Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Missouri for

yielding, and I want to express the appreciation of so many in this

Congress and this country to him for his tremendous leadership. For 30

years, he has been a great champion for our men and women in uniform;

for the quality of their lives and their families as they serve our

country; for their readiness as they prepare to go to war; for their

well-being as they fight for our country; for his appreciation of the

sacrifice that they and their families are willing to make.

Thank you, Mr. Skelton, for being such a great leader, and thank you

for giving us this opportunity today to speak on behalf of the American

people, to take a step to end the war in Iraq and to have a vision of a

strategic plan for stability in the Middle East.

Your bill is excellent and your timing, Mr. Skelton, is perfect,

because today the Bush administration released a progress report on the

Iraq benchmarks required by the supplemental appropriations bill passed

in May. The report makes clear that not even the White House can

conclude that there has been significant progress on the Warner

resolution benchmarks.

This is hardly surprising, given what is publicly available each day

in the media: truck bombs killing scores of people in the markets; the

supposedly secure Green Zone is rocked by a 30-inute mortar and rocket

barrage; despite 30,000 additional American troops to increase

security, Iraqi leaders are urging their people to arm themselves for

their own protection; legislation to make the Iraqi political process

more inclusive is stalled in the Iraqi legislature; and the cost of the

war in precious lives and wounded American heroes continues to rise.

Since the surge began, we have lost nearly 600 American troops.

The benchmarks that are being reported on today were endorsed by

President Bush and the Government of Iraq to measure political

reconciliation and the promotion of security in Iraq. In the 5th year

of the war, the President's strategy has failed to meet those key

benchmarks.

President Bush continues to urge patience, but what is needed and

what the American people are demanding is a new direction. Remaining

bogged down in a sectarian civil war in Iraq continues an unacceptable

strain on our military and serves as an effective recruiting tool for

al Qaeda. Reports about the resilience of al Qaeda in Iraq are

alarming, but assessments that the global al Qaeda network is

reconstituting its capabilities describes a far greater threat.

The war is not making our military stronger to protect our interests,

the American people safer or the Middle East more secure. It prevents a

refocusing of our efforts on the real war on terrorism in places like

Afghanistan, and it hinders the development of a new direction strategy

for greater stability in the Middle East.

As General Batiste has said, ``Iraq is distracting America from what

should be the focus of main effort. It is in America's best interests

to rethink our national strategy, deliberately disengage from Iraq,

refit and rearm our military, get serious about homeland security, and

prepare to win the next phase of the struggle against worldwide Islamic

extremism.''

The American people see the danger of clinging to an untenable

situation in Iraq. That is why by large margins they favor a

redeployment of our troops. Passage of Chairman Skelton's bipartisan

bill will reflect the will of the American people and reaffirm the

judgment of the House that the redeployment of our troops is a central

element and an effective way forward in Iraq.

We will repeat that judgment legislatively as often as necessary,

hopefully with an increasing level of support from our Republican

colleagues, until pressure from the American people causes the

President to change his mind and his policies.

To those who urge that we wait until September, I say that it has

been 4 1/2 years and half a trillion dollars, at least. We have

already waited too long. The troops in their third and fourth tours in

Iraq, those who have been so grievously wounded and the families of

those who have died, deserve far better than that.

After more than 3,600 lives have been lost to a flawed strategy, we

have a responsibility to create a new direction. After spending $329

million every day, $329 million every day on the war in Iraq, on a war

that is not making our country safer, we have an obligation to change

course. After 5 years of a failed policy in Iraq, we have a duty, not

just to voice our opposition, but to vote to end the war.

Chairman Skelton's bipartisan bill offers a step we can take today

toward bringing the troops home, to creating a strategic vision for

stability in the Middle East and for beginning to rearm our military.

Let us pass this bill and those that will follow in the coming weeks

and provide the new direction on Iraq that the American people demand

and that is so urgently needed. I urge a ``yes'' vote on the Skelton

bill.