Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding and for

his exceptional leadership in the national security of our country.

My colleagues, for 3 days and nights, more than 350 Members of

Congress have come to the floor to speak their conscience about the war

in Iraq and the President's escalation proposal. I commend my

colleagues on both sides of the aisle for the tenor, for the most part,

and the substance of their remarks.

There is one proposition on which we can all agree: Our troops have

performed excellently in Iraq. They have done everything asked of them.

And as the resolution states, Congress and the American people will

continue to support and protect the members of the United States Armed

Forces who are serving or who have served bravely and honorably in

Iraq. We owe our troops a debt of gratitude for their patriotism, for

their courage, and for the sacrifices they are willing to make.

As a sign of our respect for them, particularly those who have lost

their lives in the war, and for their families, I request that we

observe a moment of silence.

Thank you.

We owe our troops a course of action in Iraq that is worthy of their

sacrifice. Today, we set the stage for a new direction on Iraq by

passing a resolution with fewer than 100 words which supports our

troops and disapproves of the President's escalation proposal. Instead,

Democrats have proposed a different course of action to the President.

Over and over again we have suggested a different plan.

One year ago, Senator Harry Reid and I stood with House and Senate

Democrats to propose our agenda for real security, to project our power

and our values, to protect the American people. Consistent with our

real security agenda, Democrats have sent the President four letters,

starting in July, and the most recent one the end of January, urging

him to adopt a strategy for success, containing these elements: change

of mission, redeployment of troops, building a political consensus,

engaging in diplomacy, reform of reconstruction and a refocus in the

war on terror.

In terms of changing the mission, U.S. forces in Iraq must be

transitioned from combat to training of Iraqi forces, real

counterterrorism activities, force protection and logistics. A shift in

mission will allow the number of U.S. troops in Iraq to be reduced,

diminishing their presence in the daily lives of Iraqis and minimizing

the chance of these troops being caught in the crossfire between rival

Iraqi factions. Ending the emphasis on a combat mission will allow the

phased redeployment of our forces from Iraq beginning within the next 4

to 6 months.

Declining troop levels will require fewer bases, and none of them

will need to be permanent, consistent with legislation introduced and

passed by this House by Congresswoman Barbara Lee and also introduced

by Congressman David Price.

A smaller military presence in Iraq will also relieve some of the

strain on

our troops, their families, and our military equipment. Success in Iraq

requires more than military force, and that really is what this debate

is about today.

General Peter Chiarelli, a three-star General, until recently the

Commander of the Multinational Corps Iraq, observed in December, and I

quote, ``We need to get out of thinking that this is solely a military

conflict where we must simply apply more U.S. or coalition or Iraqi

forces against an enemy that we can destroy. All our Nation's

strengths--diplomatic, economic, political--must be leveraged to help

the Iraqis find their way through this process.''

Unfortunately, there has been no sustained and effective effort to

engage Iraq's neighbors diplomatically. Iraq's neighbors have the

greatest stake in Iraq's stability and the role it will play in the

region. Leaders of those countries are best able to help Iraqi leaders

improve security by reducing ethnic tensions. To this end, an

international contact group should be established to support a

political settlement in Iraq and preserve Iraq's sovereignty.

Senator Reid and I also wrote to the President that an international

conference should be convened to broaden support for the reconstruction

effort that is essential if Iraqis are going to be put to work building

their country's future.

On the subject of reconstruction, there has been little effective

reconstruction in Iraq because of mismanagement and disappearances of

funds. That is why we propose that, in order for the reconstruction of

Iraq to attract international support, it must be conducted according

to practices which are honest, transparent, and accountable.

Reconstruction must be guided by the kind of process set forth in

legislation introduced by Congressman Patrick Murphy and the Blue Dog

Coalition. The United States should take the lead on accountability in

reconstruction. Politically, there has been no sustained and effective

effort to engage rival Iraqi factions.

The U.S. must insist that Iraqi leaders make the political

compromises needed for a broad-based and sustainable political

settlement that will produce an inclusive political system in Iraq. A

good beginning would be to press Iraqi leaders to amend the

Constitution to achieve a fair sharing of power and resources. That was

promised at the time of the referendum over 1 year ago.

The resulting political consensus will allow Iraqi security forces to

challenge the militias on behalf of the nation and to disarm them.

Proponents of the President's escalation are equating the war on

terror to the war in Iraq. As our esteemed chairman of the House Armed

Services Committee, Congressman Ike Skelton of Missouri, a great

patriot, has observed, ``Two conflicts. Two wars. And the two should

not be confused. There are those who attempt to fuzz the two conflicts

together as `the war on terror,' but the wars are truly separate and

distinct,'' Chairman Skelton stated.

The war in Iraq continues to detract from our ability to fight

against the war on international terrorism effectively. We need to

finish the job started more than 5 years ago in Afghanistan against al

Qaeda and the Taliban and address other conditions around the world in

which the appeal of terrorism breeds.

The longer it takes us to resolve the situation in Iraq, the longer

resources and attention will continue to be diverted from the war on

terrorism. Our ability to respond to the escalating conflict in

Afghanistan and other potential crises in the world is constrained

severely by the deterioration in military readiness to levels not seen

since the Vietnam era.

There we have the six elements that we talked about: change of

mission, redeployment of troops, building of political consensus,

engaging in diplomacy, reform of reconstruction, and a refocus on the

war on terror. By placing so much emphasis, instead, on dealing with

the problems in Iraq militarily and not enough emphasis on sustained

political and diplomatic engagements, the President's escalation plan

repeats past mistakes.

The stakes in Iraq are too high to recycle proposals that have little

prospect for success. The bipartisan resolution today may be

nonbinding, but it will send a strong message to the President. We here

in Congress are committed to protecting and supporting our troops.

The passage of this legislation will signal a change in direction in

Iraq that will end the fighting and bring our troops home safely and

soon. Our troops are working together to secure our Nation, and we in

this House must work together to secure our Nation as well and to do so

in a way that honors their sacrifice.

I urge my colleagues to support our troops and a new direction in

Iraq by voting ``aye'' on the bipartisan Skelton-Lantos-Jones

resolution.