Mr. President, last December, 10 of America's most

distinguished senior statesmen and -women made public a blueprint for

success in Iraq and in so doing opened up the possibility for the

administration and the Congress to come together on a bipartisan basis

to begin a new direction in Iraq. The Iraq Study Group, led by former

Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton,

presented our Nation with a fully bipartisan Iraq strategy--a strategy

that all of America could get behind, with clearly defined benchmarks,

realistic goals, and a sensible approach for protecting U.S. security

interests.

Today, the U.S. Senate is finally considering legislation that would

help take us in the direction outlined by the Iraq Study Group, over 3

months ago. Under the leadership of Senator Byrd, the Senate

Appropriations Committee has presented this body with a chance to get

the mission right, namely by beginning the phased redeployment of our

combat units from Iraq.

Thanks to additional language spelling out a clearly defined

benchmarks for Iraqi authorities to meet, from Senator Ben Nelson,

Congress has finally put the Iraqi Government on notice that it is time

for them to step up to their responsibilities. It is time for the

government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to start providing for

Iraq's own security and making the difficult but necessary political

compromises to bring all parties in Iraq to the table, thereby ending

the untenable situation of American troops being forced to referee a

civil war there. Iraqi compromises will only emerge through serious

diplomatic engagement by the U.S. State Department, Iraqi politicians,

and neighboring countries in the region.

But this isn't just my view. This is also the view of Iraq Study

Group cochair, Congressman Lee Hamilton. Before the Senate bill was

made public in its entirety, Congressman Hamilton had an opportunity to

comment on the House's version of the supplemental appropriations bill.

In a Washington Post op-ed, he pointed out that ``The House Bill lays

out the steps that the Iraqi Government must take . . . At issue is the

conditionality of U.S. support. Time and again, Iraqis have missed

deadlines. Time and again, deadlines have been extended, and U.S.

political, economic and military support has continued and even

increased. The House bill breaks that cycle.''

Most crucially, Congressman Hamilton went on to say that the House

bill, ``by tying continued U.S. support--including the presence of U.S.

troops--to benchmarks, uses the strongest possible leverage to press

Iraqi leaders to meet their commitments.''

Clearly, in the view of Cochair Hamilton, the current majority in

Congress is taking the necessary steps to address our national security

needs, and doing so in a manner consistent with the recommendations of

the Iraq Study Group.

Without such a strategy, U.S. Iraq policy amounts to little more than

an open-ended commitment which has not translated to progress on the

ground in Iraq; and is causing significant long-term costs to our

military and to our national security.

We have already lost over 3,200 brave American service members in

Iraq, and regrettably, that number continues to grow.

We have spent over $400 billion since the war began, with an

additional $121 billion in the underlying bill being debated today.

And our Armed Forces have been left so depleted of combat gear due to

the war in Iraq, that vast segments of our military are reporting ``not

ready'' for duty--including two-thirds of the Army in the United States

and nearly 90 percent of our National Guard.

As these figures demonstrate, our Armed Forces and America's national

security simply cannot afford the Bush administration's ``stay the

course'' policy in Iraq any longer. It is quite literally breaking our

military. And it is endangering our Armed Forces' ability to respond to

future challenges to America's national security--whether on the Korean

Peninsula, the Middle East, or elsewhere in the world.

As Army Chief of Staff GEN Peter Schoomaker testified to the Senate

Armed Services Committee: ``We have a strategy right now that is

outstripping the means to execute it.'' His deputy, GEN Richard Cody,

further stated: ``The readiness continues to decline of our next-to-

deploy forces.''

Yet, today, we find the administration still engaging in its smoke

and mirror campaign to purposefully downplay the monetary and human

costs of this war. They do it by forbidding the taking of photos of our

honored fallen heroes coming back to Dover Air Force Base and by

funding the war through emergency supplementals that are used to

obscure the war's impact on our budget deficit. They do so by

shamefully neglecting the needs of our returning heroes, too many of

whom have come home broken in body or spirit.

Despite all of these efforts, the impact of the Iraq war has been so

transparently damaging to America's security that it has been

impossible even for this White House to keep the facts from the

American people--particularly in terms of our military's combat

readiness.

According to a March 19 Washington Post report, ``it will take years

for the Army and Marine Corps to recover from what some officials

privately have called a `death spiral,' in which the ever increasing

pace of war-zone rotations has consumed 40 percent of their total gear,

wearied troops and left no time to train to fight anything other than

the insurgencies now at hand.''

We are over 4 years into this war, and the administration is still

decrying those of us trying to help address these serious concerns. And

all the while, it is the administration who is still continuing to

propose budgets, with too few resources for our deployed troops.

In fact, the President and the Vice President have continued their

disingenuous claims that Democratic proposals would actually cut

funding for our troops even while they are the ones proposing budgets

with shortfalls in critical combat equipment, military hospital upkeep,

and veterans health priorities.

It is time for Congress to finally say ``enough is enough.''

The Iraq Study Group was very clear on the need to restore our own

military's combat readiness, as spelled out in recommendations 48 and

49 of its report. According to that report, ``the defense budget as a

whole is in danger of disarray, as supplemental funding winds down and

reset costs become clear. It will be a major challenge to meet ongoing

requirements for other current and future security threats that need to

be accommodated together with spending for operations and maintenance,

reset, personnel, and benefits for active duty and retired personnel.

Restoring the capability of our military forces should be a high

priority for the United States at this time.''

I wholeheartedly agree with this statement.

As my colleagues know, since the war began in 2003, I have to come to

the Senate floor time and again to offer amendments to spending bills

to address shortfalls in the administration's proposed budget--largely

over the objections of the White House and its congressional allies.

In 2003, I offered an amendment to the emergency supplemental

appropriations bill to add $322 million for critical protective gear

identified by

the Army that the Bush administration had failed to include in their

budget. But it was blocked by the administration and their allies.

In 2004 and 2005, I authored legislation, signed into law, to

reimburse troops for equipment that they had to purchase on their own

because the Rumsfeld Pentagon failed to provide them with the body

armor and other gear they needed to stay safe.

And last year, working with Senators Inouye, Reed, and Stevens, I

offered an amendment to help address a $17 billion budget shortfall to

replace and repair thousands of war battered tanks, aircraft, and

vehicles. Without these additional resources, the Army Chief of Staff

claimed that U.S. Army readiness would deteriorate even further. This

provision was approved unanimously and enacted in law. But much more

remains to be done.

A recent report by the independent National Guard Commission says

that 88 percent of our National Guard is reporting ``not ready'' for

duty. To address this concern, I introduced S. 756 to provide the $38

billion over the next 5 years the National Guard says it needs to

restock its depleted equipment inventories and restore its

preparedness, for both wartime and homeland security missions. Doing so

is critical to our national security, and we owe our country and our

troops no less.

Thankfully, here again, Senator Byrd and the Appropriations Committee

have demonstrated their leadership by adding $1 billion to address

critical equipment shortfalls for our National Guard in 2007. This is a

good first step as we work to ensure that America's citizen soldiers

are fully prepared to fight our enemies abroad and respond to domestic

emergencies here at home. I am joining my colleagues, Senators Leahy

and Bond, in offering an amendment to add another $1 billion to meet

other immediate National Guard short-term needs. In addition, I intend

to work throughout this year to ensure that we address all of the

Guard's critical equipment needs.

In the meantime, this supplemental appropriations bill will begin to

put us on the right track, to reverse 4 years of the administration's

mismanagement of a war, and 6 years of its reckless battering of

America's great Armed Forces. We should have no higher priority than

the safety and well-being of our troops. Plain and simple.

But a great deal more remains to be done. We need to redeploy our

combat forces out of Iraq's urban areas to Kurdistan, other rural areas

of Iraq, and to bases in Kuwait and Qatar, where they can focus on

counterterrorism operations, train and equip Iraqi security forces, and

offer force protection to U.S. personnel and infrastructure which

remain in Iraq after the redeployment of combat forces has been

completed early next year.

But more than that, we need to stop allowing ourselves and our Nation

to be cowed by the administration's fear-mongering. We must embrace the

many recommendations of the Iraq Study Group and engage in a ``New

Diplomatic Offensive'' in Iraq and the wider region because, as the

Iraq Study Group wisely concluded, only a political solution which the

Iraqi people buy into can salvage Iraq.

Mr. President, the United States has a moral obligation to assist

Iraqi and Afghan refugees and those internally displaced by violence. I

commend the Appropriations Committee for beginning to effectively do

so, by increasing such assistance by $50 million for Iraq, and $18

million for Afghanistan.

The Brookings Institution estimates that nearly one-quarter of all

physicians have fled Iraq. There are nearly 2 million Iraqi refugees in

Jordan and Syria. These refugees have placed a tremendous strain on the

essential social services and infrastructure of those two countries,

which have begun to close their border crossings. Emergency funding is

necessary to provide these individuals with basic medical care, food,

housing and to ensure that their children are able to attend school.

We cannot afford to miss another opportunity to change our course in

Iraq and to support the men and women sacrificing their lives there--

opportunities this administration has resisted at every step of the

way. The new Democratic majority in Congress has already begun doing

so. The passage of this bill will represent another step toward a

stronger and safer America, and more secure and stable Iraq.

If President Bush is wise he will reconsider his threat to veto this

measure and begin to embrace the call for change embodied in this

legislation. If not, I will continue to do all that I can to keep the

pressure on the administration. I know that the majority of the Members

in this body will as well. That is our responsibility as the people's

representatives.