Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary

leadership of Mr. David Obey, who understands that the strength of our

country is indeed measured in our military might but also in the health

and well-being of the American people.

Thank you for bringing this important legislation to the floor.

Mr. Speaker, today is indeed an historic day. Today, this new

Congress will take the first step: it will vote to end the war in Iraq.

Any statement on the war in Iraq must begin with a tribute to our

troops. Today and every day we thank our troops for their courage, for

their patriotism, for the sacrifice that they and their families are

willing to make.

For 4 years and under the most demanding and dangerous conditions

imaginable, they have worked together to do everything that was asked

of them. As Members of Congress, our first responsibility under the

Constitution, the preamble to the Constitution to which we take an oath

of office, is to provide for the common defense. We here in this body

have an obligation to work together to do that for the American people.

Mr. Johnson, our colleague, you, Patrick Murphy, and everyone in

between who has served our country have helped make it the home of the

brave and the land of the free. I salute you both.

I would like to also acknowledge two people who have been the

champions of our troops and experts on our national security in this

body. The two of them are the leading proponents on the legislation

that is on the floor today: the Chair of the Armed Services Committee,

Ike Skelton; and the Chair of the Defense Appropriations Committee,

Jack Murtha. The two of them care deeply about the well-being of our

troops, the readiness of our troops and its importance to our national

security, and they are proposing that we pass this legislation today.

I have said from the beginning of this war, this war is a grotesque

mistake. Last year's bipartisan Iraq Study Group said: ``The situation

in Iraq is grave and deteriorating.'' They called for action.

The facts on the ground are these: after 4 years, Iraq is in chaos

and the

government is not being held accountable. The administration is sending

troops into the battle who are not mission-ready.

And when they come home, our veterans are not being honored as the

heroes they are. The revelation of appalling conditions at Walter Reed

Hospital and VA facilities across the Nation remind us, once again,

that our troops are being sent into a war without the right preparation

to welcome them home when they return. What kind of message does that

send to our troops?

In terms of the chaos in Iraq, our Commander in Iraq, General

Petraeus, recently said, ``There is no military solution to a problem

like that in Iraq.'' General Petraeus. Yet, the President's response to

escalating levels of violence is to deploy more troops, a strategy that

has been tried and failed, tried and without success three times

already.

In the short time since the escalation began, disturbing facts have

come to light.

The admission by General Peter Pace, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs

of Staff, that he is, ``not comfortable'' with the readiness of Army

units in the United States.

The declaration whereby the Department of Defense has finally

admitted that elements of a civil war do exist in Iraq; in fact, it is

even worse than that.

Yesterday, in terms of reconstruction, the conclusion of the Special

Inspector General that the failure of the reconstruction effort in Iraq

was caused by a lack of planning, coordination and oversight. In fact,

more than $10 billion has disappeared, with no accountability. Waste,

fraud and abuse are rampant in the reconstruction in Iraq.

How are we going to win the hearts and minds if the money is

disappearing in thin air? We must address those and other facts about

the war in Iraq.

The bill we debate today, the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health

and Iraq Accountability Act, does that by rebuilding our military,

honoring our promises to our veterans, holding the Iraqi Government

accountable, and enabling us to bring our troops home.

Rather than sending more troops into the chaos that is the Iraqi

civil war, we must be focused on bringing the war to an end. We can do

that by passing this bill that transforms the performance benchmarks

that have already been endorsed by President Bush and the Iraqi

Government into requirements.

When those benchmarks are met, or when it becomes clear, after a

reasonable amount of time, that they will not be met, the bill requires

that our troops leave Iraq on a schedule that our former colleague, Lee

Hamilton, a cochair of the Iraq Study Group, called responsible, not

precipitate.

Benchmarks without deadlines are just words. And after 4 years of

this war, words are not enough.

As Former National Security Advisor Brzezinski wrote in a letter

endorsing this bill, ``It is clear that a different approach is needed

if the Iraqis are to be encouraged to make the political accommodations

necessary to promote stability and national reconciliation.'' That

should have been happening a long, long time ago.

Bring the troops home too soon? It is too late for that, 4 years into

a war, a war in which we have been engaged longer than we were in World

War II.

This bill, in its wisdom, calls upon the Defense Department to adhere

to its own readiness standards. The benchmarks were endorsed by the

President and the Iraqi Government. The guidelines for the readiness

standards are the Defense Department's own. Those standards are

intended to assure that before our troops are sent into harm's way,

they have the training and the equipment they need to enable them to

perform their missions successfully. That simply is not happening.

The war in Iraq has produced a national security crisis, well

described by Mr. Murtha and Mr. Skelton and others in the course of the

day. Our readiness is at its lowest level since the Vietnam war. By

addressing that crisis, the bill supports the troops, supports the

troops, and protects the American people.

How do we support the troops by sending them into harm's way without

the proper training and equipment, without the proper dwell time at

home, and taking them there and overextending their stays and

redeploying them over and over again? This bill says, adhere to your

own guidelines.

Over and over again, Senator Reid, the Democratic leader in the

Senate, and I have appealed to the President to have a new direction in

Iraq, change the mission from combat to training, enabling us to

redeploy our troops for limited purpose in Iraq. Engage in diplomacy,

encourage the Iraqis to engage in the regional diplomacy so necessary

to bring stability to the region. Have real reconstruction. Real

reconstruction, reform it; reconstruction, not corruption. And have the

political change that is necessary, amend the Constitution to relieve

the civil unrest and strife that has produced so much violence.

When we do that, we can bring our troops home. We can redeploy them

out of Iraq, and we can turn our attention to the real war on terror in

Afghanistan.

A matter of weeks ago I was in Afghanistan with some of our

colleagues, and the commander of the coalition forces there told us,

flat out, that if we had not taken our attention away from Afghanistan,

if we had stayed focused there, the al Qaeda and the Taliban would not

have the opportunity that they have there now to make a comeback. That

is where the war on terror is. The war in Iraq is a separate war from

the war on terror. It is a separate war.

Again, the American people have lost faith in the President's conduct

of this war. The American people see the reality of this war. The

President does not.

Today, the Congress has an historic opportunity to vote to end the

war in Iraq. Each Member of Congress will make a choice. The world is

watching for our decision. The choice is clear. Will we renew the

President's blank check for an open-ended war without end, or will we

take a giant step to end the war and responsibly redeploy our troops

out of Iraq?

The American people want a new direction in Iraq. Today the Congress

will provide it. The American people do not support a war without end,

and neither should this Congress. I urge an ``aye'' vote.