Mr. President, today the Senate approaches a decisive

turning point in the history of our engagement in Iraq, a moment that

will have repercussions not only for the future of that country but for

the security of our country as well.

The immediate question before us is direct. Should Congress impose a

deadline for the withdrawal of our troops from Iraq? To that question I

answer: No, no, no.

We all know the circumstances under which this vote is taking place.

The administration is politically weak. The war is politically

unpopular. It has never been easier to advocate a withdrawal. But I

cannot support it because I believe deeply that it would be wrong. Our

cause in Iraq remains just and necessary, and we continue to have the

prospect of achieving success there.

If passed, this legislation would order a withdrawal of American

troops from Iraq to begin in 120 days, regardless of conditions on the

ground, regardless of whether we are succeeding or failing, regardless

of the consequences for

America's security, regardless of the consequences for our allies in

the region, and regardless of the recommendations of the man we

unanimously put in charge of our troops there--GEN David Petraeus. In

short, this withdrawal would be ordered by this legislation regardless

of reality.

This congressionally ordered withdrawal of our troops from Iraq would

essentially be giving up on our cause in Iraq just when our prospects

are picking up there. It would snatch defeat from the jaws of progress

in Iraq today--progress that is critically important to our success in

the larger war against terrorism.

What then are the arguments given to justify such an arbitrary order

to our troops from this Congress so far away?

First, proponents of withdrawal keep returning to the proposition

that American soldiers shouldn't be policing a civil war. Surely my

colleagues don't mean to say the U.S. military has never or should

never police a civil war. That would certainly come as a surprise to

our soldiers who have been keeping the peace in Bosnia and Kosovo over

the past decade, dispatched there wisely and strongly under a

Democratic President with the support of Democrats in Congress.

Clearly, our military has policed civil wars in the past and will do so

and must do so in the future. So why do proponents of withdrawal from

Iraq keep insisting it shouldn't happen now? The answer has to do with

the way some people choose to characterize what is happening in Iraq.

When they suggest our soldiers are stuck in a civil war there, it

suggests the conflict has become hopeless, a pit of violence where

there are no heroes, only villains, and where our military cannot

possibly do any good. Is this the case? I think the facts suggest not.

There are more heroes by far than villains in Iraq today and, most of

all, there is the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people who are the

innocent victims of violence and want nothing more than to live secure

and free lives.

Iraq has a government--a government freely elected by the people; a

government where every day Iraqis of every ethnicity and sectarian

identity come together. That is not a civil war. The Iraqi Government

has faults and weaknesses, to be sure, and we should be using every

instrument at our disposal to pressure its leaders to make better

choices. But there is a world of difference between the moderates who

compose the Iraqi Government and the extremists who seek to murder

them.

The image of Iraq as a country in which everyone is complicit in the

violence also overlooks something else. It overlooks the innocent

victims of that violence who are the majority. The truth is we are

confronted in Iraq today with a deliberated, calculated campaign of

murder of civilians, often on the basis of religious identity alone, by

insurgents and terrorists.

All of us should be able to unite around the proposition, therefore,

that we as Americans have a moral responsibility not to pick up and

walk away and turn our backs on the slaughter. Like the Serb death

squads that tried to ethnically cleanse Kosovo or Hutu extremists in

Rwanda, or the jingaweit today in Darfur, the sectarian violence we are

witnessing in Iraq is directed at the extermination of human beings on

the basis of nothing more than who they are.

It is an awful irony of this debate that many of the same people who

consistently and correctly call on the United States to do more to stop

the genocide in Darfur now demand we abandon the Iraqis and invite a

genocide there.

I know some believe the violence in Iraq is inevitable, the outgrowth

of ancient hatreds that exist outside the bounds of normal politics. We

heard those arguments before also. We heard them in the 1990s about

Yugoslavia and about Rwanda. Surely, from those conflicts, we should

know better than that now.

The wanton slaughter of innocent people that our soldiers are trying

to stop in Baghdad, and now with some success, is not the inevitable

product of ancient hatreds but the consequence of a deliberate,

calculated strategy by an identifiable group of perpetrators, first and

foremost al-Qaida. We know this because al-Qaida itself has said so.

Its leaders have stated openly that they have worked to foment hatred,

fear, and violence between Sunnis and Shiites, precisely because al-

Qaida knows it represents their best opportunity to overthrow the

elected Iraqi Government, to sow the seeds of chaos, to stamp out any

hope of Middle Eastern democracy, and, sadly, as this debate shows

today, to push the United States of America--the world's superpower,

the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of so many for freedom--to the

point of retreat from Iraq.

This is also why the notion expressed in the supplemental that we can

separate the fight against terrorism from the fight against sectarian

violence in Iraq simply defies reality. The fact is, the worst

sectarian violence in Iraq is being committed by al-Qaida and other

Islamist terrorists.

The biggest cause of the violence in Iraq is not the split between

the Sunnis and Shiites but a specific ideology--the ideology of Islamic

extremism--that is trying to exploit that divide for its own evil ends.

The success of that ideology is not inevitable. Thanks to General

Petraeus, his troops, and the new strategy, sectarian violence is down.

Maqtada al-Sadr has disappeared. The Mahdi army is splintering.

Displaced Iraqi families are returning to their homes.

Of course, we will not know for some time to what extent the new

strategy will succeed, but it is clear that, for the first time in a

long time, there is reason for cautious optimism about Iraq. Why would

we, at this moment, order a withdrawal of the very troops that are

bringing greater security and a cause for optimism?

Mr. President, the record of the past 2 months shows Prime Minister

Maliki has allowed and encouraged U.S. forces to sweep into Sadr City.

He has worked with General Petraeus to ensure that all of the Iraqi

Army units required by the new strategy are available. He has flown to

the heart of Al Anbar Province to meet with Sunni leaders. These

breakthroughs have happened not in spite of but because of the American

commitment to Iraq and because of the presence of General Petraeus and

his troops.

I ask my colleagues to consider what it will mean if Congress now

orders our troops to pull back from this battle, just at the moment

that they are beginning to succeed. Consider the consequences if we

knowingly and willingly withdraw our forces and abandon one of the few

states in the Middle East to have had free, competitive elections as an

alternative to extremism and violence.

I understand the frustration and anger and sheer sense of exhaustion

so many feel about Iraq. I am acutely aware of the enormous toll this

war has taken. But I ask those determined to order a withdrawal to

think carefully about the consequences, and not just geopolitical but

moral, for the United States. We cannot redeploy from our moral

responsibility in Iraq or in our foreign policy, more generally. It is

contrary to our traditions. It is contrary to our values. It is

contrary to our interests. Yet that is precisely what this Congress

will be calling for if we order our troops to withdraw now. That is

precisely what the Congress will be calling for if we order our troops

to withdraw from Iraq now, regardless of what is happening on the

ground.

I appeal to my colleagues, don't do this. Give General Petraeus and

his troops a chance to succeed for us in Iraq. Strike this language

from this bill.

I yield the floor.