Mr. Speaker, it has been nearly 4 years since President

Bush ordered American military forces into Iraq with the intention of

toppling the government of Saddam Hussein. Now, after more than 3,100

American troops have been lost and this Nation has spent in excess of

$365 billion, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Do we endorse the

President's decision to escalate the conflict, or do we, as a coequal

branch of government, exercise our prerogative to force a change in

course?

In October of 2002 I voted for the resolution authorizing the use of

military force in Iraq based on three assumptions: First, that the

intelligence community correctly assessed that Iraq had active

stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and was pursuing a

nuclear bomb; second, that President Bush would exhaust all diplomatic

efforts to resolve the international community's standoff with Iraq

over its weapons programs; and, third, that if the President determined

that a resort to force was necessary the prosecution of the war and its

aftermath would be competently managed by the President and his

administration.

Each of these assumptions proved to be wrong. Iraq had no weapons of

mass destruction and no nuclear program; President Bush did not exhaust

all diplomatic efforts; and perhaps most tragically, his administration

made terrible, costly and repeated blunders in its conduct of the war.

I have been to Iraq three times to visit our troops and to thank them

for their service and their sacrifice. I have met the families of five

soldiers and marines from my district who have been lost in Iraq. I

have visited with our wounded here and overseas.

Words cannot convey the admiration that I have for the magnificent

job that these men and women, many of them still in their late teens

and early twenties, are doing on our behalf in Iraq. Whatever failings

there have been in the prosecution of this war by the administration,

our troops have performed magnificently in wretched conditions and

against an often unseen enemy that has targeted U.S. military and Iraqi

citizens without discrimination.

We must and we will continue to ensure that they have the resources

they need to do their jobs and to come home safely, and once they are

home, we will provide them with the care and benefits that they have

paid for in blood.

Unlike some of my friends in the minority, I have never construed

support for the troops to require a blind, unquestioning and slavish

devotion to the Executive, even when the Executive is wrong, even when

its policies will not achieve the desired result, and even when those

very policies place our troops unnecessarily and unproductively at

greater risk. On the contrary, on the contrary, an engaged Congress is

essential to meaningful support for the troops.

On many occasions here on the House floor, in committee and in

meetings with senior officials, I have pressed for accountability,

oversight and a more vigorous commitment to force protection. In

October 2003, I voted against the $87 billion Iraq supplemental because

I believed that it shortchanged security for our troops and allocated

too much for no-bid contracts.

Now, more than 3 years later, our reconstruction efforts in Iraq are

a disaster and a national disgrace. Too many of our troops still ride

into battle in vehicles that are not properly protected against IEDs

and other weapons.

Last June I voted against the administration's ``stay the course''

resolution that sought to conflate the war in Iraq with the entire

struggle against al Qaeda, even as it failed to acknowledge that our

strategy to stabilize the country was not working and that its country

was slipping into civil war.

Now, against the advice of Congress, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group,

most military experts and the American people, President Bush has

determined that victory in Iraq can be achieved by deploying 21,000

additional combat troops to Baghdad and its environs.

Regrettably, I cannot see how this escalation can be successful.

Instead, I believe it will further the cycle of dependency that has

allowed Iraq's Shiite dominated government to avoid making compromises

with Sunnis and to avoid building capable security forces. It will

increase the strain on our military at a time when the Army and Marines

are already stretched to the breaking point. And, most of all, it will

deepen our military commitment to Iraq at a time when there is a

national consensus that we should be taking steps to reduce our combat

role and reinvigorate the diplomatic process.

The administration and the minority charge that those who do not

support the escalation have no plan and that this is the only possible

path to success. I disagree. The Iraq Study Group laid out a strategy

that centered around a reduced American combat presence in Iraq,

increased efforts to train Iraqi forces, increased pressures on the

Iraqis to make compromises and a regional conference to hammer out a

common approach to Iraq.

This resolution is a clear message to the President that his approach

has lost the confidence of this House and we need a change of

direction. I hope he chooses to take our counsel. But he should be

aware that the days of a rubber-stamp Congress are over, and we are

willing to take other steps to insist on charting a new course in Iraq.