Mr. Speaker, last Thursday, September 15, we held an

informal congressional hearing to discuss and explore a military

withdrawal from Iraq. It was called ``The Bipartisan Congressional

Forum on How to Bring the Troops Home.'' It was the first of its kind

and it was about time.

I had hoped that the House Committee on Armed Services or the House

Committee on International Relations would have taken up the matter,

but repeated calls for such hearings have fallen on deaf ears. So, with

the help of my colleagues and with many others and also my wonderful

staff, we went about putting together this very needed hearing.

In so doing, we knew absolutely that opposition to the war is a

stance that is firmly in the political mainstream. Less than 40 percent

of Americans, according to the recent polls, approve of the President's

handling of Iraq, and roughly half want to see our troops come home as

soon as possible. With this being an American sentiment comes

responsibility to be more than a protest movement.

We also knew that we needed to offer sound, thorough policy proposals

that could turn our deeply held convictions into operational reality,

and that is what Thursday's hearing was all about. This was not an

opportunity for placard waving, though there is certainly a time and a

place for that. We were more interested in how to bring our troops

home, rather than why.

We heard from a broad range of experts, from scholars and military

strategists. We heard from Senator Max Cleland from Georgia.

We started with an overview of the situation on the ground, including

a perspective on the lives of Iraqis under U.S. occupation. Later, we

heard about specific ways that we can pivot away from the current

policies, ending our military presence in Iraq and bringing our troops

home. From there, we transitioned into a discussion of what next. I

have always insisted that ending the war does not and cannot mean

abandoning Iraq and its people.

Believing in the principle underlying Colin Powell's ``Pottery Barn

Rule,'' and that even if it was the Bush administration policy that

broke it, at the very least we must play a constructive role in the

rebuilding of Iraq.

Most of all, Thursday's hearing was designed to inspire a long

overdue national conversation about alternatives to the current Iraq

policy.

Our goal was to fill the policy vacuum and break the silence on

Capitol Hill where, frankly, Members of Congress have been slow to

embrace the fresh thinking and new approaches to Iraq that their

constituents are eager to discuss and are eager to hear. For too long,

for a number of reasons, this debate has been ceded to the Bush

administration, even as they have produced a bloody and ruinous

debacle.

Thursday's hearing demonstrated that we want to do more than just say

no to the war in Iraq. We want to say yes to a new, intelligent,

progressive, peaceful Iraq policy that will both protect the American

people and fulfill our obligations to the Iraqi people. Chief among

these obligations is to ensure that the United States does not maintain

a long-term military presence in Iraq. That means no permanent bases

and no control over Iraqi oil.

From our witnesses, it was clear: We need to engage in an open and

robust dialogue, both at home and in Iraq. They agreed that multiparty

peace talks are the best way to convince all factions of Iraqis that we

are serious about allowing them to dictate their country and rebuild

it, and, most important of all, the need for a commitment to bring the

U.S. troops home. The truth is that our military presence in Iraq is

contributing to the chaos there, not alleviating it. By bringing our

troops home, we can save both American and Iraqi lives and we can

reunite thousands of American families in the process.

Mr. Speaker, my hope is that last week's hearing will serve as a

catalyst for elected officials, for think-tanks and others around the

country to join in a dialogue about military disengagement from Iraq,

that the hearing will start a discussion that has been long, long

overdue. The time for action in Iraq is now. So let us start taking

action.