Mr. Speaker, I thank the chairman of the committee for

yielding.

No matter how the Members vote on the two amendments before the House

on this measure, I know that every one of us is absolutely committed to

our men and women in harm's way and prays for their safe return home.

I also know that the Members on our side of the aisle, regardless of

how we vote on these amendments, are united in our collective judgment

that the President's policy is failing; and that after 4 years of

repeated misjudgments in Iraq by this administration, it is long past

time to insist that the administration and the Iraqi Government be held

accountable for making progress; and, that we must change direction in

Iraq.

In fact, the American public strongly support the Democratic position

on the war. Just today, the latest New York Times/CBS poll found that

76 percent of Americans, including a majority of Republicans, say that

the troop surge has either had no impact or made the situation worse.

Meanwhile, 63 percent said the United States should set a date for

withdrawing troops sometime in 2008. That, of course, is what the bill

that we passed and sent to the President did. He vetoed it. That

position was adopted by the majority of this House and the majority of

the Senate in the last supplemental bill.

And 69 percent say Congress should appropriate money for the war on

the condition that we set benchmarks for progress. I am pleased, of

course, that the Warner language is in there, but it is not enough.

Mr. Speaker, it is deeply disappointing that the President continues

to defy the will of the American people. But today, with this amendment

which includes 18 strong new benchmarks on political, security, and

economic progress, and other reporting requirements, I believe this

Congress has moved the ball forward and begun to hold the

administration accountable.

Is it as far as we are going to go? It is not. Should we go further?

We must. Make no mistake, this amendment does not provide everything

that we had hoped for, but I do not believe that it provides a blank

check or that this Congress is rubber-stamping the President's request.

The President did not want the Warner amendment attached. He doesn't

want any constraints.

In addition to benchmarks, this requires the President to report on

progress in July and September, and ties all economic support for Iraq

to progress on the benchmarks, although a waiver is required. Why?

Because the President said he would veto the bill if it was not.

The fact is, this is simply the best bill we could put together and

that would be signed. It is a political reality. It is not what we want

to pass.

It imposes truly for the first time ever a level of accountability

that did not exist, however, previously. For the first time ever, we

are also calling for the Iraqi Security Forces to step up and do the

job assigned to them so our soldiers can step down by providing funding

for an outside review of the Iraq Security Forces' current capacity and

their reliance on our Armed Forces.

We have moved the ball forward. Far enough? No. Do we need to move

further? Yes. But we have advanced toward a new direction and a new

policy

in Iraq. And in the months ahead, we will continue to fight for a new

direction in Iraq in the fiscal year 2008 defense appropriations bill

and other measures to be considered.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, let me say that I am very pleased that the

second amendment being considered will provide for the first time in a

decade a long overdue increase in the Federal minimum wage, as well as

additional funding for defense and veterans health care, and homeland

security, drought relief, the State Children's Health Insurance

Program, and gulf coast recovery. The Katrina provision is a critical

one.

Mr. Speaker, I will vote for both of these amendments, and I urge my

colleagues to do so as well.