq, and we must

persevere until we are successful. The alternative is unacceptable.

I am extremely proud of our brave men and women in uniform and the

sacrifices they and their families have made during Operation Iraqi

Freedom. I understand the sentiments of those constituents who want

American troops to leave Iraq because they want us to stop taking

casualties. Words cannot describe the pain I feel when I see reports

that more troops have been wounded or killed. However, if our troops

leave Iraq prematurely, there will be no chance for stability in the

Middle East; no way to check the advance of Iran or Syria; and a far

greater likelihood that more Americans will suffer at the hands of

emboldened terrorists.

In closing, let me express my sincere congratulations to the Iraqi

people on the occasion of their successful national elections. My

thoughts and prayers remain with our men and women in uniform, as they

continue to work to bring freedom to the Iraqi people and safety and

security to all of us here at home.