Mr. Speaker, today, I voted for the U.S. Troop

Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act because it

provides our Nation's returning troops and veterans with the care they

need and deserve, and makes our country more secure by setting forth a

new, responsible course in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The people of my District have told me that after four years and

thousands of lives lost, they are looking to Congress to ensure that

our commitment in Iraq is not open-ended, that there is not a blank

check on American lives, and that the Iraqi government will be held

accountable.

While I have serious concerns about some aspects of this legislation,

and, in general, do not support an absolute, Congressionally-mandated

timetable in Iraq, I believe that, on balance, this legislation does

more good than harm. Ideally, I would have preferred a more bipartisan

approach, especially on an issue of this magnitude.

I am deeply disappointed in my Party's leadership for insisting on a

timetable instead of working with our colleagues on the other side of

the aisle. I am also disappointed that leadership saw fit to include

millions of dollars for unrelated spending projects for shrimp farmers

and peanut storage facilities. I will be working with my colleagues to

remove these provisions as this bill goes to conference.

Our sons and daughters are in harm's way, however, and I cannot in

good conscience withhold the resources they need while we continue what

is likely to be a lengthy debate in Washington.

I also believe that as the Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation, I have a unique

responsibility to our veterans.

I am working hard to make caring for our veterans a national

priority, and this legislation is a good start. It secures a much-

needed $1.7 billion for veterans' health care, including $550 million

to get rid of the maintenance backlog that will help ensure veterans'

facilities are clean and well-maintained.

This bill provides $20 million to clean up the mess at the Walter

Reed Army Medical Center. These funds, combined with the Dignity for

Wounded Warriors Act of 2007--which I introduced last month--are an

important first step.

By voting this emergency supplemental down, Congress would send a

distressing and insulting message to our injured soldiers, veterans and

their loved ones that its years of neglectful under-funding and failed

oversight of Walter Reed would go on and on.

This bill also makes our country more secure. It provides our troops

with the resources they need to fight al Qaeda and other terrorists in

an increasingly hostile situation in Afghanistan. For too long, the

situation in Afghanistan has gone under the radar while al Qaeda and

elements of the Taliban have grown stronger.

In Iraq, we are setting forth a new, responsible course that demands

that the Iraqis take responsibility for their own security and

stability. That requires the Iraqi government to meet its own

benchmarks.

This is precisely the type of plan the bipartisan Iraq Study Group

outlined just a few months ago. The distinguished members of that

panel, including James Baker, Lee Hamilton and Arizona's own Sandra Day

O'Connor, believed, as I do, that benchmarks are an appropriate way to

chart the Iraqi government's progress, or lack thereof.

Among these benchmarks are quelling sectarian violence, disarming

sectarian militias and developing a plan to share oil revenues

equitably among all Iraqis. Holding the Iraqi government accountable is

imperative because they have not always lived up to their promises.