Mr. Speaker, first let me rise to commend

Congressman Keith Ellison and the Progressive Caucus for organizing

Special Orders each and every week. In fact, later this evening there

will be one held to talk about the 6-year anniversary of the war and

occupation of Iraq. So I rise today to talk about this very briefly.

Six years ago, President George W. Bush launched our Nation into one

of the most disastrous, misguided, and dangerous military actions in

our history, the initial invasion and proceeding occupation of Iraq.

Now, as the new administration seeks to withdraw troops from Iraq, it

is essential that the media, the public, and those of us in elected

office support these efforts.

However, this time, no matter how uncomfortable it may be for those

of us who fully support President Obama--who himself opposed the

invasion from the beginning--we must hold our Iraq policy accountable

and demand answers to tough questions regarding how and when our

occupation will end.

Last month, to his credit, and we applaud his efforts, President

Obama laid forth a timeline for the withdrawal of our military presence

in Iraq. His proposal would have two-thirds of our troops home by

August of 2010, with the remaining force of approximately 35,000 to

50,000 scheduled to leave by the end of 2011, almost 3 years from now.

His announcement received praise from both sides of the political

aisle; however, I think that we still need to talk about and have an

honest and frank discussion of its merits and potential faults.

Americans seem, collectively, to try to forget about Iraq, but we

must remember that this is costing us $10 billion a month in this

economic recession. And while we recognize, appreciate, and applaud the

President's decision, his declaration allows us to move forward and

focus on other issues. And so what we are trying to do is make sure

that we are focused on our comprehensive foreign and military policy at

the same time that we are working on our economic and domestic front.

While this reaction, of course, is understandable because people are

suffering each and every day as a result of the last 8 years, it is

also dangerous. We cannot afford to ignore the enormous

risks and potential sacrifices that loom ahead.

As one of the founders of the Out of Iraq Caucus, along with

Congresswoman Maxine Waters and Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, our

position has been clear all along; we opposed the war and the

occupation from the start, and we have worked day in and day out to end

it.

We believe that ending the occupation of Iraq means redeploying all

troops--and we mean all troops--and all military contractors out of

Iraq. It also means leaving no permanent bases, and renouncing any

claim upon Iraqi oil.

We remain concerned about the plan, which calls for 127,000 troops to

stay in Iraq until the end of this year and for 35,000 to 50,000 troops

to remain in Iraq for another 2\1/2\ years after that. We cannot

imagine the need for such an enormous military commitment, and we have

talked to military experts who also question that.

How did the military planners agree on such a large residual for us,

one which is comparable in size to our force levels in South Korea at

the height of the Cold War? What role does this transitional force play

in the event that violence flares back up? And what steps are being

taken to address the 190,000 American contractors in Iraq, and to

dismantle our permanent bases? Some say we don't have permanent bases

there, others believe that we do--I am one who believes that we do. And

so these questions must be addressed before we can move forward. We

respectfully wrote to the President and set forth a set of questions

asking some of the looming concerns which some of us still have.

America's interests in Iraq and the region will best be advanced by

reducing the size of our military footprint and making greater use of

other assets of national power, including diplomacy, reconciliation,

commerce, development assistance, and humanitarian aid.

As we solemnly mark the beginning of a seventh year--and it's hard to

imagine we have been there 7 years--of the conflict in Iraq, we not

only must reflect on the incredible sacrifices made by the men and

women who serve in the military, but also, we have to demand an honest

assessment of the potential future obstacles that their brothers and

sisters in arms will face. As President Obama has said, ``We must be as

careful getting out of Iraq as we were careless getting in.''