Mr. Speaker, tonight we do something different. Tonight

we may do something that may even be unprecedented. Tonight I am joined

on the floor of the House by my distinguished gentleman and my partner

from Long Island, the gentleman from New York (Mr. Bishop) and we will

be joined by the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. Dent) and the

gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Shays) and the gentleman from Maryland

(Mr. Gilchrest) and perhaps others.

Tonight, for the first time that I know of, Republicans and Democrats

take to the floor of the House to discuss Iraq, but not to criticize

one another about Iraq, not to beat each other up about Iraq, not to

cast aspersions and blame about Iraq, not to talk about what divides us

on Iraq, but to find ways to come together on Iraq.

I don't think that's happened before on this floor, but I do believe

that the American people have an unquenchable thirst for Democrats and

Republicans not to take the time of this Congress for sloganeering and

name calling and the impugning of motives, but to take the time of this

Congress to have an intellectual debate over those issues, to take the

time of Congress to really honor those troops and our veterans, and to

discuss not what is left and what is right, but to discuss the way

forward.

The gentleman from New York knows that every time the people from our

districts and the American people tune into C-SPAN, what they see are

Republicans and Democrats arguing and fighting and criticizing,

attacking each other's ideas, impugning each other's patriotism,

impugning each other's motives. Tonight is different, because we are

not going to discuss what separates us and divides us, but we are going

to discuss what, in fact, can unite us.

War in Iraq has caused an outbreak of war on floor of the House of

Representatives, and tonight we declare a ceasefire. For me, this is

not just a professional obligation, but, for me, it is personal, for

two reasons.

The first is that several days ago I made a phone call to the father

of Matthew Baylis. He was killed in Iraq last week. It was small arms

fire in Baghdad. I have no idea whether Matthew Baylis or Matthew

Baylis himself was a Democrat or a Republican or an independent or

perhaps not registered to vote.

I don't care. I do believe that Matthew Baylis would want Republicans

and Democrats to come together to talk about the way forward; that

Matthew Baylis and those like him, who died in the service of his

country, would want us to spend more of our time talking about moving

our country forward than moving our country to the left or the right.

And the second reason that this is personal for me, Mr. Speaker, is

because it's being organized by the House Center Aisle Caucus, which is

a bipartisan group of 50 Democrats and Republicans who have come

together, based on certain propositions. The first proposition is, we

can disagree agreeably; that we can state our differences without

calling each other names; that we can debate the issues without having

this Chamber sound like a fourth grade elementary school auditorium

that's run amok.

And the other premise of the Center Aisle Caucus, Mr. Speaker, is

that Democrats and Republicans will disagree on perhaps as much as 70

percent of the issues, which means we have a fundamental obligation to

agree on the 30 percent that's left.

The problem is that even when we agree we haven't moved forward,

because we've allowed our disagreements to paralyze areas where we, in

fact, have consensus. And so the Center Aisle Caucus, which was

sponsored, actually which was founded by the gentleman from Illinois,

Congressman Tim Johnson, and me and the gentlewoman from Missouri,

Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson, and the gentleman from Kansas (Mr.

Moore), the Center Aisle Caucus has been meeting on an ongoing basis to

find areas of agreement. We recently met with the ambassador from Iraq

to the United States, and he gave us some ideas.

Before I yield time to my friend from New York, I just want to focus

on some of the principles that we do agree on.

If you would listen to the debate here on the floor of the House of

Representatives, Mr. Speaker, you would think that there are actually

Members of Congress who want us to lose in Iraq. There's not a single

Member of Congress who wants us to lose in Iraq.

If you listen to the debate on the floor of the House, Mr. Speaker,

you would think that there are actually Members of Congress who do not

care about the lives lost in Iraq. There is not a single Member of

Congress who has a callous disregard for the lives lost in Iraq.

You would think that there are two types of Members of Congress,

either Members of Congress who want defeat or Members of Congress who

want to be in Iraq forever. I don't know of a single Member of Congress

who supports either option.

The fact of the matter is we are not the enemies, Democrats and

Republicans. Americans aren't the enemies. The enemies are the people

that we're fighting, and we need to focus on this.

And the Center Aisle Caucus has gathered and has endorsed several

principles that we're going to discuss tonight, and I'll run through

them quickly and then yield my time to the gentleman from New York.

Here are the shared principles that Democrats and Republicans who are

interested in finding common ground have articulated:

Number one, we support our Armed Forces. We want to make sure they

have adequate force protection. We want to make sure they have

everything they need to keep them safe and keep them sound, and we want

to bring them home as fast as possible.

Number two, we want to take care of our veterans. And I am so proud

to announce on this floor tonight that earlier today the Appropriations

Committee, which I have the privilege of serving on, unanimously,

Republicans and Democrats, Democrats and Republicans, passed a $109.2

billion package that addresses the critical health care and housing

needs for our veterans. $18 billion above last year's level and $4

billion more than the President requested, and I hope that he will not

veto that bill.

Our bill includes $87.7 billion in crucial funding for the Department

of Veterans Affairs, which is a $6.7 billion increase in discretionary

funding over last year's level. That is the largest single increase in

the 77-year history of the Veterans Administration.

Our bill addresses the backlog in claims by adding 1,000 new claims

processors, and that's going to help veterans who now wait an average

of 177 days for the benefits they deserve. I am very proud that

Democrats and Republicans today in the Appropriations Committee voted

to take care of our veterans.

We agree that we need to secure Iraq's borders because there are too

many reports that Syria and Iran are sending fighters and equipment and

technology over those borders to make the situation in Iraq even worse,

not resisting Iraq's sovereignty, and threatening our troops and Iraqi

civilians.

We agree that we need to stand up Iraqi security forces because we

cannot be there for a prolonged period of time. I would imagine that we

all agree that we've all been there too long already, and so we need to

find ways to stand up Iraq security forces, and we're going to discuss

that tonight.

We agree that there's a need for regional change. We agree that the

Middle East is a very dangerous place in the world, and we need to

transform it, using all the tools in our toolbox, from a place where

children are taught how to blow things up to a place where children are

taught how to put things together.

We agree that Iran needs to be responsible, and we need to engage

Iran with the carrot and the stick. And we're pleased that the

administration, which had resisted having any talks with Iran with

respect to what is happening in Iraq, in fact, held those talks

recently.

And, finally, we want to defeat al Qaeda, and we are prepared to use

all the tools in our toolbox to do that. Because it was al Qaeda in

Afghanistan that launched the attacks on the United States which killed

hundreds of Long Islanders, those represented by myself and those

represented by the distinguished gentleman from Long Island, from New

York's First Congressional District, Mr. Bishop.

And on that I would be privileged to yield time to my colleague, the

gentleman from New York.

I thank the gentleman, and I appreciate his raising this

issue of one for one, because I think it's a perfect example of Members

of this body having different ideas that may make sense, trying to

offer those ideas in the spirit of some compromise and reasonableness.

Let's go into the basis of that one for one and explore it as a

possible, not a way out, because Iraq is certainly complex and

complicated, but at least one measure of improvement.

The President has said that, in the past, and has stated this

publicly, that for every Iraqi that stands up, an American will come

home or be redeployed. And he has said that on several occasions. On

other occasions, we've heard that there are between 250,000 and 300,000

Iraqis that have been stood up. Well, the gentleman can help me do the

math. If in fact there are between 250,000 and 300,000 Iraqis that have

been stood up and if for every one that stands up an American is going

to redeploy, how come 250,000 to 300,000 have not redeployed?

The answer is in how you define ``training'' and what it means to say

``stand up.'' In fact, go you take a look at the textbook definition of

``training'' in military terms, combat proficiency is what is

important, and there are different levels of combat proficiency. If you

are trained at level one combat proficiency, you are capable of

fighting and winning convincingly anywhere in the world and you don't

need any U.S. support. If you are trained at level two combat

proficiency, you can fight and win almost anywhere in the world, but

you need some measure of U.S. support, maybe some intel, maybe some

reconnaissance assistance, maybe some logistics support. So if you take

a look at the numbers of Iraqi forces that are actually trained at

level one or level two combat proficiency, you will find that it is not

250,000 to 300,000 but far less. And the numbers ought not be repeated

in a public forum, but far less than 250,000 to 300,000.

So the idea that we came up with was why don't we ask the President

to report to the Congress on a monthly basis how many Iraqis have

actually been trained at level one or level two combat proficiency,

certify that to the Congress, and then we will redeploy an equivalent

amount. Now, I am not suggesting that we withdraw that number

necessarily. We might redeploy them to the borders so we can prevent

Iran and Syria from inflaming the situation in Iraq.

The point is, Congressman Bishop, that I don't claim to have all the

answers and I know that this isn't the perfect answer, but it is an

idea that we have tried to set forward.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman. And, again, this was

just one idea.

And the true value of the Center Aisle Caucus and this kind of

dialogue, this unprecedented dialogue, and civil dialogue between

Members on both sides is that we all have good ideas and we have all

been trying to advance those ideas. And it is so refreshing to be

joined by three members of the other side of the Center Aisle Caucus

who have been extremely constructive, who have been true leaders in

trying to forge bipartisan alliances in order to move the country and

the debate not to the left, not to the right, but forward. And I am

very proud that we are joined by the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr.

Dent) and the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Shays), and I know the

gentleman from Maryland (Mr. Gilchrest) has joined us as well.

And I yield to the distinguished gentleman from Pennsylvania, a

leader in the Center Aisle Caucus (Mr. Dent).

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I thank the gentleman.

Before yielding to the distinguished gentleman from Maryland, just to

clarify on the issue of Status of Forces Agreement, Mr. Dent was kind

enough to join the Iraqi ambassador to the United States, Ambassador

Sumaydi, and me and other members of the Center Aisle Caucus for a

dinner where the ambassador himself talked about the importance of a

Status of Forces Agreement.

Will it end the war tomorrow? Absolutely not. Will it end it next

week? No. Is it one good, reasonable idea that will lower the

temperature in Iraq, that will reduce the animosities that are flaming

out of control there? I believe it will. And I am appreciative that the

gentleman from Pennsylvania has cosponsored a bipartisan resolution

that asks the President to submit a Status of Forces Agreement to the

Iraqi government, not conclude one because it has got to be negotiated,

but at least submit one to send a signal and a message that we don't

want to own the place; that we are there and we will leave when the

Iraqi government wishes us to.

With that, I want to thank the gentleman from Maryland for his

bipartisan leadership and his great measure of thoughtfulness on issues

with respect to Iraq, and I yield to the gentleman from Maryland (Mr.

Gilchrest).

I thank the gentleman.

Before recognizing Mr. Bishop, I want to follow up on a very

important point that the gentleman made about the lessons that history

teaches us with respect to the importance of having a dialogue with our

adversaries. I wish we understood those lessons here in the United

States Congress. Because if you take a look at those lessons of

history, the Cold War, The Space Raid, World War II, all of the great

challenges that confronted Congresses in the past have been solved with

bipartisan dialogue. Think about the Cold War. It was the

bipartisanship, the bipartisan approach of a John F. Kennedy and a

Richard Nixon and that helped end the Cold War. Think about World War

II. It was the political leadership of FDR and Harry Truman and the

military leadership of Dwight D. Eisenhower. There was always great

bipartisanship with respect to enormous foreign policy challenges in

our country. Democrats and Republicans found ways to talk to one

another. I guess there was a saying that ``politics stops at the

water's edge.'' One of the concerns I have is that we have kind of lost

that sense, that we have made foreign policy and made issues of war and

peace partisan issues. And what we are trying to do here in the Center

Aisle Caucus, with the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. Shays) and the

gentleman from New York (Mr. Bishop) and the gentleman from

Pennsylvania (Mr. Dent) is bring Democrats and Republicans back to the

water's edge in the Center Aisle.

And with that, I will yield to Mr. Bishop.

I thank the gentleman.

I would pose a question, if I may, to the gentleman from Connecticut,

who as Congressman Dent said has been to Iraq 17 times and chaired the

Subcommittee on Terror. I know he was consulted with respect to the

Iraq Study Group report or at least I believe was consulted with

respect to the Iraq Study Group report and see if he would share his

perspectives on the value of the Iraq Study Group report in terms of

generating some bipartisan cooperation and moving us in the right

direction in Iraq.

I would yield to the gentleman.

Well, I thank the gentleman. I think it is a very sound

idea. The Iraq Study Group proved its value as an independent entity.

And I have the highest regard for General Petraeus. In fact, he was in

my office the day that the President announced the surge. And I was

skeptical about the surge, personally I did not support the surge, but

I thought it was important to reach out to General Petraeus and at

least give him an opportunity to explain it to me.

I think he is the best we have. I have a very high regard for him. I

think his report is going to be indispensable. I think it would be

extremely useful to send the Iraqi Study Group back to take a look so

that, like President Reagan said, ``trust but verify.'' I think that

verification would be extremely useful.

And I will yield to the gentleman from New York.

Before yielding to the gentleman from Maryland, I want to

again remind my colleagues and those viewing that what you've heard

here on the floor of the House is different. You've actually heard

Members from both sides generating ideas and agreeing to them rather

than impugning each other's integrity. And that is exactly the purpose

of this Special Order.

I yield to the gentleman from Maryland.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask the gentleman from Connecticut

whether he is proposing any specific initiative to formally request

that the Iraq Study Group reconvene and make an assessment in Iraq in

the near future. If he is, I would be pleased to join with him on a

bipartisan basis.

I thank the gentleman.

I will close by thanking each of our colleagues to join with us this

evening. Of the American people are accustomed to tuning into these so-

called special orders and seeing a Democratic hour, which is usually

spent beating up Republicans, and a Republican hour, which is usually

spent beating up Democrats.

Tonight they saw something different. They saw Mr. Dent talk about a

status of forces agreement, which Democrats can agree with. They saw

Mr. Bishop talk about the one-for-one agreement, which has bipartisan

support. They saw Mr. Shays discuss an idea to have the Iraq Study

Group reassess conditions, which has Democratic support. And they heard

the historic perspective of Mr. Gilchrest, a perspective that only a

Marine that was wounded in Vietnam can properly give to the United

States Congress.

The point is that I believe that without sounding overly

enthusiastic, that in the past hour there was more bipartisan,

reasoned, rational discussion of ideas to move us forward rather than

left or right than has happened on the floor of this House over the

past 4 years. That is precisely what the Center Aisle Caucus was

created to generate.

Tonight we close by sharing our principles: That we support our Armed

Forces. We will take care of our veterans. More assistance passed in

today's appropriations bill to veterans than at any time in the 77-year

history of the Veterans Administration, passed unanimously by the

Appropriations Committee today. We will secure Iraq's border. We want

to stand up Iraq's security forces. We understand the need for regional

change. We will push for that. We understand the threat of Iran. And we

want to defeat al Qaeda.

Today's discussion was not about left or right, it was about moving

forward. I know the gentleman talked about the service member that he

represents who was lost in Iraq. Again, I would ask the American people

to continue to support our Armed Forces.

I can think of no better evening and no better person to inspire this

special order than Matthew Baylis, who we lost in Iraq last week, and I

believe he would be very proud of what we are doing this evening. As I

said before, I don't know whether he was a Democrat or a Republican. I

have no idea whether his family are Republicans or Democrats. I do know

that they would be proud that this evening, Democrats and Republicans

joined together to talk about a way forward, without a single one of us

calling another one a name.