Madam President, let me start by thanking the Senator

from Colorado for his courtesy to me this evening as well as my friend

from Tennessee.

I rise today to join my distinguished colleagues from both sides of

the aisle in discussing a bipartisan way forward on what is the

greatest challenge facing our country; that is, the war in Iraq. I

commend the two leaders of this effort, Senator Salazar and Senator

Alexander, for their leadership in crafting a well-grounded strategy

based on the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group.

I have repeatedly expressed my strong opposition to the President's

strategy of sending tens of thousands of additional troops to Iraq.

Despite that opposition and the opposition of many others, the

administration pushed forward with its plan, arguing that the surge

would give the Iraqi Government the time and space necessary to make

the political compromises that are necessary to end the continued

sectarian violence. Unfortunately, my initial concerns about the surge

strategy have proven to be well-founded.

First, there has been a terrible loss of life among our troops over

the past few months. In fact, 331 American soldiers were killed from

April to June--the highest 3-month level of the war. One such soldier

was SGT Joel House, a brave and patriotic Mainer whose funeral I

attended in Lee, ME, just last week. Our troops have sacrificed so

much.

Second, the fact is that the Iraqi Government has utterly failed to

pursue the political reforms necessary to quell the sectarian violence.

Our troops have done their part, but the fact is virtually all the

experts agree that a solution to the sectarian violence is found in

political reforms, not in military action. When you combine the

increased sacrifice of our troops and the unwillingness or inability of

the Iraqi leaders to act, it is not surprising that more and more

Americans are questioning the President's strategy in Iraq.

It is clear our country needs a new direction in Iraq. We need a new

strategy that will redefine our mission and set the stage for a

significant but gradual withdrawal of our troops over the next year. We

do not have to search far and wide for this new policy. It is right

before us. It has already been mapped out in the unanimous

recommendations of the bipartisan Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group. The

Iraq Study Group's recommendations chart the path forward and remain

just as viable today as they were when they were first released in

December.

The Baker-Hamilton report sets forth three core principles for

salvaging a measure of stability for Iraq and the surrounding region.

First, the report says the United States must shift the primary

mission of its military forces in Iraq from combat to training, with

the goal of removing all combat brigades not necessary for training,

force protection, and counterterrorism activities against al-Qaida and

other foreign jihadists by March of 2008. Shifting the mission of our

troops to a new and more defined and narrower set of goals will

ultimately encourage the Iraqi military to step up to the plate while

lowering U.S. casualty rates, relieving our service members of heavy

deployment schedules, and improving the long-term readiness of our

military.

Second, the Iraq Study Group Report states that U.S. support for the

Iraqi Government should be conditioned on Iraq making progress in

meeting specific benchmarks.

In May, Senator Warner and I authored legislation to require the

President to provide two reports to Congress--one which will be

released tomorrow and the other on September 15--on whether the Iraqis

are meeting 18 benchmarks essential to achieving political

reconciliation. Although we have not yet seen the report that is

scheduled to be released tomorrow, from everything I have heard, the

Iraqi Government is extremely unlikely to have met any of the

benchmarks we have laid out. The Warner-Collins proposal also included

a provision to condition the release of reconstruction funds to

progress made by the Iraqi Government. Surely, if the Iraqis are not

passing the political reforms that are necessary, the United States

should not continue to provide reconstruction funds. This requirement

which is in the law now is also consistent with the Iraq Study Group's

recommendations.

Third, the Iraq Study Group says the United States must launch a new

diplomatic effort in the region to ensure Iraq's long-term stability,

or to help ensure its stability. Iraq cannot be addressed effectively

in isolation from other major regional issues and interests. Both the

international community and Iraq's immediate neighbors are clearly not

doing enough to foster its stability, and it is long past time for that

to change. Senator Salazar and Senator Alexander have incorporated

these recommendations into legislation I have cosponsored and into the

amendment we will be offering to the Defense authorization bill.

How significant it is that this amendment enjoys widespread, bipartisan

support because it is long past time for a new bipartisan approach to

the war in Iraq.

Iraqi leaders must reach political agreements in order to achieve

reconciliation, and their failure to do so is unfair to our American

troops who are making such grave sacrifices. The responsibility for

Baghdad's internal security and for halting the sectarian violence must

rest primarily with the Government of Iraq and the Iraqi security

forces. At the same time, it is important we continue the mission of

fighting al-Qaida and the counterterrorism mission. But an open-ended

commitment of American forces in Iraq simply does not provide the Iraqi

Government with the incentives it needs to adopt the political reforms

that give Iraq the best chance of quelling the sectarian violence.

Ultimately,

resolving the sectarian violence requires a solution in which the Sunni

minority is more fully integrated into the power structures and oil

revenues are more equitably distributed among Iraq's citizens.

This war and the way it has been prosecuted has cost our Nation so

much over the past 4 years. It has cost us the lives of our men and

women in uniform, and it has cost us billions of dollars. While our

Nation's Armed Forces have sacrificed gravely, they continue to answer

the call of duty. They inspire us, but they have more than done their

part. Many of our Nation's soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen have

been to Iraq more than once. This, of course, has been so hard on them,

and it has also been difficult for the families they leave behind.

We especially need to thank our National Guard members and our

reservists. Far too much has been asked of these citizen soldiers,

their families, and employers. Whether they are from Maine or Michigan

or Minnesota or Mississippi, these citizen soldiers have put their

lives on the line and their jobs and families aside to answer the call

of duty. But we as a nation are asking too much of them given the

failures of the administration's policies in Iraq.

We must chart a new course. Now is the time to demonstrate to these

Service members and their families and to the American people at large

that we in Congress can move past politics, partisan politics on the

critical issues facing our country as we seek a new direction in Iraq.

We must demonstrate that we can build a bipartisan approach to bringing

a responsible conclusion to this war, and that is exactly what the

Salazar-Alexander amendment would do. It is based on well-thought-out,

careful, balanced, bipartisan, and unanimous recommendations of the

Iraq Study Group, and I hope my fellow Senators will join us in

supporting this measure.

Madam President, again, my thanks to the chief sponsors of this

amendment for accommodating my schedule.

I yield the floor.