Mr. President, we have before us today a supplemental

appropriations bill that will finally start the process of bringing our

troops home.

The United States today is in its fifth year in Iraq. The

administration offers no apparent road out of Iraq. It offers only an

escalation plan that keeps growing, and an open-ended commitment to a

civil war.

The Congress of the United States has an obligation to express its

voice on this matter and to offer a solution.

The search for a solution has been difficult. We have come to the

floor many times this year, and we have struggled to find the right

course of action.

I believe that path is before us today.

This legislation would initiate the orderly drawdown of our forces

and redefine the mission for a small supporting force that would

remain. It sets benchmarks for the administration and for the Iraqi

Government.

This legislation calls for actions which this administration has

stubbornly resisted, including the prompt phased redeployment of U.S.

forces from Iraq. This redeployment would begin within 120 days of the

legislation being enacted.

The legislation sets a goal of March 31, 2008, for redeploying major

combat forces from Iraq. A smaller force would be allowed to remain,

with its mission limited to protecting American and coalition personnel

and infrastructure, training and equipping Iraqi forces, and conducting

targeted counterterrorism operations.

This supplemental also calls for a vigorous ``diplomatic, political,

and economic strategy.''

This strategy would involve ``sustained engagement with Iraq's

neighbors and the international community for the purpose of working

collectively to bring stability to Iraq.''

This is the key to ending the violence in Iraq--the recognition that

the solution to Iraq lies not in U.S. force but in political

accommodation among the Iraqis.

This legislation also sets benchmarks for the Iraqi Government.

These include deploying trained and ready Iraqi security forces in

Baghdad; strengthening the authority of Iraqi commanders to make

tactical and operational decisions without political intervention;

disarming militias and ensuring that Iraqi security forces are

accountable only to the central government and loyal to the Iraqi

Constitution; enacting and implementing legislation to ensure that

Iraq's oil is distributed to all Iraqi citizens in an equitable manner;

enacting and implementing legislation that reforms the de-

Ba'athification process in Iraq; ensuring a fair process for amending

the Iraqi Constitution to protect minority rights; and enacting and

implementing rules to protect the rights of minority political parties

in the Iraqi Parliament.

Finally, this supplemental requires that the top U.S. commander in

Iraq report to Congress on progress by the Iraqi Government in meeting

these benchmarks--30 days after this act is enacted and every 90 days

thereafter.

Our Nation's present course of action is untenable and unsustainable.

Our very purpose for being in Iraq bears little resemblance to the

reasons Congress authorized the use of military force in October 2002.

What do we have as we enter the fifth year of this war? A terrible

human toll in dead and injured--3,200 Americans killed, more than

24,000 wounded, with estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths that soar well

into the six figures and a toll on our Treasury that is unsustainable.

According to the Congressional Research Service, the Iraq war is

already the fourth most expensive war in U.S. history, behind World War

II, Korea and Vietnam. We are spending roughly $8.4 billion in Iraq a

month--more than $2 billion a week. So far we have spent nearly $400

billion in Iraq. Think of the opportunity costs to this Nation. Wars

cost money. I understand this. But we cannot continue this level of

spending on a distant civil war with no exit strategy. If we keep our

combat forces in Iraq for years to come--as this administration seems

intent on doing--it will likely become the second costliest war we have

ever waged.

Our military cannot continue to bear this heavy burden. This war has

eroded our troop readiness, depleted military equipment, and left our

fighting forces weary.

Consider these developments:

Army and Marine officers say the rapid pace of deployments into Iraq

has put the readiness of their troops into a ``death spiral''--with 40

percent of gear worn out and soldiers and marines left fatigued and

undertrained. Our Nation owes our fighting forces better than this.

The 3rd Infantry Division, scrambling to meet deployment orders,

reportedly has sent injured troops back to Iraq--including ones so

badly injured that they could not put on their body armor. We owe our

fighting forces better than this.

The Army's medical facilities are understaffed and underfunded--not

just at Building 18 at Walter Reed--and its medical staff is

overwhelmed. We owe our fighting forces better than this.

Some 1,800 Marine Corps reservists will get letters this week

notifying them that they are being involuntarily recalled for a year,

thanks to a shortage of volunteers to fill some jobs in Iraq.

This follows news that should make everyone in this Chamber take

notice: The 82nd Airborne Division--the storied ``All-American''

Division--is so strained by this war that it can no longer respond on

short notice to a crisis.

For decades, the 82nd Airborne has kept a brigade on round-the-clock

alert--ready to respond to a crisis anywhere around the globe within 18

to 72 hours. But The New York Times reported on March 20 that the 82nd

Airborne can no longer meet this standard--a standard it has long held

with pride.

I believe the supplemental that we have before us today is the

solution to the Iraq problem. It provides a vehicle for Congress to

express its sense on Iraq and to require the President to take

concrete, measurable steps forward. It sets clear deadlines and

requires vigorous regional diplomacy. It sends a message to an

administration marked by arrogance and declares to the Iraqi Government

that their time has come.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, said as much

Monday, March 26, in his farewell news conference.

Mr. Khalilzad was direct: The Iraqi leadership must understand, he

said, that time is running out.

Finally, most importantly, this legislation begins the process of

bringing our troops home.

We have a choice today. We can vote for a clear-headed Iraq policy or

do nothing. We can exercise our constitutional oversight duties or we

can be a rubberstamp for a failed Iraq policy.

I urge my colleagues to choose the first path. To choose the other is

to abdicate our responsibility.