Mr. Speaker, I thank the distinguished gentleman for

yielding and the solemnity with which he introduced this debate.

My colleagues, in a few weeks the war in Iraq will enter its fifth

year, causing thousands of deaths, tens of thousands of casualties,

costing hundreds of billions of dollars, and damaging the standing of

the United States in the international community. And there is no end

in sight.

The American people have lost faith in President Bush's course of

action in Iraq, and they are demanding a new direction.

On January 10, President Bush proposed deploying more than 20,000

additional combat troops to Iraq. This week we will debate his

escalation.

In doing so, we must be mindful of the sacrifices our military

personnel are being asked to make in this war and the toll it is taking

on them, on their families, and on our veterans. Each one of us must

determine, in a

manner worthy of their sacrifice, whether the President's proposal will

make America safer, make our military stronger, and make the region

more stable.

As this debate begins, let us be clear on one fundamental principle:

we all support the troops.

In this bipartisan resolution that is before us today, it clearly

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 honor the

service of our troops by asking the difficult questions about this war.

As Republican Senator Robert Taft of Ohio said 2 weeks after Pearl

Harbor: ``Criticism in a time of war is essential to the maintenance of

any democratic government.''

And just 10 days ago, President Bush told House Democrats: ``I

welcome debate in a time of war . . . I do not believe that if you

don't happen to agree with me, you don't share the same sense of

patriotism I do,'' the President said.

In the spirit of responsibility to our troops and the patriotism we

all share, let us consider whether the President's escalation proposal

will lessen the violence in Iraq and bring our troops home safely and

soon.

From the standpoint of the military, the President's plan must be

evaluated for its prospects for success. It is based on a judgment that

the way out of Iraq lies in sending more troops in. Our experience in

Iraq has proven just the opposite. Four previous troop escalations have

resulted in escalating levels of violence.

And as with any military action, the President's plan must also be

evaluated on the additional burdens it will place on our troops and

military families who have already sacrificed so much, the impact it

will have on the already dangerous state of our military readiness.

Our military has done everything they have been asked to do, and they

have performed excellently. But in order to succeed in Iraq, there must

be diplomatic and political initiatives.

There has been no sustained and effective effort to engage Iraq's

neighbors diplomatically, and there has been no sustained and effective

effort to engage Iraqi factions politically. The Iraqi Government has

failed to honor promises made last year when the constitution was

adopted by failing to propose amendments to include all sectors of Iraq

in the civic life of the country. As a result, today we are confronted

by little political accommodation, hardening sectarian divisions,

ethnic cleansing by neighborhoods, and waves of refugees burdening

neighboring countries.

After the Members of this body, this House of Representatives, have

fully debated the President's escalation proposal, we will have a

straight up-or-down vote. In a few days, and in fewer than 100 words,

we will take our country in a new direction on Iraq. A vote of

disapproval will set the stage for additional Iraq legislation which

will be coming to the House floor.

Friday's vote will signal whether the House has heard the American

people: no more blank checks for President Bush on Iraq. Our taxpayer

dollars must go to protect our troops, to keep our promises to our

veterans, and to provide for the safety of the American people.

In light of the facts, President Bush's escalation proposal will not

make America safer, will not make our military stronger, and will not

make the region more stable; and it will not have my support.

I urge my colleagues to support our troops and vote ``aye'' on the

bipartisan Skelton-Lantos-Jones resolution before us today