Mr. Speaker, I normally rise to speak on

behalf of the people of Florida's 16th Congressional District. Today I

rise to begin a conversation not only with my colleagues, but with my

constituents.

This week, this legislative body, the people's House, is engaged in a

great debate over the President's decision to stay the course in Iraq

by escalating the number of troops. I have, over the past few days,

heard many arguments as to the wisdom of the President's decision to do

so. But the one message that all who have spoken agree with, Democratic

or Republican, liberal or conservative, is that our brave men and women

in uniform have done a magnificent job fighting in Iraq and around the

world to protect our lives, our culture, and our country.

I have heard my colleagues argue that the mere act of debating the

President's decision to escalate the war sends the wrong message to our

troops and the wrong message to our enemies. To these colleagues I say

do not underestimate the power of democracy, the power of freedom of

speech, the very powers we are fighting to give the people of Iraq.

Debate sends the message of strength, resolve, and commitment. This

debate is about finding the best way for America to win the war on

terror.

I agree with the President that the world is a dangerous place and we

need to take the war to the terrorists and those who support terror.

But I disagree with the President that by sending more troops to police

a civil war in Iraq, America is any closer to winning the war on

terror. I come to this conclusion as a result of consultations with our

military leaders, our diplomats, and those in the White House

responsible for executing the President's policies. I come to this

conclusion from talking to our men and women in uniform who have served

with distinction.

Democracy can only happen when a people want it. We have seen time

and again that a people who yearn for democracy will break the yoke of

tyranny and liberate themselves from their oppressors. America has

invested lives of over 3,000 of its best young men and women, sustained

over 20,000 casualties, and spent nearly $400 billion on the Iraq war.

We have rid the Iraqi people of a cruel tyrant and have given them the

opportunity to live in a democracy. American men and women securing a

street corner in Sadr City will not change the hearts of the Sunni or

Shia. Additional troops will not secure democracy. Only the men and

women of Iraq can do that. Now is the time for the Iraqi people to

stand and demand democracy.

It is time for America to move forward in our fight against terror.

It is time to focus on eliminating terrorists in Iraq, Afghanistan, or

wherever they are harbored. It is time to bring Osama bin Laden to

justice for the crimes he perpetrated on 9/11.

We need to gather our strength and send a clear message to our

enemies that their continued efforts to support terror and engage in

activity against America or her allies will result in certain and swift

justice.

This President needs to do what his father did in the first gulf war

and what President Clinton did in the Balkans, and that is to

demonstrate leadership by engaging in diplomacy. This President needs

to listen to the sage advice of the Baker-Hamilton Commission and use

America's power and prestige to bring the world together in support of

the Iraqi people. The world needs to know that America will provide a

democratic Iraq, and those who support her, with political, economic,

and military support.

I want my friends in Stuart, Okeechobee, Sebring, LaBelle, and Punta

Gorda to know that I am here today because democracy requires us to

speak up and speak out and you deserve to have a voice in this debate.

In speaking out, I am supporting our President by letting him know that

we are committed to winning the war on terror, but that we will not

support his strategy to increase escalation of the troops in Iraq and

that America will not quit until we have vanquished all who use terror

to achieve political gain.

We want the Iraqi people to know that this is their moment to grasp

democracy; and should they choose to do so, the American people will

continue to support them and their efforts to build a better life for

their children.

Tomorrow, my colleagues and I will take the important first step in

showing the President that we support our troops, but do not support

his plan to invest more American lives to mediate a civil war.

Make no mistake, this vote is binding, as it binds me and my

colleagues to our constituents by forcing us to take a stand.