Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding. Once

again, as I have done over and over again, I thank him for yielding,

for bringing this important legislation to the floor, and for his

extraordinary leadership.

I also want to commend Mr. Murtha for his leadership as well in

shaping this path to stability in the Middle East and bringing an end

to the war and bringing our troops home safely and soon.

I also want to acknowledge Mr. Skelton, the Chair of the Armed

Services Committee. He has been busy at work on his authorization bill,

but he very much helped shape this proposal. I commend him and many

other Members here who have made this path to stability in the Middle

East possible.

Since January, a majority of the Members of this House have been

working to change course and change the mission in Iraq. Our goals are

clear: Strengthen our military; bring stability to the region; and make

the American people safer by ending the war, allowing our attention to

be refocused on defeating international terrorism, and at the same

time, honoring our commitment to our veterans which, as we have seen

unfold in recent months, has been sadly neglected.

Today, we will take the next step in that effort in this legislation

by: Providing for our troops fighting a war in Iraq that the President

initiated, but for which he has refused to pay in his annual budget

requests; honoring our commitment to our wounded veterans of Iraq,

Afghanistan and other wars who struggle to get the medical care and

benefits they deserve from a system overwhelmed, underfunded and unable

to respond effectively; demanding accountability from the Iraqi

government on whose efforts a national reconciliation depends, but

whose accomplishments in this area have been negligible, disappointing

and unworthy of the sacrifice of our troops on the ground in Iraq.

And this legislation ends the blank check for the President's war

without end. It does provide a path to stability in the Middle East by

changing our mission in Iraq and enables us to focus on the threat of

terrorism.

Chairman Obey's bill satisfies each of these requirements and meets

the immediate needs of our troops, but allows Congress to decide in a

few months whether the situation on the ground in Iraq justifies using

the remaining money to redeploy our forces or continue the war.

The President's own benchmarks, these are the President's own

benchmarks for measuring progress in Iraq, will be the centerpiece of

that evaluation. You would think that the President would embrace this

legislation. It has his benchmarks. It asks for a progress report.

Perhaps he thinks there will be no progress so he is afraid of that

report. And then a vote in the House as to whether to continue the war.

The President's own benchmarks

for measuring progress in Iraq again will be the centerpiece. His

benchmark. This is the kind of regular and responsible review of the

war Congress should have been conducting since the mission began more

than 4 years ago.

Regrettably, but not surprisingly, the President has threatened to

veto the Obey bill. Unfortunately, the President has taken us down this

road before. The President has brought us to this point by vetoing the

first Iraq Accountability Act and refusing to pay for this war

responsibly. He has grown accustomed to the free hand on Iraq that he

had before January 4. Those days are over.

The American people have made it clear that they want a new direction

in Iraq, one that is going to bring this war to an end. They have lost

confidence that the President can or will produce a plan to do that.

Even some members of the President's own party have finally realized he

has lost credibility with the American people.

The President said today that he would accept benchmarks. But what he

fails to accept is accountability for failing to meet those benchmarks.

Benchmarks without consequences are meaningless.

It is interesting to me that in the President's No Child Left Behind

legislation, he establishes standards for America's school children. If

those children do not meet those standards, there are serious

consequences for them, for their families, for their schools and for

their school districts. And yet, while holding America's school

children accountable with consequences, the President refuses to hold

the Iraqi government responsible with consequences while our young

people in Iraq are dying.

The President said again today he would accept these benchmarks, we

hope that he will and reconsider the thought of veto. This is a bill he

should like. It has his benchmarks. It asks for a progress report. He

must have some confidence in what he is doing and then leave it up to

the Congress to make a judgment in July. What could be fairer than

that.

Congress has offered the President recommendations for change in

Iraq. In rejecting them, he has offered nothing in return except a

demand for more of the same, a blank check for a war without end.

The American people expect more and deserve better. A war which has

ended so many lives, weakened our military at a great risk to our

security and costs so much money, costs so much in reputation for

America throughout the world, cannot continue indefinitely. I don't

know why the President doesn't understand. This war cannot proceed

indefinitely, and that is the course he has us on.

Any engagement that we have militarily should meet the test of: Does

it make our country safer? Does it strengthen our military? And does it

bring stability to the region that we are engaged in? The President's

policy fails on all three scores.

This bill offers more ideas for winding down this war. I urge the

President to consider these ideas and those which may be proposed by

the Senate and work with us in conference to produce a bill that meets

the needs of our troops and the expectation of our country. We owe it

to the American people to try to find our common ground so we can end

this war, and we will do that. But we will stand our ground if it is a

blank check for a war without end.

We look forward to continuing our conversations with the White House,

with the Senate, to again draw down this war and bring home our troops

safely and soon.