Mr. Speaker, this has been a long debate. But two points

must be absolutely clear at the outset. First, it is imperative that we

continue to support our troops on the ground. Our service members

deployed to Iraq have done a magnificent job. They have performed their

missions admirably, effectively, and with valor. They have done

everything we have asked them to do. They have made sacrifices as have

their families. They deserve our unqualified support. And as a Member

of Congress, I strongly disagree with some of my colleagues who have

suggested cutting off funds for our troops serving in Iraq.

A second point to be made here is that immediate withdrawal from

Iraq, which has likewise been advocated by some members on the other

side of the aisle, is also a bad idea. The Iraq Study Group has said

that ``it would be wrong for the United States to abandon the country

through a precipitate withdrawal of troops and support.'' The National

Intelligence Estimate of January 2007 says that ``if Coalition forces

were withdrawn rapidly during the term of this estimate, we judge that

this almost certainly would lead to a significant increase in the scale

and scope of sectarian conflict in Iraq.''

Religious conflict aside, there is another reason for avoiding

immediate withdrawal, and that is simply that al Qaeda and its

affiliated groups still operate in Iraq. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin

Laden's chief deputy, considers their efforts in Iraq to be ``crucial''

towards furthering al Qaeda objectives in the region. Thus, these

groups are aggressively pursuing terrorism within the borders of that

country, committing acts of violence against Shias, Kurds and anyone

else who dares to disagree with them.

By instigating this mayhem and bloodshed in Iraq, al Qaeda hopes to

realize its supreme goal, to destabilize the government, assume control

over the country and its oil wealth and eventually install a Taliban-

style government in Baghdad. This is not good for the United States. It

is not good for Iraq. And it is not good for the region. That is why I

oppose immediate withdrawal.

That being said, and understanding the need for Congress to debate

the issue of the war, I am disappointed in the way this debate has

taken shape. The majority has given much time for us to express our

views, but it has limited the options that might be employed to make

this legislation more effective. They allowed no amendments either from

Republicans or from their own Democratic colleagues. They refused to

permit any substitutes. They even denied us a motion to recommit.

By putting before us this highly restrictive rule, the other side has

effectively foreclosed dialogue on other measures that might have added

substance to the debate. While both Democrats and Republicans utilize

the Iraq Study Group findings to justify their positions, the majority

leadership has refused to consider my colleague from Virginia's

legislation, Mr. Frank Wolf, his legislation, H. Con. Res. 45, which

would implement some of the most significant recommendations of the

Iraq Study Group's report. This legislation would emphasize the need

for U.S. forces to accelerate the training of their Iraqi counterparts,

would establish milestones for success in Iraq, and would promote

diplomatic initiatives in order to advance stability in the country and

in the region.

Yet no debate on such a bill and no opportunity to offer an amendment

consistent with those objectives was tolerated by the majority. What

does this say about their commitment to fulfilling the objectives

recommended by the Iraq Study Group's report? You know, we are all

speaking about this report, but we are simply not voting on it. That is

wrong.

I stand before you today in my second term in Congress as someone who

has tried to understand the Iraq war from many different viewpoints. I

have talked with my constituents both pro and con about the war. I have

listened to military and intelligence briefings. I have visited Iraq. I

have studied the Iraq Study Group report. I have read journal articles,

academic studies and news clips on the subject, all to increase my

professional awareness of what is going on over there.

But I do not just see this from a professional perspective. The Iraq

war has had personal consequences for me as well. One of my staffers,

Jason Lane, is a Reservist who has been called to active duty and is

deployed there right now.

I have talked with the troops who have served there. I have visited

the wounded in hospitals and most painfully attended the funerals of

those who gave to this country what Abraham Lincoln called the last

full measure of devotion. I attended one of those funerals just last

Friday.

From all of this, I must admit, I have my concerns about the efficacy

of the President's troop surge. I believe that it is far more important

that the Iraqis

show the political will to achieve reconciliation and end the sectarian

violence that is slowly but surely strangling their capital and their

country.

As their Prime Minister, Maliki said on November 27, 2006, ``The

crisis is political, and ones who can stop the cycle of aggravation and

the bloodletting of innocents are the politicians.''

Success in Iraq is essential to achieving America's foreign policy

objectives, and it is in America's best interest to ensure that Iraq

can sustain, govern and defend itself. But I believe in holding Prime

Minister Maliki to his word. We cannot and will not abandon our troops

who are currently on the ground in Iraq.

We must make sure that our forces effectively engage al Qaeda, as

opposed to mediating a Sunni-Shia conflict that is the responsibility

of the Iraqi government to resolve. We all know these are the

challenges facing this Congress, and these are challenges that must be

met in a bipartisan manner.