I thank Congressman Israel for yielding, and

I also thank him for organizing this special order, something I think

that is long overdue. And let me also thank my friend and colleague

from New York's Second Congressional District for his leadership role

in the Center Aisle Caucus.

In a Congress that is, at times, bitterly divided along partisan

lines, and that partisanship obscures the kind of discussion that we

need to have on this issue as well as so many other issues, the Center

Aisle Caucus stands for civility. It stands for honest and reasoned

debate, and it stands for shared decision making. I say qualities that

are often in short supply in this Chamber but qualities that are

desperately needed, both in this Chamber and in our country.

Let me also start by offering my deepest sympathy and condolences to

the family of Specialist James Lundin of Bellport in the First

Congressional District, who also gave his life last week in Iraq. He

represents, as you know, the 26th Long Islander to lose his or her life

in the service of our great country in Iraq. His wake was today, and he

will be buried tomorrow in Calverton National Cemetery.

And like you, Congressman Israel, I called his father on Monday, and

I spoke with his father. And one of the things that struck me was the

remarkable dignity with which he and his family were dealing with what

has to be unspeakable pain. It is that kind of dignity that we need to

honor in the way we do our jobs, and it is that kind of dignity that we

need to bring to what will hopefully be a fruitful discussion of how we

move forward in Iraq.

And, as I say, this kind of debate is a debate that must take place.

It must be an honest debate; and it must be a debate that, above all,

is absent in the often inflammatory and pejorative characterizations of

those who offer differing views. And we all engage, at one time or

another, in these inflammatory characterizations.

As you said, Congressman Israel, there is not a soul in this Chamber

that does not support our troops. And, in fact, the evidence of that is

over the course, the 4 1/2 year course of this conflict, the fact that

with overwhelming bipartisan majorities we have consistently given the

troops each and every dime that this administration has asked for them

and in some cases increased the amounts of money that we will make

available to them.

We all want us to succeed in Iraq, in Afghanistan. We may have

differing versions or different interpretations of what constitutes

success, but that, again, is the kind of debate that ought to take

place in a healthy and vibrant democracy.

But the debate thus far has been compromised, as you and others well

know, when those of us who think that a time line is something that we

ought to seriously consider. When that time line is characterized as a

surrender date, that obscures the kind of discussion that we need to

have.

When those of us who believe that we must change course in Iraq, when

that is characterized by the questioning of our patriotism, that

obscures the kind of debate that we need to have.

When looking for time lines or looking for benchmarks or talking

about the way in which we fund our troops is characterized as

abandoning our troops, that's the kind of thing that obscures the kind

of reasonable debate that we need to have.

And with respect to supporting our troops, my own view, and I think

this view is shared by a great many in this Chamber, that the best way

to support our troops is to put them in positions where they can

succeed and get them out of positions in which they cannot succeed. And

I think we all agree on both sides of the aisle that what has taken

place thus far has put our troops in positions in which it has been

very, very difficult for them to succeed. So that, if nothing else,

motivates an impetus on the part of a great many of us to urge a change

of course in Iraq.

I want to speak just for a second, Congressman Israel, about one of

the shared principles. And, by the way, those shared principles are the

kind of principles that all reasonable people should be able to embrace

and support. But one is the issue of standing up the Iraqi security

forces. It is a subject about which we have spoken in the past, and I'm

proud to be a cosponsor of the legislation that you have introduced,

along with Chairman Skelton, that would create, in effect, a one-for-

one exchange; that for each Iraqi brigade or battalion that we stand

up, we would withdraw one of our own.

I think that that kind of approach has several advantages. One, it

would be true to the goal that the President himself has set out, and I

believe set it out as going as far back as January of 2004, that as the

Iraqi stand up we will stand down.

Since January of '04, we have spent about $15 billion to train and

equip and outfit Iraqi troops, and we have several hundred Iraqi troops

right now in uniform under arms, and yet we continue to increase our

own complement of troops.

I think it is a perfectly reasonable, sane, rational proposition that

we impose obligations on the Iraqi troops; and as they step up to those

obligations, we relieve our own troops of those obligations.

As I say, I think the legislation that you and Chairman Skelton have

filed and that, as I say, I am proud to cosponsor, I think that that is

very reasonable legislation. I hope to see that legislation receive the

kind of debate and discussion and attention that it ought to.

We're not done yet. As you know, we have a report coming to us in

September; and at that point the Congress is going to need to make

another set of

decisions. Hopefully, that kind of reasoned response to a situation

that none of us can support in terms of how it has gone thus far is the

kind of direction in which we need to head.

So, with that, I'm happy to yield back to you.

I think it is, as I said before, a perfectly

reasonable idea but also one that represents, I believe, an imperative.

I think even the most ardent supporters of our presence in Iraq must

recognize the enormous strain that a prolonged presence in Iraq has

placed on our Armed Forces, and I believe the most ardent supporter

must recognize that it will be enormously difficult, if not impossible,

for us to maintain that presence at the current level or even at the

presurge level. And thus if there is a chance of bringing order to

Iraq, it must in the long term rest with Iraqi security forces as

opposed to our own forces.

And as I say, we have spent $15 billion thus far, and I won't say we

have little to show for it but we certainly don't have as much to show

for it as I believe everyone in this Chamber would agree. So I think

that of the shared principles, and I think they are all crucial and

important, but I think this perhaps take prominence over all the others

because if for no other reason, just the simple logistics of

maintaining the troop presence we have given our current end strength

is going to be enormously difficult, if not debilitating, on our Armed

Forces.

I thank Mr. Israel for yielding.

I want to pick up on a comment that my friend from Connecticut just

made with respect to how we should deal with the recommendations of the

Iraq Study Group. You suggested that we bring those recommendations

here and we discuss them and endorse them. And I think that the model

is the 9/11 Commission. It was a bipartisan commission that issued a

unanimous set of recommendations, which in the main we have acted upon

here in this Chamber. The Iraq Study Group was a bipartisan group that

issued a unanimous set of recommendations. And I believe that they are

ones that we can galvanize around, and I believe that they make good

sense. They perhaps don't give all of us everything that we would want

on either side of the aisle, but they do represent a way to move

forward. And I believe that if we were to bring those recommendations

here, I believe they would attract majority support in this Chamber,

and perhaps that could then be used as a means to moving with the

administration, who I think now has also endorsed the recommendations

of the Study Group.

Initially they seemed to reject them, or at least dismiss them, but I

think now, as time has passed and as the situation on the ground has

continued to evolve, they now recognize that they do have merit, that

they do have legitimacy. And they also speak to several, if not all, of

the shared principles that we are discussing here this evening that

come out of the Center Aisle Caucus. So I thank you for making that

suggestion, and hopefully we can carry forward with that.

I would certainly agree. And I think we all

await General Petraeus' report. And I don't know General Petraeus, but

I have been told that he is a man of absolutely rigorous and

unimpeachable intellectual honesty and he will give us an honest, spin-

free report, which I think is something that we all need and would

value. But I also think sending that coalition of people, as you say,

Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, back to see on

the ground conditions 9, 10 months after they wrote their report or 11

months after they wrote their report, I think would be enormously

valuable and again perhaps would spur both the Congress and the

administration to take their recommendations more seriously or give

greater weight to them than we have thus far.

I just want to make two points. One, on the

question of engaging Iran and others that we see as enemies or

adversaries, you are quite right, Mr. Dent, that there is no guarantee

of success if we do engage, but we can virtually guarantee no success

if we don't engage. So it just seems to me that engagement is

absolutely crucial.

I think I am quoting former Secretary of State Baker correctly when I

quote him as saying that engaging in dialogue with our enemies is not

appeasement. It is diplomacy and negotiation and dialogue, something I

think we have had too little of. Hopefully we are moving in that

direction now, and signs recently are that we are.

The second point I would make is that Iran has an awful lot at stake

here. If, in fact, as a great many fear, Iraq becomes a haven for al

Qaeda, I cannot imagine that Iran views an al Qaeda-Sunni dominated

state on their borders as something that is in their best interests. So

I think that they clearly do have in effect common interests with us in

terms of bringing some order, some stability, to Iraq.