Mr. Speaker, I will vote for this Defense

Supplemental appropriations bill.

Whatever some may say, I think it would be grossly irresponsible to

vote against it. That would be to vote against providing America's men

and women in uniform with the equipment and resources they need and

against providing them the best health care they may require when they

come home.

I understand why some are urging a vote against the bill. Many

Americans are frustrated and angry because we are four years into a war

the Bush Administration assured us would be short and decisive. The

Administration's misjudgments, lack of planning and poor leadership

have made a bad situation worse. So there are many who do not trust the

Bush Administration to find a way to end this war, and who believe

Congress should simply act to cut off additional funds.

But whatever may be said about the wisdom of invading Iraq four years

ago--and I am one who believed it was a mistake to do so--the fact is

that we are still deeply engaged in Iraq. We also must finish the job

of securing Afghanistan and defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda. So long

as our troops are in the field, we must provide them what they need

even as we move to change the mistaken policies of the Administration

in Iraq.

This bill begins that change. It includes important language to hold

the president accountable to the benchmarks set by his own

administration and the Iraqi government.

Those benchmarks were outlined in January, when President Bush

announced that the Iraqi government had agreed to pursue all

extremists, Shiite and Sunni alike; to deliver Iraqi Security Forces to

Baghdad to join in the ``surge''; and to establish a strong militia

disarmament program. President Bush also announced that Prime Minister

Maliki and his government agreed to pursue reconciliation initiatives,

including enactment of a hydro-carbon law; conducting of provincial and

local elections; reform of current laws governing the de-Baathification

process; amendment of the Constitution of Iraq; and allocation of Iraqi

revenues for reconstruction projects.

By holding the president and the Iraqi government accountable for

achieving these benchmarks, this bill will provide General Petraeus and

the Administration with the leverage necessary to help the Iraqi

government forge a political solution. And we all know that it will

take a political solution--not a military one--to end this war.

The bill is an important step toward what I think must be our goal--a

responsible end to the war in Iraq, based on a strategy of phased

withdrawal of troops, accelerated diplomacy and redeployment that is

based on Iraqi stability and not arbitrary deadlines.

It is true that this legislation includes a date certain for

withdrawing U.S. combat troops from Iraq. I do not believe this

language is wise and were it up to me, this provision would not be

included in the bill. As a matter of national security policy, we

should steer clear of arbitrary public deadlines and focus instead on

realistic goals. Our military needs flexibility to be able to link

movements of U.S. troops to the realities of the situation on the

ground.

The deadline established in this bill--August of 2008--is far enough

away that I believe we may be able to revisit it if need be, and while

I find its inclusion troubling, I do not believe in letting the perfect

be the enemy of the good. And the bill's language does give the

president flexibility to protect U.S. interests, since it allows

sufficient troops to remain to protect U.S. military and civilians in

Iraq, conduct counterterrorism operations, and train Iraqi Security

Forces.

The bill also protects our troops by limiting deployment schedules

and setting minimum readiness standards--based on current Defense

Department standards--for U.S. troops deploying to the region. The

president could

waive these requirements but only by certifying in writing to Congress

that waiving them would be in the interest of national security.

The bill also includes many provisions important to our troops, such

as funds for military personnel for imminent danger pay, family

separation allowances, and basic allowances for housing; funds for

recruiting and retention in the Army Reserve and National Guard; and

funds to develop countermeasures to prevent attacks from improvised

explosive devices. The bill recommends the creation of a new Strategic

Readiness Reserve fund, and provides $2.5 billion for the program,

which is intended to improve readiness, training and equipping of U.S.

forces not already deployed.

Given the recent revelations about problems with the defense health

system at Walter Reed and other facilities across the system, I am very

pleased that the bill provides $2.8 billion for military health care

costs and $1.7 billion for initiatives to address the health care needs

of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, particularly those suffering from

traumatic brain injury and post traumatic stress disorder. Funding is

also included to address facility deficiencies so the Department of

Veterans Affairs does not have to defer facility maintenance and upkeep

in order to provide quality health care services.

The bill also provides $52.5 billion for military operations in Iraq

and Afghanistan and funds the $5.9 billion request for the Afghan

Security Forces and the $3.8 billion request for Iraq Security Forces.

And the bill includes $3.1 billion to fully fund the Pentagon's FY07

request for the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Commission's

recommendations, which is vitally important for Ft. Carson as it

prepares to expand and for other military installations in Colorado.

On the non-military side, the bill includes critically important

funding for farmers and ranchers in southeastern Colorado who were

recently hit hard by winter storms. Thousands of cattle were killed in

storms worse than the October 1997 storm that killed approximately

30,000 cattle and cost farmers and ranchers an estimated $28 million.

The struggles that family agriculture producers and small counties face

are significant and are having a negative impact on the livelihood of

hundreds of farmers and ranchers and their communities. So I am pleased

that the Colorado delegation was successful in persuading the House

leadership to include financial assistance for farmers and ranchers,

including for those affected by Colorado's recent blizzards, and I am

hopeful that the funding will be included in the final conference

report.

Mr. Speaker, we have entered the 5th year of the war in Iraq.

Already, more than 3,200 of our men and women in uniform have made the

ultimate sacrifice in the performance of their duty. More than 24,000

others have been wounded. The Iraqi death toll is at least 60,000, with

more than 650,000 other Iraqis displaced and at least one million who

have fled to Syria and Jordan and other countries.

Even these heavy costs are not the whole story, because nation-

building in Iraq has degraded our ability to counter other threats to

our national security around the globe. As a member of the Armed

Services Committee, I am all too aware of the pressures on our active

duty and National Guard and reserve soldiers, including a lack of

equipment and training, multiple or extended deployments, and limited

time at home between deployments. To be successful, U.S. forces must be

trained, equipped, and ready to quickly deploy worldwide. Shortfalls in

personnel, equipment, or training increase the risk to our troops and

to their mission.

Mr. Speaker, many of us who voted against authorizing the President

to rush to war in Iraq were worried that while it would be easy to

eliminate the Saddam Hussein regime, the aftermath would be neither

easy nor quick. Sadly, our fears have proven to be justified. And now,

as the Pentagon has finally admitted in its most recent quarterly

report, the situation in Iraq is ``properly descriptive of a civil

war.''

Insisting on keeping our troops in the middle of that kind of

internecine war is not a recipe for victory; it is only a prescription

for quagmire. And as a new Foreign Relations Council report notes, we

bear responsibility for developments within Iraq, but are increasingly

without the ability to shape those developments in a positive

direction.

We need to be scaling back our military mission in Iraq. We need to

make the U.S. military footprint lighter--not in order to hasten defeat

or failure in Iraq, but to salvage a critical measure of security and

stability in a region of the world that we can ill afford to abandon.

But as we do so, we must work to avoid a collapse in the region--not

only because we have a moral obligation to the people of Iraq, but also

because our national security has been so badly compromised by the Bush

administration's failures there. The President's decision to take the

nation to war has made our country less safe. We need to change course

and chart a path that enhances our national security and sets the right

priorities for the war on terrorism and struggle against extremists.

This bill begins to chart this path, and I will support it.