Mr. Speaker, as a proud member of the

Progressive and the Out of Iraq Caucuses, I rise in support of H.R.

1591, the ``U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health, and Iraq

Accountability Act.'' I commend the leadership of the Speaker and her

team and Chairman Obey and Defense Subcommittee Chairman Murtha for

their patient and careful crafting of the bill.

I stand in strong support of our troops who have performed

magnificently in battle with a grace under pressure that is

distinctively American. I stand with the American people, who have

placed their trust in the President,

the Vice-President, and the former Secretary of Defense, each of whom

abused the public trust and patience.

I stand with the American taxpayers who have paid nearly $400 billion

to finance the misadventure in Iraq. I stand with the 3,222 fallen

heroes who stand even taller in death because they gave the last full

measure of devotion to their country.

For these reasons, Mr. Speaker, I stand fully, strongly, and

unabashedly in support of H.R. 1591, which for the first time puts the

Congress on record against an open-ended war whose goal line is always

moving.

Mr. Speaker, I voted against the 2002 Iraq War Resolution. I am proud

of that vote. I have consistently voted against the Administration's

practice of submitting a request for war funding through an emergency

supplemental rather than the regular appropriations process which would

subject the funding request to more rigorous scrutiny and require it to

be balanced against other pressing national priorities.

The vote today will put the House on record squarely against the Bush

Administration's policy of looking the other way while the Iraqi

government fails to govern a country worthy of a free people with as

much commitment and dedication to the security and happiness of its

citizens as has been shown by the heroic American servicemen and women

who risked their lives and, in the case of over 3,000 fallen heroes,

lost their lives to win for the Iraqi people the chance to draft their

own constitution, hold their own free elections, establish their own

government, and build a future of peace and prosperity for themselves

and their posterity.

Mr. Speaker, there is no more important issue facing the Congress,

the President, and the American people than the war in Iraq. It is a

subject upon which no one is indifferent, least of all members of

Congress. Many good ideas have been advanced by members of Congress to

bring to a successful conclusion the American military engagement in

Iraq.

Mr. Speaker, nearly every decision reached by a legislative body is a

product of compromise. The bill before us is no different. If it was

left solely to us, any of us could no doubt add or subtract provisions

which we think would improve the bill. Indeed, more than fifty

amendments were offered to H.R. 1591, including four submitted by me.

In fact, the only amendments voted on by the Rules Committee were two

of the amendments I offered, although neither was made in order this

time.

The first of these amendments, Jackson Lee Amendment No. 1, would

terminate the authority granted by Congress to the President in the

2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force in Iraq because the

objectives for which the authorization was granted have all been

achieved. Specifically, Congress authorized the President to use

military force against Iraq to achieve the following objectives:

1. To disarm Iraq of any weapons of mass destruction that could

threaten the security of the United States and international peace in

the Persian Gulf region;

2. To change the Iraqi regime so that Saddam Hussein and his Baathist

party no longer posed a threat to the people of Iraq or its neighbors;

3. To bring to justice any members of al Qaeda known or found to be

in Iraq bearing responsibility for the attacks on the United States,

its citizens, and interests, including the attacks that occurred on

September 11, 2001;

4. To ensure that the regime of Saddam Hussein would not provide

weapons of mass destruction to international terrorists, including al

Qaeda; and

5. To enforce all relevant United Nations Security Council

resolutions regarding Iraq.

Thanks to the skill and valor of the Armed Forces of the United

States we now know for certain that Iraq does not possess weapons of

mass destruction. Thanks to the tenacity and heroism of American

troops, Saddam Hussein was deposed, captured, and dealt with by the

Iraqi people in such a way that neither he nor his Baathist Party will

ever again pose a threat to the people of Iraq or its neighbors in the

region. Nor will the regime ever acquire and provide weapons of mass

destruction to international terrorists. Also, the American military

has caught or killed virtually every member of al Qaeda in Iraq

remotely responsible for the 9/11 attack on our country. Last, all

relevant U.N. resolutions relating to Iraq have been enforced.

In other words, every objective for which the use of force in Iraq

was authorized by the 2002 resolution has been achieved, most with

spectacular success thanks to the professionalism and superior skill of

our service men and women. The point of my amendment was to recognize,

acknowledge, and honor this fact.

My second amendment, Jackson Lee Amendment No. 4, would change the

troop reference date for redeployment set forth in section 1904 from

March 1, 2008, to December 31, 2007. What this means is that the

Government of Iraq will have had more than 3 years since the United

States turned over sovereignty to establish a sustainable government

with secure borders that can protect its people. I believe that if the

Allied Forces could win World War III in less than 4 years, certainly

that is enough time for the Government of Iraq to provide for the

security of its people, with the substantial assistance of the United

States.

While there are many good proposals that have been advanced which are

not included in the bill, we ought not to let the perfect become the

enemy of the good. This emergency supplemental may not be perfect but

it is better--far better--than any legislation relating to the war in

Iraq that has ever been brought to the floor far a vote. Let me count

the ways.

First, H.R. 1591 ensures that U.S. forces in the field have all of

the resources they require. Second, the bill directs more resources to

the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Third it

improves healthcare for returning service members and veterans. Fourth,

it establishes a timeline for ending the United States participation in

Iraq's civil war. Last, it demands accountability by conditioning

continued American military involvement in Iraq upon certification by

the President that the Iraq Government is making meaningful and

substantial progress in meeting political and military benchmarks,

including a militia disarmament program and a plan that equitably

shares oil revenues among all Iraqis.

Mr. Speaker, I want to take a few minutes to discuss why the American

people believe so strongly that the time has come to an end the policy

of not placing any demands or conditions on American military

assistance to the Government of Iraq.

As Kenneth M. Pollack of the Brookings Institution, and a former

senior member of the NSC, brilliantly describes in his essay, ``The

Seven Deadly Sins Of Failure In Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis Of The

Reconstruction,'' in Middle East Review of International Affairs

(December 2006), our trust and patience has been repaid by a record of

incompetence unmatched in the annals of American foreign policy.

The Bush administration disregarded the advice of experts on Iraq, on

nation-building, and on military operations. It staged both the

invasion and the reconstruction on the cheap. It did not learn from its

mistakes and did not commit the resources necessary to accomplish its

original lofty goals or later pedestrian objectives. It ignored

intelligence that contradicted its own views.

It is clear now that the Administration simply never believed in the

necessity of a major reconstruction in Iraq. To exacerbate matters the

Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the White House Office of

the Vice President (OVP) worked together to ensure that the State

Department was excluded from any meaningful involvement in the

reconstruction of Iraq.

The Administration's chief Iraq hawks shared a deeply naive view that

the fall of Saddam and his top henchmen would have relatively little

impact on the overall Iraqi governmental structure. They assumed that

Iraq's bureaucracy would remain intact and would therefore be capable

of running the country and providing Iraqis with basic services. They

likewise assumed that the Iraqi armed forces would largely remain

cohesive and would surrender whole to U.S. forces. The result of all

this was a fundamental lack of attention to realistic planning for the

postwar environment.

As it was assumed that the Iraqis would be delighted to be liberated

little thought was given to security requirements after Saddam's fall.

The dearth of planning for the provision of security and basic services

stemmed from the mistaken belief that Iraqi political institutions

would remain largely intact and therefore able to handle those

responsibilities.

But there were too few Coalition troops, which meant that long supply

lines were vulnerable to attack by Iraqi irregulars, and the need to

mask entire cities at times took so much combat power that it brought

the entire offensive to a halt.

It was not long before these naive assumptions and inadequate

planning conjoined to sow the seeds of the chaos we have witnessed in

Iraq.

The lack of sufficient troops to secure the country led to the

immediate outbreak of lawlessness resulting in massive looting and

destruction dealt a stunning psychological blow to Iraqi confidence in

the United States, from which the country has yet to recover. We

removed Saddam Hussein's regime but we did not move to fill the

military, political, and economic vacuum. The unintended consequence

was the birth of a failing state, which provided the opportunity for

the insurgency to flourish and prevented the development of

governmental institutions capable of providing Iraqis with the most

basic services such as clean water, sanitation, electricity, and a

minimally functioning economy capable of generating basic employment.

Making matters worse, the Administration arrogantly denied the United

Nations overall

authority for the reconstruction even though the U.N. had far more

expertise and experience in nation building.

The looting and anarchy, the persistent insurgent attacks, the lack

of real progress in restoring basic services, and the failure to find

the promised weapons of mass destruction undercut the Administration's

claim that things were going well in Iraq and led it to make the next

set of serious blunders, which was the disbanding of the Iraqi military

and security services.

Mr. Speaker, counterinsurgency experts will tell you that to pacify

an occupied country it is essential to disarm, demobilize, and retrain

(DDR) the local army. The idea behind a DDR program is to entice,

cajole, or even coerce soldiers back to their own barracks or to other

facilities where they can be fed, clothed, watched, retrained, and

prevented from joining an insurgency movement, organized crime, or an

outlaw militia.

By disbanding the military and security services without a DDR

program, as many as one million Iraqi men were set at large with no

money, no means to support their families, and no skills other than how

to use a gun. Not surprisingly, many of these humiliated Sunni officers

went home and joined the burgeoning Sunni insurgency.

The next major mistake made in the summer of 2003 was the decision to

create an Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which laid the foundation for

many of Iraq's current political woes. Many of the IGC leaders were

horribly corrupt, and they stole from the public treasury and

encouraged their subordinates to do the same. The IGC set the tone for

later Iraqi governments, particularly the transitional governments of

Ayad Allawi and Ibrahim Jaafari that followed.

Finally, by insisting that all of the problems of the country were

caused by the insurgency rather than recognizing the problems of the

country were helping to fuel the insurgency, the Bush administration

set about concentrating its efforts in all the wrong places and on the

wrong problems.

This explains why for nearly all of 2004 and 2005, our troops were

disproportionately deployed in the Sunni triangle trying to catch and

kill insurgents. Although our troops caught and killed insurgents by

the hundreds and thousands, these missions were not significantly

advancing our strategic objectives. Indeed, they had little long-term

impact because insurgents are always willing to flee temporarily rather

than fight a leviathan. Second, because so many coalition forces were

playing ``whack-a-mole'' with insurgents in the sparsely populated

areas of western Iraq, the rest of the country was left vulnerable to

take-over by militias.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, a cruel irony is that because the Iraqi

Government brought exiles and militia leaders into the government and

gave them positions of power, it is now virtually impossible to get

them out, and even more difficult to convince them to make compromises

because the militia leaders have learned they can use their government

positions to maintain and expand their personal power, at the expense

both of their rivals who are not in the government and of the central

government itself.

All of this was avoidable and the blame for the lack of foresight

falls squarely on the White House and the Office of the Secretary of

Defense.

Mr. Speaker, the American people spoke loudly and clearly last

November when they tossed out the Rubber-Stamp Republican Congress.

They voted for a New Direction in Iraq and for change in America. They

voted to disentangle American troops from the carnage, chaos, and civil

war in Iraq. They voted for accountability and oversight, which we

Democrats have begun to deliver on; already the new majority has held

more than 100 congressional hearings related to the Iraq War,

investigating everything from the rampant waste, fraud, and abuse of

Iraq reconstruction funding to troop readiness to the Iraq Study Group

Report to the shameful mistreatment of wounded soldiers recuperating at

Walter Reed Medical Center.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 1591, the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health

and Iraq Accountability Act provides real benchmarks and consequences

if the Iraqi Government fails to live up to its commitments. First, it

requires the President to certify and report to Congress on July 1,

2007 that real progress is underway on key benchmarks for the Iraqi

government. If the President cannot so certify, redeployment of U.S.

troops must begin immediately and be completed within 180 days. If the

President fails to certify that Iraq has met the benchmarks on October

1, 2007, a redeployment of U.S. troops would begin immediately at that

time and must be completed within 180 days. In any case, at the latest,

a redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq must begin by March 1, 2008,

and must be completed by August 31, 2008.

Since the benchmarks the Iraqi Government must meet are those

established pursuant to President Bush's policies, it is passing

strange indeed that he would threaten to veto the bill since it

necessarily means he would veto his own benchmarks for the performance

of the Iraqi government. He would veto his own readiness standards for

U.S. troops. The President demands this Congress send him an Iraq war

bill with ``no strings.'' But the only ``strings'' attached, Mr.

Speaker, are the benchmarks and standards imposed by the President

himself.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to the enormous financial cost, the human

cost to the men and women of the United States Armed Forces has also

been high but they have willingly paid it. Operation Iraqi Freedom has

exacerbated the Veterans' Administration health care facility

maintenance backlog; placed an undue strain on the delivery of medical

treatment and rehabilitative services for current and new veterans; and

exacted a heavy toll on the equipment, training and readiness

requirements, and the families of the men and women of the United

States Armed Forces.

The emergency supplemental acknowledges the sacrifices made by, and

the debt of gratitude, we and the Iraqi people owe to Armed Forces of

the United States. But more than that, it makes a substantial down

payment on that debt by providing substantial increases in funding for

our troops.

The supplemental includes a total appropriation of $2.8 billion for

Defense Health Care, which is $1.7 billion above the President's

request. The additional funding supports new initiatives to enhance

medical services for active duty forces and mobilized personnel, and

their family members. Included in this new funding is $450 million for

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder/Counseling; $450 million for Traumatic

Brain Injury care and research; $730 million to prevent health care fee

increases for our troops; $20 million to address the problems at Walter

Reed; and $14.8 million for burn care.

Unlike the Republican leadership of the 109th Congress and the Bush

administration, the new Democratic majority is committed to America's

veterans. What's more, we back up that commitment by investing in their

well-being. For example, the bill includes $1.7 billion above the

President's request for initiatives to address the health care needs of

Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and the backlog in maintaining VA health

care facilities, including $550 million to address the backlog in

maintaining VA health care facilities so as to prevent the VA from

experiencing a situation similar to that found at Walter Reed Medical

Center.

The bill includes an additional $250 million for medical

administration to ensure there are sufficient personnel to support the

growing number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and to maintain a high

level of services for all veterans; $229 million for treating the

growing number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans; $100 million for

contract mental health care, which will allow the VA to contract with

private mental health care providers to ensure that Iraq and

Afghanistan veterans are seen in the most timely and least disruptive

fashion, including members of the Guard and Reserve; and $62 million to

speed up the processing of claims of veterans returning from Iraq and

Afghanistan.

Mr. Speaker, when American troops are sent into harm's way, America

has an obligation to do all it can to minimize the risk of harm to the

troops. That is why I am pleased the supplemental includes additional

funding above the President's request to support our troops. We are

providing $2.5 billion more to address the current readiness crisis of

our stateside troops, including ensuring that they are better equipped

and trained. We include $1.4 billion more for military housing

allowances and $311 million more for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected

(MRAP) vehicles for troops in Iraq. And there is included in the

supplemental $222 million more for infrared countermeasures for Air

Force aircraft to address the growing threat against U.S. air

operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Equally important, Mr. Speaker, the supplemental contains language

directing the President to adhere to current military guidelines for

unit readiness, deployments, and time between deployments.

The supplemental requires the Defense Department to abide by its

current Unit Readiness policy, requiring the chief of the military

department concerned to determine that a unit is ``fully mission

capable'' before it is deployed to Iraq. The President may waive this

provision by submitting a report to Congress detailing why the unit's

deployment is in the interests of national security despite the

assessment that the unit is not fully mission capable.

The Defense Department is also required to abide by its current

policy and avoid extending the deployment of units in Iraq in excess of

365 days for the Army and 210 days for the Marines. The provision may

be waived by the President only by submitting a report to Congress

detailing the particular reason or reasons why the unit's extended

deployment is in the interests of national security.

Mr. Speaker, to reduce the incidence of combat fatigue and enhance

readiness, it is

important that our troops have sufficient time out of the combat zone

and training between deployments. The supplemental requires the Defense

Department to abide by its current policy and avoid sending units back

into Iraq before troops get the required time away from the war

theater. The President may waive this provision by submitting a report

to Congress detailing why the unit's early redeployment to Iraq is in

the interests of national security.

Last but not least, Mr. Speaker, it must be noted that the cost of

the war in Iraq to the United States has also been high regarding the

new and neglected needs of the American people. Americans have been

exceedingly tolerant and patient with this Administration's handling of

the situation in Iraq. We have postponed, foregone, or neglected needed

investments in education, infrastructure, housing, homeland security.

That is why I am very pleased that the supplemental includes the

following $4.3 billion for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

disaster recovery grants, including $910 million to cover the cost of

waiving the matching fund requirements in the Robert T. Stafford

Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. Sec. 5174

(Public Law 93-288) (Stafford Act) for state and local government

meaning the Federal government will finance 100 percent of the grants.

Waiving the Stafford Act's matching fund requirement is critically

important to the Gulf Coast states devastated by Hurricanes Katrina and

Rita. Based on my multiple listening trips to New Orleans and the Gulf

Coast region, and my numerous meetings and discussions with government

officials at all levels in the affected states and with survivors of

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, many of whom now are relocated to my

Houston congressional district, the most important lesson I have

learned is that the Stafford Act is in its present form is simply

inadequate to address the scale of devastation and human suffering

wrought by a disaster the magnitude of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I

thank Mr. Obey and Mr. Murtha for responding to concerns I expressed to

President Bush about the need to modernize the Stafford Act so that it

remains relevant to the 21st Century.

I believe the Stafford Act must be amended to grant the federal

government explicit authority and flexibility to provide long-term

recovery assistance to communities devastated by disasters of the

magnitude of Hurricane Katrina and Rita. Such authority currently does

not exist and the Stafford Act's emphasis on temporary assistance to

affected individuals and communities is simply inadequate to address

the scope of human suffering we witnessed last August and which is

still with us today. I will continue my efforts to modernize the

Stafford Act. But I very strongly approve of the nearly $1 billion

included in the bill to waive the matching fund requirements for hard-

pressed state and local governments coping with emergencies of the

scale of Hurricane Katrina.

Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) funding has been extended to

September 30, 2010. SSBG funding provides critically needed social

services, including programs for mental health, child welfare, and the

treatment of addictive disorders.

Also allocated is $1.3 billion for east and west bank levee

protection and coastal restoration systems in New Orleans and

surrounding parishes.

There is included $25 million for Small Business Administration (SBA)

disaster loans and $80 million for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

Development (HUD) tenant-based rental assistance. The supplemental also

adds $400 million to restore partial cuts to the Low Income Home Energy

Assistance Program (LIHEAP). This funding will bring much needed relief

to many States that are running out of LIHEAP funds just as many

utility shut-off moratoriums are set to expire.

The supplemental adds $750 million to the State Children's Health

Insurance Program (SCHIP) to ensure continued healthcare coverage for

children in 14 States that face a budget shortfall in the program. By

taking prompt action now, these States will not be forced to stop

enrolling new beneficiaries or begin curtailing benefits.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the supplemental provides $30 million for K-12

education recruitment assistance; $30 million for higher education

assistance; and $40 million in security assistance for Liberia. It also

includes an additional $1 billion to purchase vaccines needed to

protect Americans from a global pandemic. Development of production

capacity for a pandemic vaccine must be accelerated so that

manufacturers can quickly produce enough quantities to protect the

population.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, let me say that although the bill may not

be the best I might have hoped for, I have concluded that it is the

best that can be achieved at this time, this moment in history. I

support the bill because I believe it represents a change of course and

a new direction in our policy on Iraq. This bill will place us on the

road that will reunite our troops with their families and bring them

home with honor and success.

Mr. Speaker, the bill before is not asking us to expand or extend the

war in Iraq. I would not and will not do that. On the contrary, this

bill offers us the first real chance to vote to end the war. This bill

puts us on the glide path to the day when our troops come home where we

can ``care for him who has borne the battle, and for his widow and

orphan.'' This bill helps to repair the damage to America's

international reputation and prestige. This bill brings long overdue

oversight, accountability, and transparency to defense and

reconstruction contracting and procurement.

Most important, Mr. Speaker, this bill offers us the first real

chance to vote to end the war. We should take advantage of this

opportunity. I urge my colleagues to support H.R. 1591, the ``U.S.

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