Mr. Speaker, recent newspaper articles, television

news reports, debates on the floor of the U.S. House and Senate, and

even dinner time conversations this holiday season have been dominated

by discussions about the war against terrorism in Iraq.

Two and a half years removed from the beginning of this war, the

stakes for victory remain high. It is important for all Americans,

whether they support the war or not, to understand the implications of

why we went there; what we are there to achieve; and what the

consequences would be if we agreed to an artificial timetable to

withdraw our troops. Because we continue to face both great

difficulties and great opportunities in Iraq, it is even more important

that all Americans absolutely recognize what the future of Iraq means

to our security here at home and the future of the Middle East!

My current reading of the Iraq debate is that some war critics, who

originally supported the war, have lately been trying to revise or

rewrite the history of how Iraq became the central front in the war on

terrorism. Some of this is genuine, principled opposition to war. Some

of it is personal animosity toward the President. Whatever the reason,

we need to separate the two. As some have said, ``hate the war, love

the warfighter.''

To understand why we are there we do not have to look much further

than what some critics said before the war and what they are saying

now.

In 1998, House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi said ``Saddam Hussein

has been engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction

technology.'' Seven years later, she says Saddam's weapons were ``not

an imminent threat to the United States or a cause for war.''

In 2002, Senator Hillary Clinton said Saddam ``has also given aid,

comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists.'' Now she claims there were

``false assurances, faulty evidence'' for war, but still hesitates to

embrace calls for immediate withdrawal.

Even former President Bill Clinton said in 1998 that Saddam's

``ability to produce and deliver weapons of mass destruction poses a

grave threat.'' Yet, now he says the war was ``a big mistake,'' but,

like his spouse, warns of the danger of a premature withdrawal.

Unlike what Iraqis endured under the tyranny of Saddam Hussein,

Americans are afforded the right to voice their concerns and state

their opinions just as these elected officials and other citizens have

done. However, it is important we understand the facts before more

judgments and accusations are made.

Saddam Hussein reigned through terror, sponsored terror, and

massacred innocent Iraqis with chemical weapons. He invaded his Kuwaiti

neighbors and violated more than a dozen U.N. resolutions. His armed

forces shot at U.S. and British pilots for the ten years they patrolled

the U.N.-imposed ``No Fly Zones'' as they protected the Iraqi people

from his brutality. And in the words of weapons inspector Dr. David

Kay: Saddam had the ``intent'' and ``capabilities'' to develop weapons

of mass destruction.

I have never regretted voting to give the President the authority to

go to war in Iraq and remove Saddam from power. While I agree with

Senator John McCain that mistakes have been made and some pre-war

intelligence was unintentionally flawed, we cannot overlook positive

developments in Iraq. I am convinced, however, that the progress we

have made could be lost if we prematurely withdraw our troops before

the Iraqi people are fully capable of governing and securing their own

country.

The War on Terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan is the defining

challenge of our generation, whether some ``war opponents'' like it or

not. Osama Bin Laden's deputy Ayman Al-Zawahiri has declared Iraq to be

``the place for the greatest battle,'' where he hopes to ``expel the

Americans'' and then spread ``the jihad wave to the secular countries

neighboring Iraq.'' Such statements reaffirm why withdrawing our troops

according to an artificial political timetable would be detrimental to

the future of Iraq, our own national security, and could actually

embolden those who hate our way of life.

Iraq continues to strengthen its security forces, but not all of

their military battalions are ready to operate independent of coalition

troops. Our troops, and those of our coalition allies, are still needed

in Iraq and we need to stand firm in the face of the terrorists. If we

leave prematurely, jihadists and terrorists will interpret our

withdrawal as total victory and use that opportunity to turn Iraq into

a springboard for future attacks closer to our shores. We know what

these terrorists are capable of. Here in New Jersey, we don't need to

be reminded of 9/11, nor have we forgotten terrorist attacks in Bali,

London, Madrid, Thailand, Bangladesh, Jordan, Israel, and the discovery

of cells in Belgium and a host of countries around the world.

We also have a responsibility to 28 million Iraqis who, after decades

of abuse and torture by Saddam, yearn to be free and deserve a chance

for prosperity and stability. We pledged to guide the Iraqi people

through the difficult steps of constituting a new government,

strengthening the Iraqi Army, and laying the ground work for free

elections. But it would be incredibly dangerous if we allowed threats

from Bin Laden, Zawahiri, or any of the insurgency to influence our

foreign policy and ``break our promise'' to the Iraqi people. Drawing

down our forces in Iraq should be based strictly on the progress being

made by the Iraqi government to fully secure their own country and the

judgment of our military generals on the ground over there.

For our troops to come home safely, our strategy for victory depends

significantly on more Iraqi Security Forces, ISF, being trained,

equipped, and ready to ``lead the fight'' for securing their own

country. American military leaders in Iraq estimate that 210,400 Iraqi

forces are currently fighting to defend Iraq. More than 80 battalions

are fighting alongside coalition troops while nearly 40 others,

including four in Baghdad, are independently policing and controlling

areas of Iraq. Despite that innocent Iraqis continue to be a target of

suicide bombers, more than 50,000 Iraqi police have completed basic

training courses and ISF recruitment remains high. With all due respect

to media reports, most of the insurgency only exists in four of 18

provinces in Iraq, a country the size of California.

Despite continued terrorists attacks, car bombings, beheadings, and

kidnappings, the terrorists have not achieved their goals. In fact,

2005 has been a watershed year for democracy in Iraq. In January, the

world watched as Iraqis defied terrorist threats by going to the polls

and casting their votes for self-determination. Eight million Iraqis

went to the voting booth and took a stand against terror by voting for

an interim National Assembly. In October, almost 10 million

participated in an Iraqi referendum to approve a national constitution

that--for the first time ever--guarantees them basic freedoms, rights

and protections under law, regardless of their gender, religion, or

ethnic origin. And on December 15 even more Iraqis cast their votes for

a permanent, full-time government.

In addition to the political and security strategy in Iraq, we must

also continue to focus on the economic and reconstruction effort. While

at times slow, critical infrastructure in Iraq continues to be restored

and rebuilt to meet the increasing demand and need of the country's

growing economy. The Army Corps of Engineers and many of our soldiers

and Marines, working alongside Iraqis, the USAID and other

international agencies, are helping Iraq build schools, modernize water

and sewage projects, and open new fire and police stations.

Approximately 80,000 children are attending Iraq's 3,400 schools. After

years of neglect, more than 15,000 Iraqi homes have been connected to

the Baghdad water system. And more Iraqi women are receiving better

health care thanks to the construction of a new 260-bed maternity

hospital in Mosul.

These are strong signs of progress in Iraq--none of which would have

been possible without the service, sacrifice, and strong morale of U.S.

and coalition forces. Unfortunately, such stories are not always being

told by the media. Iraqis want to be free, and thanks to the support of

our service men and women, they are taking steps each and every day to

reach their goal.

Mr. Speaker, victory will not be accomplished overnight. On the

contrary, the Iraqis still need our help to meet their political and

security objectives. Our work in Iraq remains dangerous and difficult

but we must meet the challenges of this new kind of war. We must honor

the service and sacrifice of our soldiers by doing whatever it takes to

protect our nation and prevail in Iraq and Afghanistan.