Mr. Speaker, it is right for Congress to ask the

President to implement a plan to start bringing our troops home from

Iraq. That would be the right message to send to the Iraqis: they must

assume the responsibility for security of their own country.

Congress needs to have a real and meaningful debate on the future

role of the U.S. military in Iraq as we approach the fourth anniversary

of the congressional authorization to use force in Iraq. Congress

should take seriously its obligation to oversee our military.

The majority has given us one option with this resolution, which is

to make a political statement in support of President Bush. The House

leadership has refused to allow amendments to this resolution. It is

interesting that we are committed to building democratic institutions

in Iraq but we are not willing to let the Members of Congress vote on

alternative policies in Iraq. Our men and women in uniform that are

putting their lives on the line every day deserve the full attention of

Congress.

Mr. Speaker, we all agree with those parts of the resolution that:

honor Americans who have taken part in the global war on terror,

including our first responders, diplomats, military, and intelligence

officers; honor the sacrifices of American, Iraqi, and Afghan military

forces, and the families of those troops; congratulate the Iraqi people

for holding free and fair elections, under a new democratic

constitution; supports the efforts of the Iraqi and Afghan people to

live in freedom; and declares that the United States will prevail in

the global war on terror.

We should be debating whether or not and how to withdrawal or

redeploy United States Armed Forces from Iraq, and members should be

permitted to offer amendments to this resolution. We should not simply

be asked to ``stay the course.'' Congress must reclaim its oversight

responsibility and ask serious questions about the Iraq war and

reconstruction effort.

I am convinced that we must change course. The repositioning of our

troops would help us to regain the focus on the war on terror.

The President came to Congress in October 2002 and asked Congress to

authorize force against Iraq. I voted against giving the President this

authority, and parted ways with most of my colleagues in Congress. This

was not a popular vote at the time, but it was the right vote. I was

proud of my vote then as I am now.

I have remained an outspoken critic of President Bush's policies in

Iraq. There was no connection between the events of 9/11 and the Saddam

Hussein regime. The Bush Administration distorted and misused

intelligence information about Saddam Hussein's actual

WMD capacity. Saddam Hussein did not have nuclear weapons, and did not

pose an imminent threat to the United States.

During our debate in 2002, I stated on the House floor that I had

``grave concerns'' about a unilateral, pre-emptive military attack by

the United States which could ``endanger our global coalition against

terrorism.'' I also stated that ``we cannot overlook the massive cost

and effort that the United States would have to undertake in a post-

Saddam regime.'' Finally, I stated that ``the United States will need

the help of its allies as it attempts to transition Iraq from a

dictatorship to a democracy.'' I regret to say that I was correct on

all these counts.

The President prematurely disbanded the Iraqi security forces. After

overthrowing Saddam, the President protected the oil ministries, but

not the weapons and ammunitions depots, which were looted by insurgents

and are now being used to attack American forces. The President did not

provide the heavy armor needed for our troops and equipment. The

President did not plan for an insurgency. Finally, the President

invaded Iraq and then attempted to reconstruct Iraq without seeking any

significant assistance from the international community.

We have paid a heavy price. More than 2,500 American soldiers are

dead. More than 18,000 American soldiers have been injured. We have

spent over $300 billion to date on the Iraq war and reconstruction.

Mr. Speaker, in December 2004 I visited Iraq as part of a

Congressional delegation. I wanted to see the situation on the ground

in Iraq firsthand. It is an experience that I will not soon forget. I

thanked our troops for their service, including troops from Maryland

and from our Maryland Guard and Maryland Reserve. Our troops have

performed with honor and distinction and have done everything that we

have asked of them. Our troops deserve to come home to their families

and a grateful nation.

Yet the President still says that we must stay the course. We need to

immediately change course in Iraq, which must include the drawdown of

U.S. troops from Iraq. We currently have approximately 130,000 troops

in Iraq, roughly 20 percent of which are Guard and Reserve troops.

Military experts have recommended a drawdown of at least 10,000 troops

a month. It is not necessary for us to announce a specific timeline for

the withdrawal of our troops. It is reasonable to expect, however, that

one-half of our combat troops should come home by the end of 2006, and

that all of our combat troops should come home by the end of 2007.

We should make sure that our National Guard are the first to come

home, as they were never intended to be used as the primary military

force for overseas conflicts. Our Guard units should be made available

for local needs.

The drawdown of American troops from Iraq back home will allow us to

achieve certain necessary objectives. First, we will bring our troops

home to their families, and take them out of the middle of a civil war.

Our soldiers should not be used as police officers. Second, we will

send an important message to the Iraqi government to take

responsibility. U.S. troops cannot remain in Iraq indefinitely. Third,

we will remove a powerful propaganda and recruitment tool for Al Qaeda

that the United States is an occupation force. Fourth, we would be able

to stage our troops outside of Iraq to work with our allies and the

international community to fight the war against international

terrorism. The repositioning of our troops would help us to regain the

focus we have lost on the war on terror. Finally, bringing our troops

home would help us preserve the strength of our all-volunteer military

by improving troop morale and boosting our efforts to improve

recruitment of new soldiers.

The United States should convene an international conference on Iraq

which would include the government of Iraq. As the sole remaining

superpower, the United States needs to mend diplomatic fences. Such a

conference should achieve three primary goals. First, it should produce

a verifiable cease-fire. Second, it would establish a mechanism for the

completion of the training of Iraqi security forces. Finally, it would

coordinate all international humanitarian and reconstruction assistance

to the new Iraqi government.

Finally, we must honor our commitment to our military and veterans'

families, which will strengthen our recruitment efforts for new troops.

Our volunteer military is in danger. The morale of our troops is

suffering due to longer tours of duties and budgets that have not fully

funded veterans' benefits, particularly in meeting their health care

needs.

Our recruitment efforts have fallen short in the military, as both

the Army National Guard and Army Reserve have only met roughly 80% of

their recruiting goals.

The answer is the proper deployment of our troops, and the full

funding of our veterans' benefits, particularly their health care

needs. These benefits are particularly relevant considering we have

18,000 wounded veterans so far as a result of the Iraq war. We must

also bear in mind that estimates indicate that 50,000 war veterans will

experience battle fatigue and post traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, and

will require extensive treatment and rehabilitation.

Mr. Speaker, I call on the President to immediately change course in

Iraq, including the implementation of a plan to start bringing our

troops home from Iraq.