Mr. Speaker, I thank very much Congressman

Hinchey and thank Congresswoman Kaptur for her remarks.

Today marks the start of the 5th year of the war in Iraq; and as I

begin my statement, I want to recognize the honorable service of the

men and women who have served our country in Iraq. I want to honor the

memories of the 3,188 service members who have given their lives in

Iraq, including five men from my district and over 50 officers of the

United States Army who graduated from the United States Military

Academy at West Point, which I am proud is in my district. While I

believe the war in Iraq has been a mistake, I deeply respect the honor

and integrity of those who have given their lives following the orders

of their Commander in Chief.

In light of the sacrifices of so many of our men and women in

uniform, it saddens me that I have to come to the floor of the House of

Representatives and say I believe this war has been a strategic blunder

in our efforts to fight terrorism.

On September 11, our Nation was attacked and many people from my

district, including police and firefighters, died at the World Trade

Center. The United States correctly responded by pursuing those

responsible for 9/11 in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, this administration

decided to change its focus and start a war of choice with Iraq, a

country which had not attacked us and was not an imminent threat to the

United States.

Now our military is trapped in the middle of a civil war instead of

pursuing Osama bin Laden, Mullah Mohammed Omar, and other al Qaeda

affiliates throughout the world responsible for 9/11 and other similar

attacks and groups planning to attack the United States again.

Because we are focused in Iraq, the progress made in Afghanistan is

slipping. The Karzai government does not control the territory outside

its own capital. We see an increase in the drug trade that funds

regional warlords. The Taliban emerges at night to terrorize the local

population, and our military expects increasing attacks throughout this

spring. However, because of our continuing overcommitment in Iraq, the

United States has little ability to increase its troop numbers in

Afghanistan and respond to that deteriorating situation.

While the administration and its allies say we are battling the

terrorists in Iraq, the United States intelligence agencies say

otherwise. The National Intelligence Estimate released in April 2006

stated: ``The Iraq conflict has become a `cause celebre' for jihadists,

breeding a deep resentment of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world and

cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement.'' Iraq is not

the central front in the war on terror as the President likes to say.

Instead, it is a rallying point, a recruiting poster that Osama bin

Laden uses to recruit more terrorists.

The war in Iraq has seriously weakened our military. A recent report

found that 90 percent of our National Guard youths are rated ``not

ready'' to respond to a national disaster or terrorist attack in the

United States. Further, in order to meet their recruitment goals, the

military has lowered the minimum standards for being accepted into the

service, and our military faces a crippling loss of mid-level officers

as larger and larger numbers decide not to reenlist and face multiple

deployments.

It is time for a new direction. Our intelligence agencies know it,

our military commanders know it, and the American people demanded it

last November. General Petraeus, commanding general in Iraq, stated on

March 8: ``There is no military solution to a problem like that in

Iraq, to the insurgency of Iraq.'' And just last week, Pentagon

analysts admitted that the war in Iraq is a civil war.

Unfortunately, our President refuses to face reality and the will of

the American people. He wants to put more troops in the middle of a

civil war. He wants an open-ended commitment to keep combat troops in

Iraq indefinitely. He wants to leave the problem of Iraq to the next

President. And, once again, he has returned to Congress and asked for

another blank check to continue this misguided war. Unlike the

President, this Congress will face reality and realize that we must

change direction in Iraq.

Some of our colleagues speaking earlier from the other side of the

floor criticized us for trying to, as they say, micromanage the war.

There cannot be 435 or 535 Commanders in Chief. We would not need to

take this kind of action to manage or, if you will, micromanage the war

if the President and Commander in Chief were doing his job, if the

leadership were coming from the top, as our structure of government

ordinarily calls for it to come.

But because there is a vacuum in the top, because the President has

continued to disregard or turn a blind eye to the reality of what is

happening, not only around the world, as our Congresswoman just

mentioned, in terms of the reputation of the United States, which

ultimately in the long term is what will determine our security, our

reputation, the approval of the United States and its policies by other

peoples and other countries around the world will ultimately determine

in the long run how secure we are, we do not have enough money to spend

our way into security if we continue to make more enemies and lose our

friends.

General Petraeus is correct. We need a political solution to the war

in Iraq instead of a military escalation. It is time for a diplomatic

surge. The United States must push the Iraqi Government to meet its

commitments that it made to its partners in Iraq. It is time the United

States reached out to our allies in the region and throughout the

world.

By requiring the Iraqi Government to achieve a list of objectives and

establishing a timetable for U.S. involvement in Iraq, we can end the

culture of dependency developing in Iraq. We can make the Iraqi

Government stand up and take control of its own fate. If they do that,

we will stick by them. We will help them train police and military

forces and rebuild their country. If they are unwilling or unable to

take that responsibility, we will know that the United States does not

have a serious partner in Iraq.

If we are to defeat the people who did attack our country on

September 11, those who continue to seek to destroy us, we must pivot

away from Iraq and back to Afghanistan and al Qaeda, the people who

actually attacked us. We must draw down in Iraq and let our military

redeploy, rebuild, and refocus.

The United States faces a gravely serious threat, and we must be

prepared to defeat it. Our 4-year involvement in Iraq has seriously

endangered our ability to do that. At home, our National Guard has been

undermined. It is unprepared to respond to a terrorist attack or a

natural disaster. Abroad, our military forces are stretched thin and

unable to shift quickly.

If we really want to defeat Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and the other

terrorist groups that seek to kill us, we must return our attention to

that war and leave the civil war we currently face in Iraq to the

Iraqis. If we rebuild our forces and refocus on the threats in

Afghanistan, Pakistan and throughout southeast Asia, we will be able to

truly defeat our enemies and truly protect the United States of

America.