Mr. President, there is one moment each year when America

comes together, when the leader of our country, our President, in his

State of the Union Address, speaks of our experience in the past, our

history, and his vision of our Nation's future. It is a rare moment on

Capitol Hill, House and Senate together on a bipartisan basis, the

Supreme Court, the Cabinet, the diplomatic corps. It is quite a festive

and historic--sometimes solemn--gathering. Tonight will be an

opportunity for us to gather again for the State of the Union Address.

I am looking forward to it.

It comes at a moment in American history when there is a strong

emotion across this country, a strong feeling about the war in Iraq. It

is a feeling that was made even more intense by the events of this last

weekend where we lost so many of our brave soldiers: a helicopter crash

from the sky, lives were taken on the ground. At the end of the day, we

had lost 3,059 of our best and bravest soldiers, marines, airmen, and

sailors in this war in Iraq.

The President will speak of many things this evening. That is his

responsibility--from energy to health care to education and beyond. But

the issue most dominant in the minds of America is the issue of Iraq.

It was certainly the most dominant issue in the November election when

the message came through loudly and clearly that it was time to change,

it was time for America to step back and reassess our role in Iraq and

where we go from here.

Since that election, many important things have happened. The

Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, resigned, replaced by Robert

Gates. The military leadership in Iraq was changed and the President

came forward, after a time of deliberation, with his own proposal. That

proposal, which we heard a little over a week ago, called for adding

more troops in the theater of war in Iraq, some 21,000 more Americans,

to join the 144,000 soldiers who are there today.

Most of us have spoken publicly about that in disagreement with the

President: our belief that the escalation of the number of troops in

Iraq is the wrong way, the wrong direction for our Nation; our belief

that 21,000 soldiers cannot stop the civil war that has 14 centuries of

fighting behind it; and our belief that 21,000 American lives are too

many to ever lose in this kind of dangerous situation.

The President, undoubtedly, will speak to Iraq this evening and the

American people will listen closely. But that is not the end of the

conversation. The conversation will continue in the Senate where men

and women representing States, as I have the honor to do in

representing Illinois, will engage for the first meaningful debate on

the war in Iraq in more than 4 years since we passed the use-of-force

resolution.

Circumstances have changed dramatically. Reading the resolution

today, one would wonder if it even justifies our current presence

because it spoke of removing Saddam Hussein, dealing with weapons of

mass destruction, stopping the march of nuclear weapons into Iraq. We

now know all of those things were either wrong in that original

resolution or have become moot by the events that have transpired.

There is an effort underway to make sure this debate on Iraq

represents the bipartisan feeling of America, represents the fact that

there are Democrats and Republicans and Independents who feel intensely

that the current strategy, the current plan the President is pursuing

is not the right plan.

The first resolution will be considered by the Foreign Relations

Committee this week and is sponsored by Senators Biden and Levin on the

Democratic side and Senator Hagel on the Republican side.

Yesterday, there was another resolution brought to the attention of

the American people, introduced by three Members I respect. Senator

John Warner, former chairman of the Committee on Armed Services, a

Republican Senator from Virginia, the lead sponsor, Senator Ben Nelson,

a Democrat from Nebraska, and Senator Susan Collins, a Republican from

Maine, are about to introduce a resolution that clearly expresses the

sense of Congress about this strategy in Iraq. Much has been written

about it. The resolution should speak for itself because these

Senators, two Republicans and a Democrat, resolve:

The important thing about these resolutions, though they are

different in wording, is they all reach the same conclusion. The

conclusion is the President's policy, the escalation or augmentation,

virtually the same word, is the wrong way to move in Iraq today.

I hope at the end of the day we can come together on a bipartisan

basis, that we can cooperate in finding ways to blend these resolutions

so we do speak as much as possible with a common bipartisan voice in

the Senate. We need to call for the kind of change in the President's

policy that the American people asked for in this election.

Our call is not based on politics but based on reality--the reality

of the deaths which American troops have endured in this conflict and

the reality of the war on the ground, a war which becomes more serious

and more violent by the day.

We know the military experts have disagreed with the White House for

a long time. GEN Eric Shinseki in 2003, as Army Chief of Staff, said we

would need many more troops than the administration was prepared to

send and more allies to secure peace ultimately in Iraq. Not only did

the administration ignore General Shinseki's advice, they invited him

to leave. We now know he was the one who had the insight they should

have followed.

General Abizaid, the commander of all our forces in Iraq and

Afghanistan, has told us that every divisional and corps commander in

the theater has told him we should not send more troops. That is what

the President has chosen to do despite this advice from his top

generals. General Abizaid testified before Congress that he is

convinced that:

General Abizaid and others have also repeatedly stated that the

solution to the violence in Iraq is not military, it is political. We

have to turn to Prime Minister Maliki and his Cabinet to make the

political decisions which will make the difference.

General Abizaid is not alone. The Iraqis themselves appear to agree

with his conclusion. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki stated on

November 27 last year:

The Iraqi Prime Minister has said what he needs most is weapons and

equipment, not American soldiers. When Prime Minister Maliki met with

President Bush in Jordan in November, he didn't ask for more American

troops; rather, he said he needed support by way of equipment and

weapons. In fact, Prime Minister Maliki suggested we should reduce the

presence of American troops in his country. The President has done just

the opposite.

A United States official was quoted as saying that

The answer to all of Iraq's problems is not simply to deliver more

American soldiers. But American weaponry and equipment can be helpful.

President Bush has disagreed. Although he steadfastly said as the

Iraqis stand up, our forces will stand down, exactly the opposite has

occurred. As the Prime Minister of Iraq has offered to stand up more

forces to defend his own country, the President of the United States

has said we are going to send 21,000 more of our best and bravest into

the face of danger.

Our troops have fought brilliantly and courageously. Over the

weekend, Senator John McCain, a man whom I respect and count as a

friend, made a statement on one of the talk shows, I believe it was

``Meet the Press,'' that he felt the resolutions we were debating were

a vote of confidence on whether we trusted America's troops to get the

job done. As much as I respect Senator McCain, I could not disagree

more. This vote is not about our faith in our troops. Trust me, if a

vote came to the Senate on our commitment and respect for our American

military service men and women, it would be 100 to 0. We all stand in

awe and admiration of the contributions they have made to our country

and the courage they show every day. We have confidence that given an

assignment that can be physically accomplished, they will do it better

than any military force in the world.

But the debate is not over our troops. The debate is over the

President's policy. Those troops didn't write the policy that sent too

few troops to Iraq initially. Those soldiers didn't write the

requisitions to send humvees that have become, sadly, opportunities for

roadside bombs to maim and kill our soldiers. Those troops didn't make

the critical decisions about disbanding the Iraqi Army. They didn't

make the political decisions along the way. They did their duty. And

they continue to do so.

What we are debating here is the policy decisions being made by this

administration, and a larger and larger number of Democratic and

Republican Senators are speaking out that these decisions have been

wrong and that the President's plans continue to make the wrong

decision.

The Iraq Study Group was a bipartisan effort to try to find a way

through this, to come out with a plan that will work so we can truly

bring our troops home successfully. They talked about the fact that

adding more troops would not be a good move. In fact, bringing troops

home should be our goal. They established the date of April 1, 2008,

for most of those troops to be gone. And they called for something that

this administration continues to ignore: They called for a surge in

diplomacy--not a surge in the military but a surge in diplomacy.

Baker and Hamilton, a Republican and a Democrat, with credentials of

real experience at the highest levels of our Government, said it is

time for us to open a dialog with the Syrians and with the Iranians

about the stability of the Middle East and to try to find common

ground. There are no guarantees of success with diplomatic dialog, but

there is a guarantee that if you don't try, you won't succeed.

Sadly, this administration has refused to try at the diplomatic

level. Their responses continue to be military when we know time and

again the solution is political within Iraq and diplomatic outside

Iraq.

The Baker-Hamilton study group issued its report. It was received

cordially by the White House and then ignored. Many Members believe we

should return to it, begin the redeployment of American forces, start

them coming home, as Prime Minister al-Malaki has asked, start moving

the Iraqis into a position of more responsibility and leadership, call

on the al-Malaki government in Iraq to make the political concessions

to try to bring an end to the sectarian strife, the civil war that has

caused all this violence and continues to on a day-to-day basis.

There is one thing we should stop and assess as well. That is the

real cost of this war. I have come to the floor of the Senate many

times and talked about $2 billion a week that is not being spent in

America, $2 billion being spent on this war. I voted for the money to

support our troops, and I will continue to, but we have to be honest

about the costs of the war. Our Defense bill for the coming year,

according to the Wall Street Journal last week, may top $600 billion.

That figure does not include the extra $100 billion in emergency

appropriations that Congress will soon be asked to vote on to sustain

current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The costs of the war in Iraq have been extraordinary, whether

measured in dollars or human lives. I went through a long list last

week of what we could have done in America with $400 billion, the $400

billion we have spent in Iraq, what we could have done by way of

extending the opportunity for health care and health insurance to

millions of Americans currently uninsured, offering to pay for college

education for students coming out of high school who are accepted at

the best colleges. All of these things could have been done and weren't

done because, instead, we have invested the money in this war.

The administration's view is, we will continue with no end in sight

to spend these dollars at great expense to America and lost

opportunities to our people. An open-ended commitment, as this

administration has suggested, means these costs are also open-ended. It

is time to break this cycle, to address our real security needs in

America, to implement the 9/11 recommendations at some expense but,

really, to protect our people from any future possible terrorist

attack. The bipartisan resolution that will come before the Senate in

the coming days states that our goal in Iraq should be to maximize our

chances of success. An open-ended commitment of U.S. forces in Iraq

reduces these chances rather than increasing them. Here in the safety

and comfort of Washington, we owe to it our troops not to forget that

today they stand in danger risking their lives.

Soon we will vote on whether we support the escalation of the war

that the President has called on. Let no one confuse that issue with

the question of whether we support our troops, whether we have

confidence in our troops.

Let me make something else clear: The resolution we are debating is

not a vote of confidence on the President,

nor on the troops. It is about a policy. It is a deliberation about a

policy and a strategic decision. That is why we are here. That is why

we were elected. We cannot shy away from that responsibility. We all

support our men and women in uniform. But like a majority of Americans,

we also support the changes in policy that will lead to the

redeployment of U.S. forces, ultimately bringing them home to safety.

That is the change that was called for in the last election. That is

the new direction that is needed at this point in our history.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.