Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the legislation before

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

Accountability Act. This measure supports our troops in the field. It

provides more resources to ensure that our wounded service members and

veterans receive the health care and support they need. And it sets a

responsible timeline for the phased redeployment of our troops.

Our Nation continues to pay a high price for the administration's

reckless invasion of Iraq and the President's open-ended commitment of

U.S. military forces in that country. Our troops are entering their

fifth year in Iraq, and there is no end in sight. The situation is

deteriorating. Iraq is descending into a civil war.

For the last 4 years, the former Republican majority in the Congress

sat on its hands and followed the President's policy like robots. The

American people elected a new majority in the House and Senate so that

Congress would stand up and stop being a rubber stamp for the

President.

The President's open-ended policies of committing U.S. troops in Iraq

for as long as it takes is not working. We need a new way forward. The

only chance to salvage the situation in Iraq is to put real pressure on

the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own future.

Last January 10, President Bush addressed the Nation and admitted

that the situation in Iraq was descending into a vicious cycle of

sectarian violence. He laid out a series of actions that the Iraqi

Government would have to take; benchmarks that the Iraqis would have to

follow through on or lose the support of the American people. The

President said that Iraq would approve legislation to share oil revenue

among the Iraq people; that Iraq would spend $10 billion of its own

money on reconstruction and infrastructure projects; that Iraq would

reform the laws governing de-Baathification and allow more Iraqis to

re-enter their nation's political life; that Iraq would establish a

fair process for considering amendments to Iraq's constitution; and

that Iraq would set a schedule to conduct provincial and local

elections. The President said, ``America will hold the Iraqi Government

to the benchmarks it has announced.''

Since President Bush made that speech two months ago, 217 American

soldiers have been killed in Iraq. More than 3,200 American soldiers

have died since the war began. More than 23,000 have been wounded.

Until the Iraqis step up to the plate and make the difficult political

decisions that need to be made, the sectarian violence will continue

and American military men and women will continue to be killed and

wounded. Either the factions in Iraq are going to come together and

make these decisions, or they are not. We should not leave our troops

in harm's way indefinitely and just hand the President another blank

check to continue an open-ended policy with no end in sight.

The legislation before the House supports the troops, both in Iraq

and Afghanistan. It holds the Iraqi Government to the benchmarks for

progress that the President outlined in his January 10 speech. Under

this bill, if the President cannot certify that Iraq has achieved these

benchmarks by October 1 of this year, a redeployment of U.S. troops

begins immediately and must be completed within 180 days. Absent this

pressure, the Iraqi Government will continue to postpone action on

achieving the benchmarks. If the Iraqi Government does, indeed, meet

the benchmarks by October 1, redeployment of U.S. forces would begin

next March and be completed within 180 days.

After more than 4 years, this legislation would end the open-ended

commitment to this war. It would set a clear timeline for the phased

redeployment of U.S. troops. Without this pressure, there is little

chance that the Iraqi leaders will make the decisions necessary to end

civil war and build one nation. Our country cannot make these decisions

for them. I urge passage of this legislation by the House.