Mr. Speaker, we meet on what is the fourth day of the

fifth year of the war in Iraq. It is a war that has gone on longer than

the war in Korea. America has been fighting longer in Iraq than we did

during World War II--even though that was an international conflict

fought on two fronts against some of the most dangerous threats to our

national security ever known.

Too many Members of this Congress and of this Administration have for

years seen what they wanted to see in Iraq, and believed what they

wanted to believe. But their conceptions couldn't matter less to the

men and women of that nation, or to the men and women of the American

military who are fighting there.

Civilians and soldiers don't live in the world as politicians say it

is. They live in the world as it really is. And they live, every day,

with the consequences of the decisions made here in this chamber.

During the first 4 years of the Iraq war, they had to live with an

Administration and a Congress that either could not, or would not, see

this conflict for what it really was: a war that was not being won,

that was being fought by soldiers who often did not have the equipment

they needed or the care they were owed, that was not improving the

security of the Iraqi people, that was depleting our military and, as a

result, endangering the long-term security of this nation, and that was

based on a flawed strategy that desperately needed to be changed.

They lived with the former Secretary of Defense dismissing persistent

equipment shortages by telling us that our nation had gone to war with

the Army it had. By the time Mr. Rumsfeld had uttered those words, on

December 9th, 2004, 1,288 U.S. soldiers had been killed.

They lived with predictions that the insurgency in Iraq was in its

last throes, a statement made 6 months later. Four hundred thirty-seven

more soldiers had lost their lives in those months.

And now, they live with more calls for patience from the

Administration and its allies, and more denunciations of anyone who

would seek a different course in Iraq.

As of today, more than 3,200 soldiers have died in this war. The

civilian death toll is astonishing, with estimates now running as high

as 1 million Iraqi men, women, and children killed as a direct or

indirect result of the conflict and the chaos it has unleashed.

Millions more have been dislocated, driven out of their homes and into

refugee camps.

It is long past time for this institution to join with our soldiers

and with the people of Iraq in seeing this war for what it really is.

The legislation before us today represents the first real chance

Democrats have had since 2003 to change the course of the war in Iraq.

And we intend to do it.

We will do it not because we are conceding anything to those who

would do our Nation harm, not because we lack the will to continue the

fight, and not because, as some would have you believe, we are giving

up.

Instead, we are going to change the course of this war because the

future of the people of Iraq hinges on it, because a basic level of

respect for our soldiers demands it, and because the long-term security

of our Nation depends on it.

Mr. Speaker, the simple reality is that the situation in Iraq is

stagnant at best, and deteriorating at worst. Politically, economic and

military goals are not being met there. Faced with such truths, why

should this House pass yet another blank check for the war, as past

Congresses have done?

Instead, this bill is based on a simple and logical idea: it makes

America's continued involvement in Iraq conditional on the situation

there improving.

America's soldiers will no longer be asked to fight in an open-ended

war whose goal line keeps moving. This legislation requires Iraqi

leaders to make the political compromises necessary to produce a

working government that will function for all of Iraq--or else risk

losing America's military support. And it will require security

benchmarks to be met if American soldiers are to continue sacrificing

their own safety for that goal.

But what is more, this bill represents the first step Congress has

ever taken towards ending the war in Iraq.

A clear majority of the American people want this body to take

decisive steps toward that end. A clear majority of our global allies

want the same thing. A significant number of generals and military

officials think that ending this conflict must be achieved sooner

rather than later.

This bill is a response to their words, and to their counsel. It will

not end the war immediately, nor will it end it recklessly.

Instead, it rejects the idea of a war in Iraq without end.

To continue funding this conflict without requiring any tangible

progress to be made in Iraq makes no sense. It would achieve neither

peace in that nation, nor security here.

But what it would achieve, Mr. Speaker, is the continued depletion

and degradation of our military beyond all reason. It would continue to

render our armed forces unable to fight in other parts of the world

against other threats. And it would continue to force suffering

soldiers to return to the battlefield time and again, despite physical

and mental injuries.

We know the statistics: in addition to the 3,223 soldiers that have

died, tens of thousands more have been injured, some permanently. And

there are more than 32,000 Iraq veterans--32,000--who who every day

suffer silently from the scourge of mental health problems. More than

13,000 of those men and women have been diagnosed with post-traumatic

stress disorder, PTSD.

And yet, they are afforded no relief. The President's escalation of

this conflict is forcing more soldiers back into combat sooner, with

less rest, with less training, and with less time to heal. There are

even reports of men and women being sent back to Iraq who are too

injured to wear body armor.

Mr. Speaker, it is important not to view these realities in the

abstract. I want to share with you a story I recently heard, the story

of one young lieutenant currently awaiting his second deployment to

Iraq.

Though he trained as an engineer, his first tour of duty saw him

bravely patrolling dangerous streets north of Baghdad. He returned last

December, and was initially expecting a year on base during which to

rest and train a new platoon.

Instead, he will be heading back months sooner. He says that the

soldiers under his command are not going to get the time they need to

train properly for their mission. The vehicles and equipment they now

use to train for war are failing and often break They are physically

weary, with many still suffering from the lingering effects of leg and

back injuries. Others are battling more elusive damage, and are in

counseling for PTSD. He even told me that the vast majority of the once

married soldiers in his unit are now or will soon be divorced. Their

lives outside of the war are coming apart.

And yet, if you ask him, he will never complain about these

difficulties. They are all part of the life of the soldier, he says, a

few of the many challenges he and his men will confront every day they

are deployed. When those in the military are given a mission, he told

me, they find a way to complete it. That creed is the foundation of the

strength of our Armed Forces.

It is the personification of the word sacrifice, Mr. Speaker. This

young soldier and those under his charge are going back to Iraq again,

even though they are wounded, and tired, and lacking in training and

equipment. They miss their families. They miss their lives back home.

But they are going all the same--going simply because this body has

given the President the right to send them into battle.

But what this soldier did tell me is that our Armed Forces cannot go

on like this. He said that if the foundation of our military's

strength--its refusal to admit defeat--is misused, then we will end up

destroying our system of national defense.

We hear the reports of the 82nd Airborne, for decades able to respond

anywhere in the world within 72 hours, now struggling to respond to

anything besides deployment orders sending its soldiers to Iraq.

We see men and women in uniform being sent back for tour after tour

after tour, our services desperately trying to find a way to meet new

troop requirements.

Mr. Speaker, this war represents a dramatic misuse of our military.

In the name of our national security, it is undermining the only true

guarantor of national security that we have: our Armed Forces. And for

4 years, this Congress let it happen.

But not anymore. Today, the House will finally recognize that our

military is at the breaking point--not because of any inherent

weakness, but because it is being asked to complete a mission no army

could succeed at.

And so, that mission must change.

The new strategy this bill sets forth has nothing to do with

surrender, Mr. Speaker. Instead, it has everything to do with doing

what must be done to work toward a secure Iraq. And it has everything

to do with refusing to allow those who would do us harm fool us into

defeating ourselves--in the process, attaining a victory that they will

never be able to achieve on their own.

Let me say as well that this funding bill also respects our soldiers

enough to put their needs at the forefront of our national priorities,

instead of leaving them behind. From now on, if they are asked to go

into battle without being fully armored, fully rested, and fully

trained, then the President himself will have to stand before this

country and explain why it is necessary to do so.

This bill will also provide desperately needed funds for veterans'

health care. Our country is seeing more wounded soldiers returning from

abroad than at any point in 40 years, and yet for years, our health

care system has failed thousands of them. It is unconscionable, and it

is long past time that it was changed.

Finally, this bill both increases funding for the ongoing conflict in

Afghanistan and for a variety of other critically important national

security objectives.

Taken together, it represents the beginning of what will be a

responsible and ethical shift in our national security priorities away

from a mistaken conflict in Iraq and back toward other concerns--the

continued rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, for example, and the

needs of wounded soldiers at home.

By changing a flawed strategy that has weakened our military for

years without getting us any closer to a stable Iraq, this legislation

represents our country's best chance to shake both of our nations free

from the shackles of a stalemate benefiting neither.

It is an important and historic bill, one that the people of Iraq

deserve, that the American people deserve, and that our troops most

certainly deserve. I am proud to support it, and I urge all of my

colleagues to do the same.