Mr. Speaker, I support our men and women serving in

harm's way, I support America's veterans, and I support of establishing

clear benchmarks for progress in Iraq.

Our men and women in Iraq are in the middle of what is becoming an

increasingly dangerous civil war. Despite their best efforts to provide

security, train Iraqi forces, and pursue terrorists, the violence in

Iraq ultimately must be ended by the Iraqi people. The Iraqis must step

up, once and for all, and take responsibility for their future.

The Iraq war funding bill is the only proposal on the table that sets

enforceable benchmarks for the Iraqi government and makes clear to the

Iraqi government that we will not have our soldiers in the middle of a

religious civil war indefinitely. Distinguished Hoosier and co-chairman

of the Iraq Study Group, Lee Hamilton, has said that tying continued

U.S. support, including the presence of our troops, to benchmarks is

the strongest leverage we have to force the Iraqis to act. He, too, has

said that this supplemental--despite its imperfections--should move

forward.

In an ideal situation, the President, and not the Congress, would

hold the Iraqi government accountable for improving the political and

security conditions in its country. However, the Bush Administration

has not held the Iraqi government accountable even while the security

situation has steadily deteriorated to the point of open civil war

between rival religious sects.

In early January, I wrote the President. I asked him what the

consequences would be if the Iraqi government failed to meet the

benchmarks the President articulated, benchmarks the Iraqi government

has agreed to meet, in a nationally televised speech. To this day, I

have received no response from the Bush Administration.

In addition to forcing Iraqi accountability, the Iraq war funding

bill provides desperately needed funds to ensure that current and

future veterans and wounded military personnel receive the care and

attention their service and sacrifice deserve. H.R. 1591 includes $1.3

billion in new funding for veterans' health care. This bill also

improves our ability to care for our wounded warriors, with an

additional $2.8 billion for post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic-

brain injuries, and burns and amputee rehabilitation. Finally, the Iraq

war funding bill provides $20 million to fix Walter Reed Army Medical

Center so that the embarrassingly substandard living conditions can be

quickly remedied.

This legislation also reaffirms our commitment to fighting terrorism

in Iraq and around the globe. Even if the Iraqis fail to meet our

benchmarks for progress in Iraq, American forces can still fight and

pursue terror groups operating in Iraq while continuing to help train

Iraqi security and counter-terrorism forces. The Iraq war funding bill

also provides crucial funds to fight a resurgent Taliban and Al Qaeda

in Afghanistan, and it provides much-needed money for FBI counter-

terrorism initiatives, secures at-risk nuclear materials in other

countries and provides money to install radiation detection equipment

at overseas ports that are shipping to the United States.

Mr. Speaker, I said numerous times during the campaign that Congress

must continue providing full funding for our troops in the field--this

bill does that by investing $95.5 billion in our military, including

almost $900 million for new Humvees and $2.4 billion to improve

protections against Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Though I do

not like the idea of setting a timeline for the redeployment of our

troops, I will not vote against our troops on the field, period. This

bill moves us in the right direction by sending a message to the

President--and to the Iraqi government--that the situation in Iraq is

unacceptable and must change.

The President has previously stated that he hoped Iraqi troops would

be serving on the front line and that U.S. troops would primarily be in

a training role before the end of this year. This funding bill extends

our offensive mission almost one year past the President's own date. We

are essentially asking the Iraqis to take ownership of their own

country again. That is critical for both Iraq and the United States.