Mr. President, I rise today to offer observations on the

continuing involvement of the United States in Iraq. In my judgment,

our course in Iraq has lost contact with our vital national security

interests in the Middle East and beyond. Our continuing absorption with

military activities in Iraq is limiting our diplomatic assertiveness

there and elsewhere in the world. The prospects that the current

``surge'' strategy will succeed in the way originally envisioned by the

President are very limited within the short period framed by our own

domestic political debate. And the strident, polarized nature of that

debate increases the risk that our involvement in Iraq will end in a

poorly planned withdrawal that undercuts our vital interests in the

Middle East. Unless we recalibrate our strategy in Iraq to fit our

domestic political conditions and the broader needs of United States

national security, we risk foreign policy failures that could greatly

diminish our influence in the region and the world.

The current debate on Iraq in Washington has not been conducive to a

thoughtful revision of our Iraq policy. Our debate is being driven by

partisan political calculations and understandable fatigue with bad

news--including deaths and injuries to Americans. We have been debating

and voting on whether to fund American troops in Iraq and whether to

place conditions on such funding. We have contemplated in great detail

whether Iraqi success in achieving certain benchmarks should determine

whether funding is approved or whether a withdrawal should commence. I

would observe that none of this debate addresses our vital interests

any more than they are addressed by an unquestioned devotion to an ill-

defined strategy of ``staying the course'' in Iraq.

I speak to my fellow Senators, when I say that the President is not

the only American leader who will have to make adjustments to his or

her thinking. Each of us should take a step back from the sloganeering

rhetoric and political opportunism that has sometimes characterized

this debate. The task of securing U.S. interests in the Middle East

will be extremely difficult if Iraq policy is formulated on a partisan

basis, with the protagonists on both sides ignoring the complexities at

the core of our situation.

Commentators frequently suggest that the United States has no good

options in Iraq. That may be true from a certain perspective. But I

believe that we do have viable options that could strengthen our

position in the Middle East, and reduce the prospect of terrorism,

regional war, and other calamities. But seizing these opportunities

will require the President to downsize the United States military's

role in Iraq and place much more emphasis on diplomatic and economic

options. It will also require Members of Congress to be receptive to

overtures by the President to construct a new policy outside the binary

choice of surge versus withdrawal. We don't owe the President our

unquestioning agreement, but we do owe him and the American people our

constructive engagement.

In my judgment, the costs and risks of continuing down the current

path outweigh the potential benefits that might be achieved. Persisting

indefinitely with the surge strategy will delay policy adjustments that

have a better chance of protecting our vital interests over the long

term.

I do not come to this conclusion lightly, particularly given that

General Petraeus will deliver a formal report in September on his

efforts to improve security. The interim information we have received

from General Petraeus and other officials has been helpful and

appreciated. I do not doubt the assessments of military commanders that

there has been some progress in security. More security improvements in

the coming months may be achieved. We should attempt to preserve

initiatives that have shown promise; such as engaging Sunni groups that

are disaffected with the extreme tactics and agenda of al-Qaida in

Iraq. But three factors--the political fragmentation in Iraq, the

growing stress on our military, and the constraints of our own domestic

political process--are converging to make it almost impossible for the

United States to engineer a stable, multi-sectarian government in Iraq

in a reasonable time frame.

First, it is very doubtful that the leaders of Iraqi factions are

capable of implementing a political settlement in the short run. I see

no convincing evidence that Iraqis will make the compromises necessary

to solidify a functioning government and society, even if we reduce

violence to a point that allows for some political and economic

normalcy.

In recent months, we have seen votes in the Iraqi parliament calling

for a withdrawal of American forces and condemning security walls in

Baghdad that were a reasonable response to neighborhood violence. The

Iraqi parliament struggles even to achieve a quorum, because many

prominent leaders decline to attend. We have seen overt feuds between

members of the Iraqi Government, including Prime Minister Maliki and

Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, who did not speak to each other for

the entire month of April. The Shia-led government is going out of its

way to bottle up money budgeted for Sunni provinces. Without strident

intervention by our embassy, food rations are not being delivered to

Sunni towns. Iraqi leaders have resisted de-Baathification reform, the

conclusion of an oil law, and effective measures to prevent oil

smuggling and other corrupt practices.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari has told me that various aspects of an

oil law and revenue distribution could be passed by September. But he

emphasized that Iraqis are attempting to make policy in a difficult

environment by broad consensus--not by majority vote. He believes other

policy advancements will take considerable time, but that consensus is

the safest and most appropriate approach in a fledgling democracy.

This may be true, but Americans want results in months. Meanwhile,

various Iraqi factions are willing to wait years to achieve vital

objectives. Even if the results of military operations improve in the

coming months, there is little reason to assume that this will diminish

Sunni ambitions to reclaim political preeminence or Shia plans to

dominate Iraq after decades of Saddam's harsh rule. Few Iraqi leaders

are willing to make sacrifices or expose themselves to risks on behalf

of the type of unified Iraq that the Bush administration had

envisioned. In contrast, there are many Iraqi leaders who are deeply

invested in a sectarian or

tribal agenda. More often than not, these agendas involve not just the

protection of fellow Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, but the expansion of

territorial dominance and economic privileges.

Even if United States negotiators found a way to forge a political

settlement among selected representatives of the major sectarian

factions, these leaders have not shown the ability to control their

members at the local level. After an intense year-and-a-half of

bloodletting, many subfactions are thoroughly invested in the violence.

We have the worst of both worlds in Iraq--factional leaders who don't

believe in our pluralist vision for their country and smaller

subfactions who are pursuing violence on their own regardless of any

accommodations by more moderate fellow sectarians. As David Brooks

recently observed in the New York Times, the fragmentation in Iraq has

become so prevalent that Iraq may not even be able to carry out a

traditional civil war among cohesive factions.

Few Iraqis have demonstrated that they want to be Iraqis. We may

bemoan this, but it is not a surprising phenomenon. The behavior of

most Iraqis is governed by calculations related to their history, their

personal safety, their basic economic existence, and their tribal or

sectarian loyalties. These are primal forces that have constrained the

vision of most ordinary Iraqis to the limits of their neighborhoods and

villages.

In this context, the possibility that the United States can set

meaningful benchmarks that would provide an indication of impending

success or failure is remote. Perhaps some benchmarks or agreements

will be initially achieved, but most can be undermined or reversed by a

contrary edict of the Iraqi Government, a decision by a faction to

ignore agreements, or the next terrorist attack or wave of sectarian

killings. American manpower cannot keep the lid on indefinitely. The

anticipation that our training operations could produce an effective

Iraqi army loyal to a cohesive central government is still just a

hopeful plan for the future.

I suspect that for some Americans, benchmarks are a means of

justifying a withdrawal by demonstrating that Iraq is irredeemable. For

others, benchmarks represent an attempt to validate our military

presence by showing progress against a low fixed standard. But in

neither case are benchmark tests addressing our broader national

security interests.

Equally unproven is the theory voiced by some supporters of a

withdrawal that removing American troops from Iraq would stimulate a

grand compromise between Iraqi factions. Some Iraqi leaders may react

this way. But most assume that we will soon begin to withdraw troops,

and they are preparing to carry on or accelerate the fight in the

absence of American forces. Iraqi militias have shown an ability to

adapt to conditions on the ground, expanding or contracting their

operations as security imperatives warrant.

American strategy must adjust to the reality that sectarian

factionalism will not abate anytime soon and probably cannot be

controlled from the top.

The second factor working against our ability to engineer a stable

government in Iraq is the fatigue of our military. The window during

which we can continue to employ American troops in Iraqi neighborhoods

without damaging our military strength or our ability to respond to

other national security priorities is closing. Some observers may argue

that we cannot put a price on securing Iraq and that our military

readiness is not threatened. But this is a naive assessment of our

national security resources.

American Armed Forces are incredibly resilient, but Iraq is taking a

toll on recruitment and readiness. In April, the Defense Department

announced it would lengthen tours of duty for soldiers serving in Iraq

and Afghanistan from 12 to 15 months. Many soldiers are now on their

way to a third combat tour.

Last month, for the 27th consecutive year, in a ceremony witnessed by

tens of thousands of Hoosiers, I swore in new military recruits on Pit

Road at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Over the course of the

weekend, I visited with the recruits, with the recruiters, and with

military officials. I heard personal stories of the 70-hour work weeks

put in by recruiters to meet recruiting goals. I was impressed with

each of the 66 young men and women I swore in. They are joining a

military at war, and each of them is showing tremendous courage and

commitment to our country.

The swearing-in ceremony was preceded by a briefing from Army

officials here in Washington who assured me that we are fielding the

best equipped, best trained, and most capable force we have ever had.

Yet, they also reported that the Army has exhausted its bench. Instead

of resting and training for 3 to 12 months, brigades coming out of the

field must now be ready almost immediately for redeployment.

Basic recruiting targets are being met, but statistics point to

significant declines in the percentage of recruits who have high school

diplomas and who score above average on the Army's aptitude test.

Meanwhile, the Army has dramatically increased the use of waivers for

recruits who have committed felonies, and it has relaxed weight and age

standards.

The Army is asking for $2 billion more this year for recruitment

incentives, advertising, and related activities. It needs $13 to $14

billion a year to reset the force to acceptable readiness ratings, and

they will need that amount for up to 3 years after the end of the

current operations. The Army needs $52 billion more this year to fill

equipment shortages and modernize. These figures do not include the

billions of dollars required to implement the planned 65,000 soldier

increase in the size of the active force.

Filling expanding ranks will be increasingly difficult given trends

in attitudes toward military service. This has been measured by the

Joint Advertising Market Research and Studies Program, which produced a

``Propensity Update'' last September after extensive research. The

study found that only 1 in 10 youths has a propensity to serve--the

lowest percentage in the history of such surveys. Sixty-one percent of

youth respondents report that they will ``definitely not serve.'' This

represents a 7 percent increase in less than a year. These numbers are

directly attributable to policies in Iraq. When combined with the

Army's estimate that only 3 of 10 youths today meet basic physical,

behavioral, and academic requirements for military service, the

consequences of continuing to stretch the military are dire.

The United States military remains the strongest fighting force in

the world, but we have to be mindful that it is not indestructible.

Before the next conflict, we have much to do to repair this invaluable

instrument. This repair cannot begin until we move to a more

sustainable Iraq policy.

The third factor inhibiting our ability to establish a stable,

multisectarian government in Iraq is the timetable imposed by our own

domestic political process. The President and some of his advisors may

be tempted to pursue the surge strategy to the end of his

administration, but such a course contains extreme risks for United

States national security. It would require the President to fight a

political rear-guard holding action for more than a year and a half

against congressional attempts to limit, modify, or end military

operations in Iraq. The resulting contentiousness would make

cooperation on national security issues nearly impossible. It would

greatly increase the chances for a poorly planned withdrawal from Iraq

or possibly the broader Middle East region that could damage U.S.

interests for decades.

The President and his team must come to grips with the shortened

political timeline in this country for military operations in Iraq.

Some will argue that political timelines should always be subordinated

to military necessity, but that is unrealistic in a democracy. Many

political observers contend that voter `` dissatisfaction in 2006 with

administration policies in Iraq was the major factor in producing new

Democratic Party majorities in both Houses of Congress. Domestic

politics routinely intrude on diplomatic and military decisions. The

key is to manage these intrusions so that we avoid actions that are not

in our national interest.

We do not know whether the next President will be a Democrat or a

Republican. But it is certain that domestic pressure for withdrawal

will continue to be intense. A course change

should happen now, while there is still some possibility of

constructing a sustainable bipartisan strategy in Iraq. If the

President waits until Presidential election campaign is in full swing,

the intensity of confrontation on Iraq is likely to limit United States

options.

I am not implying that debate on Iraq is bad. I am suggesting what

most Senate observers understand intuitively: Little nuance or

bipartisanship will be possible if the Iraq debate plays out during a

contentious national election that will determine control of the White

House and Congress.

In short, our political time line will not support a rational course

adjustment in Iraq, unless such an adjustment is initiated very soon.

In January, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee heard from former

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who recalled a half century of U.S.

involvement in the Middle East. He argued that this history was not

accidental. We have been heavily involved in the region because we have

enduring vital interests at stake. We may make tactical decisions about

the deployment or withdrawal of forces in Iraq, but we must plan for a

strong strategic position in the region for years to come.

This is not just a maxim from diplomatic textbooks. The vitality of

the U.S. economy and the economies of much of the world depend on the

oil that comes from the Persian Gulf. The safety of the United States

depends on how we react to nuclear proliferation in the region and how

we combat terrorist cells and ideologies that reside there.

The risk for decision-makers is that after a long struggle in Iraq,

accompanied by a contentious political process at home, we begin to see

Iraq as a set piece--as an end in itself, distinct from the broader

interests that we meant to protect. We risk becoming fixated on

artificial notions of achieving victory or avoiding defeat, when these

ill-defined concepts have little relevance to our operations in Iraq.

What is important is not the precise configuration of the Iraqi

Government or the achievement of specific benchmarks, but rather how

Iraq impacts our geostrategic situation in the Middle East and beyond.

The President's troop surge is an early episode in a much broader

Middle East realignment that began with our invasion of Iraq and may

not end for years. Nations throughout the Middle East are scrambling to

find their footing as regional power balances shift in unpredictable

ways.

Although the Bush administration has scaled back its definition of

success in Iraq, we are continuing to pour our treasure and manpower

into the narrow and uncertain pursuit of creating a stable,

democratic, pluralist society in Iraq. This pursuit has been the focal

point of the administration's Middle East policy. Unfortunately, this

objective is not one on which our future in the region can rest,

especially when far more important goals related to Middle East

security are languishing. I am not suggesting that what happens in Iraq

is not important, but the Bush administration must avoid becoming so

quixotic in its attempt to achieve its optimum forecasts for Iraq that

it misses other opportunities to protect our vital interests in the

Middle East.

To determine our future course, we should separate our emotions and

frustrations about Iraq from a sober assessment of our fundamental

national security goals. In my judgment, we should be concerned with

four primary objectives:

First, we have an interest in preventing Iraq or any piece of its

territory from being used as a safe haven or training ground for

terrorists or as a repository or assembly point for weapons of mass

destruction.

Second, we have an interest in preventing the disorder and sectarian

violence in Iraq from upsetting wider regional stability. The

consequences of turmoil that draws neighboring states into a regional

war could be grave. Such turmoil could topple friendly governments,

expand destabilizing refugee flows, close the Persian Gulf to shipping

traffic, or destroy key oil production or transportation facilities,

thus diminishing the flow of oil from the region with disastrous

results for the world economy.

Third, we have an interest in preventing Iranian domination of the

region. The fall of Saddam Hussein's Sunni government opened up

opportunities for Iran to seek much greater influence in Iraq and in

the broader Middle East. An aggressive Iran would pose serious

challenges for Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab governments.

Iran is pressing a broad agenda in the Middle East with uncertain

consequences for weapons proliferation, terrorism, the security of

Israel, and other U.S. interests. Any course we adopt should consider

how it would impact the regional influence of Iran.

Fourth, we have an interest in limiting the loss of U.S. credibility

in the region and throughout the world as a result of our Iraq mission.

Some loss of confidence in the United States has already occurred, but

our subsequent actions in Iraq may determine how we are viewed for a

generation.

In my judgment, the current surge strategy is not an effective means

of protecting these interests. Its prospects for success are too

dependent on the actions of others who do not share our agenda. It

relies on military power to achieve goals that it cannot achieve. It

distances allies that we will need for any regional diplomatic effort.

Its failure, without a careful transition to a back-up policy would

intensify our loss of credibility. It uses tremendous amounts of

resources that cannot be employed in other ways to secure our

objectives. And it lacks domestic support that is necessary to sustain

a policy of this type.

A total withdrawal from Iraq also fails to meet our security

interests. Such a withdrawal would compound the risks of a wider

regional conflict stimulated by Sunni-Shia tensions. It would also be a

severe blow to U.S. credibility that would make nations in the region

far less likely to cooperate with us on shared interests. It would

increase the potential for armed conflict between Turkey and Kurdish

forces in Iraq. It would expose Iraqis who have worked with us to

retribution, increase the chances of destabilizing refugee flows, and

undercut many economic and development projects currently underway in

Iraq. It would also be a signal that the United States was abandoning

efforts to prevent Iraqi territory from being used as a terrorist base.

Moreover, advocates of an immediate withdrawal have tended to

underestimate the requirements and complexities of such an operation.

Gen. Barry McCaffrey testified at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee

hearing on January 18, 2007, that an immediate withdrawal aimed at

getting out of Iraq as fast as possible would take 6 months. A

carefully planned withdrawal that sought to preserve as much American

equipment as possible, protect Iraqis who have worked with us, continue

anti-terrorist operations during the withdrawal period, and minimize

negative regional consequences would take months longer.

Our security interests call for a downsizing and re-deployment of

U.S. military forces to more sustainable positions in Iraq or the

Middle East. Numerous locations for temporary or permanent military

bases have been suggested, including Kuwait or other nearby states, the

Kurdish territories, or defensible locations in Iraq outside of urban

areas. All of these options come with problems and limitations. But

some level of American military presence in Iraq would improve the odds

that we could respond to terrorist threats, protect oil flows, and help

deter a regional war. It would also reassure friendly governments that

the United States is committed to Middle East security. A re-deployment

would allow us to continue training Iraqi troops and delivering

economic assistance, but it would end the U.S. attempt to interpose

ourselves between Iraqi sectarian factions.

Six months ago, the Iraq Study Group endorsed a gradual downsizing of

American forces in Iraq and the evolution of their mission to a support

role for the Iraqi army. I do not necessarily agree with every

recommendation of the Iraq Study Group, and its analysis requires some

updating given the passage of time. But the report provides a useful

starting point for the development of a ``Plan B'' and a template for

bipartisan cooperation on our Iraq strategy.

We should understand that if the re-deployment of a downsized force

is to be safe and effective, our military planners and diplomats must

have as much

time as possible to develop and implement the details. We will need the

cooperation of the Iraqi Government and key states in the region, which

will not come automatically. The logistics of a shift in policy toward

a residual force will test military planners, who have been consumed

with the surge. In 2003, we witnessed the costs that came with

insufficient planning for the aftermath of the Iraq invasion. It is

absolutely essential that we not repeat the same mistake. The longer we

delay the planning for a re-deployment, the less likely it is to be

successful.

The United States has violated some basic national security precepts

during our military engagement in Iraq. We have overestimated what the

military can achieve, we have set goals that are unrealistic, and we

have inadequately factored in the broader regional consequences of our

actions. Perhaps most critically, our focus on Iraq has diverted us

from opportunities to change the world in directions that strengthen

our national security.

Our struggles in Iraq have placed U.S. foreign policy on a defensive

footing and drawn resources from other national security endeavors,

including Afghanistan. With few exceptions, our diplomatic initiatives

are encumbered by negative global and regional attitudes toward our

combat presence in Iraq.

In this era, the United States cannot afford to be on a defensive

footing indefinitely. It is essential that as we attempt to reposition

ourselves from our current military posture in Iraq, we launch a

multifaceted diplomatic offensive that pushes adversarial states and

terrorist groups to adjust to us. The best counter to perceptions that

we have lost credibility in Iraq would be a sustained and ambitious set

of initiatives that repairs alliances and demonstrates our staying

power in the Middle East.

The Iraq Study Group report recommended such a diplomatic offensive,

stating ``all key issues in the Middle East--the Arab-Israeli conflict,

Iraq, Iran, the need for political and economic reforms, and extremism

and terrorism--are inextricably linked.'' The report stressed that

diplomacy aimed at solving key regional issues would ``help marginalize

extremists and terrorists, promote U.S. values and interests, and

improve America's global image.''

A diplomatic offensive is likely to be easier in the context of a

tactical draw down of U.S. troops in Iraq. A drawdown would increase

the chances of stimulating greater economic and diplomatic assistance

for Iraq from multilateral organizations and European allies, who have

sought to limit their association with an unpopular war.

A first step is working with like-minded nations to establish a

consistent diplomatic forum related to Iraq that is open to all parties

in the Middle East. The purpose of the forum would be to improve

transparency of national interests so that neighboring states and other

actors avoid miscalculations. I believe it would be in the self-

interest of every nation in the region to attend such meetings, as well

as the United States, EU representatives, or other interested parties.

Such a forum could facilitate more regular contact with Syria and Iran

with less drama and rhetoric that has accompanied some meetings. The

existence of a predictable and regular forum in the region would be

especially important for dealing with refugee problems, regulating

borders, exploring development initiatives, and preventing conflict

between the Kurds and Turks. Just as the Six-Party talks have improved

communications in northeast Asia beyond the issue of North Korea's

nuclear program, stabilizing Iraq could be the occasion for a

diplomatic forum that contributes to other Middle East priorities.

Eventually, part of the massive U.S. embassy under construction in

Baghdad might be a suitable location for the forum. It is likely that

the embassy compound will exceed the evolving needs of the United

States. If this is true, we should carefully consider how best to use

this asset, which might be suitable for diplomatic, educational, or

governmental activities in Iraq.

We should be mindful that the United States does not lack diplomatic

assets. Most regional governments are extremely wary of U.S.

abandonment of the Middle East. Moderate states are concerned by Iran's

aggressiveness and by the possibility of sectarian conflict beyond

Iraq's borders. They recognize that the United States is an

indispensable counterweight to Iran and a source of stability. The

United States should continue to organize regional players--Saudi

Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf States, and others--behind a

program of containing Iran's disruptive agenda in the region.

Such a re-alignment has relevance for stabilizing Iraq and bringing

security to other areas of conflict, including Lebanon and the

Palestinian territories. The United States should make clear to our

Arab friends that they have a role in promoting reconciliation within

Iraq, preventing oil price spikes, splitting Syria from Iran, and

demonstrating a more united front against terrorism.

A diplomatic offensive centered on Iraq and surrounding countries

would help lift American interests in the Middle East. But credibility

and sustainability of our actions depend on addressing the two

elephants in the room of U.S. Middle East policy--the Arab-Israeli

conflict and U.S. dependence on Persian Gulf oil. These are the two

problems that our adversaries, especially Iran, least want us to

address. They are the conditions that most constrain our freedom of

action and perpetuate vulnerabilities. The implementation of an

effective program to remedy these conditions could be as valuable to

our long-term security as the achievement of a stable, pro-Western

government in Iraq.

The Arab-Israeli conflict will not be easily solved. Recent combat

between the Hamas and Fatah Palestinian factions that led to Hamas's

military preeminence in the Gaza Strip complicates efforts to put the

peace process back on track. But even if a settlement is not an

immediate possibility, we have to demonstrate clearly that the United

States is committed to helping facilitate a negotiated outcome.

Progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict would not end the sectarian

conflict in Iraq, but it could restore credibility lost by the United

States in the region. It also would undercut terrorist propaganda, slow

Iranian influence, and open new possibilities related to Syria.

Clearly, the United States does not have the influence to solve the

Arab-Israeli conflict unilaterally. In contrast, our dependence on

Persian Gulf oil is largely within our capacity to fix. Do not

underestimate the impact on Iran and other nations of a concerted U.S.

campaign to reduce our oil consumption. A credible well-publicized

campaign to definitively change the oil import equation would

reverberate throughout the Middle East. It would be the equivalent of

opening a new front in Middle Eastern policy that does not depend on

the good will of any other country.

Many options exist for rapid progress in reducing our Persian Gulf

oil dependence, but I would emphasize two. First, President Bush or his

successor could establish the national goal of making competitively

priced biofuels available to every motorist in America. Such an

accomplishment would transform our transportation sector and cut our

oil import bill. It would require multiple elements, including ensuring

that virtually every new car sold in America is a flexible fuel vehicle

capable of running on an 85 percent ethanol fuel known as E-85; that at

least a quarter of American filling stations have E-85 pumps; and that

ethanol production from various sources is expanded to as much as 100

billion gallons a year within the next 15 to 20 years. Such a campaign

could achieve the replacement of 6.5 million barrels of oil per day by

volume--the rough equivalent of one-third of the oil used in America

and one-half of our current oil imports. None of these goals are easy,

but they are achievable if presidential advocacy and the weight of the

Federal Government are devoted to their realization. Brazil already has

achieved the large-scale deployment of ethanol as a national

transportation fuel, and its success is a source of public pride in

that country.

Second, the President could commit to a radical increase in the miles

per gallon of America's auto fleet. The Federal Government has numerous

tools to make this happen, from direct Federal support for research, to

Government fleet purchasing, to market regulations and incentives.

Incredibly, cars in America today get less mileage per gallon than

they did 20 years ago. Meanwhile, hybrids, plug-in hybrids, and fully

electric cars are at or nearly at commercialization, yet there is not

enough incentive for consumers to buy them or producers to make them on

the mass scale necessary. For fiscal year 2008, the administration

requested just $176 million for new vehicle technology research--an

amount that was less than what was requested 5 years ago.

Given that other developed nations have made great strides in

improving fuel economy, this is fertile ground for rapid improvement.

In fact, achievements on this front largely would be a matter of

generating and sustaining political will that has, thus far, been

disappointing.

The issue before us is whether we will refocus our policy in Iraq on

realistic assessments of what can be achieved, and on a sober review of

our vital interests in the Middle East. Given the requirements of

military planners, the stress of our combat forces, and our own

domestic political timeline, we are running out of time to implement a

thoughtful plan B that attempts to protect our substantial interests in

the region, while downsizing our military presence in Iraq.

We need to recast the geo-strategic reference points of our Iraq

policy. We need to be preparing for how we will array U.S. forces in

the region to target terrorist enclaves, deter adventurism by Iran,

provide a buffer against regional sectarian conflict, and generally

reassure friendly governments that the United States is committed to

Middle East security. Simultaneously, we must be aggressive and

creative in pursuing a regional dialogue that is not limited to our

friends. We cannot allow fatigue and frustration with our Iraq policy

to lead to the abandonment of the tools and relationships we need to

defend our vital interests in the Middle East.

If we are to seize opportunities to preserve these interests, the

administration and Congress must suspend what has become almost knee-

jerk political combat over Iraq. Those who offer constructive criticism

of the surge strategy are not defeatists, any more than those who warn

against a precipitous withdrawal are militarists. We need to move Iraq

policy beyond the politics of the moment and reestablish a broad

consensus on the role of the United States in the Middle East. If we do

that, the United States has the diplomatic influence and economic and

military power to strengthen mutually beneficial policies that could

enhance security and prosperity throughout the region. I pray that the

President and the Congress will move swiftly and surely to achieve that

goal.