Madam Speaker, with the holidays upon us, some Members

of this body have been working really hard to divert attention from

much of the pressing issues that we should be working on in this

Congress. They have been doing this by complaining about some kind of

war on Christmas.

You can always tell when their poll numbers are down. That is when

they reach into their bag of culture war tricks and gin up a divisive

controversy that has nothing to do with Americans' real challenges and

Americans' real aspirations. It is really interesting, my colleagues on

the other side of the aisle are very interested in preserving the

symbols of Christmas. But the war they are supporting and the budgets

they are passing, more Scrooge than Santa, demonstrate that they have

forgotten the true meaning of Christmas, particularly the part about

peace on Earth and goodwill towards all.

Besides, how many casualties have there been in this so-called war on

Christmas? Here is a hint. Several thousand less than the war on Iraq.

Today, without a doubt, we should congratulate the Iraqi people for

what appears to be a successful, high turnout election. For the third

time this year, courageous Iraqi citizens have enthusiastically

exercised their democratic rights.

But successful elections do not, and cannot, obscure the devastating

national tragedy that is the Iraq war. It does not change the fact that

over 2,100 Americans have died for weapons of mass destruction that

never existed. It does not change the fact that this war has turned

Iraq into a hotbed of terrorist activity. It does not change the fact

that our troops are sitting ducks for the insurgents who have been

emboldened, not deterred, by our military presence in Iraq.

Now that the elections are over, the question is, What now? What next

in terms of U.S. policy towards Iraq? Aside from trying to spin it and

take credit for it, what is the President's reaction to this Iraqi

election? All indications are that even with a modest reduction in

troops, he will insist that we must stay the course. That means

continuing with this bloody occupation that has killed or maimed

thousands of our people, has cost us hundreds of billions of dollars

and turned the entire world against us. Furthermore, he will not see

the irony in celebrating Iraqi democracy while we use United States

taxpayer money to manufacture propaganda and spread it in the Iraqi

press. He will ignore the contradiction in praising Iraqi freedom while

violating civil liberties at home by pushing for a more heavy-handed

and invasive sequel to the PATRIOT Act.

Here is the bottom line: a successful Iraqi election should, at the

very least, reinforce the imperative of bringing our troops home. If

Iraq is truly able to self-govern, then we have no business occupying

their country and meddling in their affairs.

I have argued all year long that it is time to restore Iraqi

sovereignty and give Iraq back to the Iraqi people. If the election is

a watershed moment, as the White House claims, then what is the

continued justification for having our troops over there in harm's way?

Now is the time to enlist the support of the international community

to establish an interim security force for Iraq. But that is just the

first step. As I have written to the President in a letter signed by 61

other Members of the House, the United States must also launch a

diplomatic offensive recasting our role in Iraq as a reconstruction

partner, rather than a military occupier.

We must also lead the way in establishing an international peace

commission to oversee the post-war reconciliation and coordinate peace

talks between Iraq's various factions.

Madam Speaker, sometimes it seems like the only people who still

support this war work in the big white building down Pennsylvania

Avenue. There is barely any constituency left for our Iraq policy. The

majority of the American people are not behind it; our global allies

are not behind it. The Iraqi people are not behind it. Even Iraqi

leaders, Sunnis, Shiite and Kurdish alike, who agree on practically

nothing, have united around the call for the United States military to

leave. With the Iraqi people having voted once

again, let us offer the ultimate vote of confidence in their democracy.

Let us reward the self-sufficiency they have demonstrated by giving

them their country back and bringing our American soldiers home.