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

legislation that would chart a new course for the United States in

Iraq. I commend the gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. Obey, and the

gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Murtha, for their leadership and for

drafting a measure that answers Americans' calls for real change.

Four years after our nation initiated military operations in Iraq,

America demands a new approach to this open-ended conflict that has

resulted in the deaths of more than 3,200 service members, including at

least 25 with strong ties to Rhode Island. Our operations in Iraq have

endangered the ability of our armed forces to respond to other crises,

distracted from efforts to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban, and damaged

our international reputation. Our military now finds itself in the

middle of a civil war, and it is time to bring our troops home.

Despite calls by the Iraq Study Group for a new approach to the

``grave and deteriorating'' situation in Iraq, President Bush has

proposed escalating military operations, sending more troops to

prosecute a war mismanaged from the start by the civilian leadership.

Fortunately, we have another choice. The House of Representatives will

vote today on an emergency spending bill that would, for the first

time, set a clear deadline to end U.S. combat operations in Iraq. As

one who originally voted against giving the President authority to

invade Iraq, I will proudly support this Democratic measure as the

first real step to end the war.

Last November, an American public dissatisfied with President Bush's

Iraq policy elected a Democratic Congress that promised a new

direction. Having heard frustration from so many Rhode Islanders, I

have worked with the Democratic leadership to develop a better

strategy. I spoke of my conversations with military families and

advocacy groups to underscore the sincerity and passion of Rhode

Islanders' call for change. Meanwhile, Democratic leaders consulted

with an array of current and former military commanders, foreign policy

experts and advocates, with committees holding more than 100 hearings

on operations in Iraq.

The bill before us is the direct result of those efforts and reflects

the will of the American people. Not only does it demand accountability

by establishing clear benchmarks for Iraqis to take control of their

own security, but it also sets a deadline to bring our troops home--no

later than August 2008. This measure sends a clear signal to the

President and the world that we do not intend to remain an occupying

force in Iraq.

The bill also addresses other serious problems facing our military

and their families. President Bush has recommended sending more troops

into harm's way, but has not provided the resources they need upon

their return home, as demonstrated by reports of substandard care at

facilities such as Walter Reed Medical Center. With nearly 25,000

American troops--among them 93 Rhode Islanders--injured in Iraq thus

far, the House spending bill provides an additional $2.8 billion for

military health care and $1.7 billion for veterans' health care to

ensure that those who have sacrificed for our nation get the support

and treatment they deserve.

Furthermore, the bill adds critical funds to restore our military

readiness and re-equip National Guard and Reserve forces, which face

major shortages as a result of operations in Iraq. Lt. General H.

Steven Blum, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, has stated that 88

percent of Army Guard units and 45 percent of Air Guard units are

unprepared for deployment as a result of equipment shortages. We depend

on our National Guard to protect us in the event of catastrophes or

natural disasters, and we must ensure they are fully prepared to defend

the Nation they serve.

In Congress, I have constantly strived to protect our national

security and to support our military, which has served valiantly in

some incredibly challenging missions. At this point, though, the

Iraqis' problems no longer require a U.S. military solution. The

underlying causes of violence are primarily political and must be

addressed as such. Unlike the President's plan, which promises more of

the same failed policy, the Democratic approach will support the

political process to end sectarian divisions in Iraq, help rebuild the

economy and infrastructure, and promote maximum diplomatic efforts to

bring an end to the violence.

Some have argued that the bill does not go far enough. Like them, I

support an even earlier exit for our troops and have co-sponsored

legislation to redeploy them out of Iraq by December 31, 2007. However,

there is no question that the Democratic measure being offered marks a

major turning point and answers Rhode Islanders' pleas by setting a

firm deadline for withdrawal. This is a tremendous step--one which

serves our troops, our constituents, and our conscience--and I will

wholeheartedly support it.