Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 1591, the

U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act.

This legislation will support our troops and veterans, hold the Bush

Administration and Iraqi government accountable and bring our soldiers

home by August 2008 or sooner. It will also provide emergency funding

for critical programs that have suffered from years of neglect.

This supplemental appropriations bill provides emergency funding for

critical programs that have long been underfunded by the Republicans.

It includes $750 million to correct the funding shortfall in the State

Children's Health Insurance program so that hundreds of thousands of

children will not lose their health care. It provides $2.9 billion for

Katrina relief and recovery. The bill also includes $2.6 billion for

homeland security needs left unaddressed by Congressional Republicans,

as well as $1.7 billion to remedy the unconscionable state of our

military and veterans' health care systems. All of these issues are

emergencies in their own right and rise to the level of inclusion in

this emergency supplemental spending bill.

The U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability

Act requires the Iraqi government to meet the security, political and

economic benchmarks established by the President in his address of

January 10th, including improvements in the performance of the Iraqi

security forces, a greater commitment by the Iraqi government to

national reconciliation, and reductions in the levels of sectarian

violence in Iraq.

If the Iraqi government is unable to meet these benchmarks by July 7

of this year, redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq would begin

immediately and must be completed by January of 2008. If the benchmarks

are met, the latest possible starting date for redeployment would be

March 1 of next year, with complete withdrawal by August 31.

The bill ensures that our troops have the tools and resources they

need to do the job they have been asked to do. It prohibits the

deployment of troops who are not fully trained, equipped and protected

according to current Department of Defense standards. The President can

only deploy unprepared troops if he certifies, in writing, to Congress,

that deploying those troops in the national interest. The bill also

provides funding so the Veterans Administration can meet the

obligations of a new generation of veterans, particularly by ensuring

that they will have the medical care they need.

I have been an outspoken opponent of military action against Iraq

since the day the administration started beating the war drums. My

preference would have been to vote for a stronger bill that would bring

our troops home even sooner than this one. I am disappointed that the

bill includes waivers to allow the President to send less than fully-

equipped troops into battle. I am also unhappy that the provision

requiring the president to get Congressional approval for an attack on

Iran was removed from the bill. I have additional concerns about the

section of the bill that allows an unspecified number of U.S. troops to

remain in Iraq after the August 2008 deadline to train Iraqis and fight

terrorism.

However, I support this legislation in spite of these deficiencies

because I believe it is an affirmative step towards our ultimate goal

of ending the war. This bill is not everything that I would have liked,

but it represents a critical turning point. No longer will this body

uncritically hand over billions of dollars for the President to wage

endless war. For the first time, Congress is considering binding

legislation that sets a date certain for the end of the Iraq war. I

will not help the Republicans defeat it.

The President and most Congressional Republicans ask that we continue

to fund this war with ``no strings attached.'' But the United States

cannot afford an open-ended commitment to a war without end. It is the

responsibility of this Congress to devise a means to end the U.S.

combat role in Iraq so that we can reclaim our position of leadership

in the world and direct our resources back towards urgent needs here at

home. I believe that this bill moves us towards these goals in an

effective and responsible way.