Mr. Speaker, tonight I would like to address the most

urgent issue facing our Nation today, the ongoing war in Iraq.

I recently returned from a congressional delegation trip to Iraq with

the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. Saxton) and several of our

colleagues on the House Committee on Armed Services. Meeting with our

servicemen and women in Iraq made me appreciate their service and their

courage even more. My trip also reinforced my conviction that America

needs an exit strategy from Iraq, and that is what I would like to

discuss tonight.

It has been nearly 2 years since we invaded Iraq and removed one of

the world's most brutal regimes; but 2 years later, America's Armed

Forces are confronting a far more resilient enemy, a growing insurgency

that has plunged Iraq into violence and chaos.

The elections are drawing closer. The peace and stability seem to be

Moving further and further away. How we got to this point in time has been the

subject of an extensive debate. How did our intelligence fail us so

badly about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction? Was that intelligence

deliberately manipulated by the administration in order to rush to war?

Why did the Bush administration not give the U.N. inspectors more time

to conduct their inspections, and how did we allow so much chaos to

grow out of Saddam Hussein's downfall? And why did we not have a better

plan to secure the peace?

Many of us have strong views about these issues, and many of us have

been quite vocal in expressing them. Unfortunately, when there is a

hotly contested Presidential campaign, the national debate often

descends into starkly partisan terms. I believe this is what happened

to much of the debate about our policy in Iraq.

In Congress the bipartisanship was lacking, and partisanship was

especially bad. Most Republicans saw it as their responsibility to

defend the President's policies, however flawed. Many Democrats viewed

their role as questioning and criticizing all that went wrong without

necessarily offering policy alternatives. The result has been a failure

to forge bipartisan consensus and develop answers to the pressing

questions about our involvement in Iraq. By rallying behind the

administration's policy, the Republican leadership in Congress failed

in its responsibility to lead, not just follow, on issues of war and

peace. At the same time, many Democrats who opposed the war from the

beginning have spent more energy lamenting the past than thinking about

solutions for the future.

A substantive, nonpartisan reassessment of America's goals and

options in Iraq is long overdue. The time has come for us to change our

focus from the missteps of the past to the challenge that confronts us

in the immediate future.

When I visited with our soldiers on the front lines, they were not

focused on the mistakes of last year, they were concerned about what we

are doing today and tomorrow. Now more than ever, with our current

policy going nowhere, America needs to form a bipartisan consensus

behind a strategy, a responsible strategy, in Iraq.

Today I challenge my colleagues in Congress to work together to

develop answers to the most urgent question facing our country today:

How can the United States put Iraq on a path toward self-sufficiency

and begin to bring our troops home in a way that advances our strategic

interests? We owe it to the American people and we owe it to the brave

men and women who are putting their lives on the line every day.

All of us in Congress have met with the family of guardsmen and

reservists whose deployments have been extended. We have spoken to too

many mothers of soldiers and attended too many funerals to leave these

fundamental questions unanswered. We must stop looking backward and

thinking defensively. We must start looking forward and developing

proactive ideas about the next steps in Iraq.

It is clear that the administration has no endgame in sight. It is

time for Congress to reassert its role in foreign policy and take the

lead on providing an exit strategy in Iraq.

The first step in Iraq to any exit strategy is an honest assessment

of the facts on the ground there. It is time to take the rose-tinted

glasses off and put aside our partisan hostilities and start with the

basics: What is going well, and what is not? What is still possible in

Iraq, and how do we get there?

In search of answers to these questions, I returned to Iraq earlier

this month. The last time I was in Iraq was August 2003, 4 months after

the fall of Baghdad. Iraq was hardly a safe place then, but we were

able to walk the streets and talk with average Iraqis, something I had

hoped to do this time. Unfortunately, the threat of violence was simply

too high. Baghdad is still a war zone.

My colleagues and I traveled in heavily armed military convoys,

zigzagging through the streets to avoid ambushes. In Iraq today the

expectation is that any American or anyone associated with the

Americans will be attacked.

The United States has spent more than $150 billion on military

operations in Iraq, with another $80 billion that the administration is

going to request from this House next month in a new supplemental

budget. We have maintained between 100,000 and 150,000 troops for 2

years. The Army's current plan is to maintain that level until at least

2007.

Over the past year, America has sent more soldiers and more money to

Iraq, but we have seen more violence. As Iraq prepares to hold

elections 5 days from now, the violence is worse than it has ever been.

All of us hope that the elections will proceed peacefully and safely

with maximum participation, but we should be realistic that regardless

of who votes or who wins, the insurgency will continue.

When Saddam was captured, we hoped the insurgents would give up. When

we transferred sovereignty, we hoped that the violence would end. And

when we routed the insurgents in Fallujah, we hoped it would break

their backs. But with each milestone, the insurgency has come back

stronger and more deadly. Attacks on U.S. forces have grown steadily

both in frequency and sophistication. Attacks on Iraqi security forces,

civilians and the infrastructure are also on the rise. Coalition forces

have been killing and capturing 1,000 to 3,000 insurgents every month

for more than a year. But over that same time, the insurgency has

quadrupled its ranks from at least 5,000 insurgents to at least 20,000

insurgents in that same amount of time.

More troubling is a network of Iraqi civilians, 200,000 by some

estimates, who offer both active and passive support, arms, materiel,

sanctuary, and, most important, intelligence. It is often better

intelligence than what our own forces have.

It is time to accept one of the basic assumptions held by the Bush

administration, and many of its critics, no longer applies: More troops

do not mean more security in Iraq. Despite 150,000 boots on the ground

and tactical victories in Fallujah and elsewhere, the insurgency is

only growing in size and lethal capacity. It may have been possible at

one point in time to pacify Iraq with an overwhelming American force.

Had we gone in with 700,000 troops like General Shinseki said we

needed, perhaps the insurgency would not have developed. We will never

know for sure. But whatever chance we had is now gone.

Ramping up our troop presence now will not turn the tables in Iraq,

and it will probably make the situation worse. The undeniable fact is

that the insurgency is being fueled by the very presence of the

American military. Back in July of 2003, General John Abizaid called

Iraq a ``classic guerrilla war,'' but we have continued to wage war as

if we were fighting a conventional army.

The result has been the ``center of gravity'' of any

counterinsurgency, the civilian population, has moved further and

further away from us. The growing hostility is palpable in Iraq. It is

measured by polls taken of Iraqis by our own government and our own

State Department. In November 2003, only 11 percent of Iraqis said they

would feel safer if coalition forces left; 6 months later, 55 percent

did. In the most recent poll that asked the question, 2 percent viewed

the United States as liberators, and 92 percent viewed the United

States as occupiers.

Iraqis have grown tired of an occupation that has provided them

neither security nor meaningful sovereignty. Iraqis were apprehensive

of America's intentions to begin with, and every time President Bush

signals our forces will remain in Iraq ``for as long as it takes,'' it

reconfirms their suspicion that we intend a permanent presence. Every

time Iraqi citizens see a Bradley fighting vehicle rolling through

their streets or a Black Hawk helicopter overhead, it undermines our

assertion that Iraq is already sovereign. Every time Iraqi bystanders

are killed in coalition actions, it further erodes the goodwill we

earned by ridding them of Saddam Hussein.

And even when innocent Iraqis are murdered by insurgents, the United

States is blamed for failing to provide security. If the world's most

potent Army cannot make the streets safe, Iraqis are asking, what is it

that they are really here for?

So the first step in achieving stability in Iraq is recognizing that

the United States presence there has become inherently destabilizing.

We also need to recognize the fact that for the

most part we are fighting not foreign terrorists or former regime

loyalists, but indigenous factions within Iraq who have united against

us.

It is a native insurgency, fueled by a combination of volatile

ingredients: a population of 25 million, 5 million of them Sunnis, with

a median age of 19 years old; a jobless rate of 30 to 40 percent with

pockets of extreme unemployment; 400,000 skilled and experienced army

soldiers dispersed throughout the country with their weapons but

without their salaries or pensions; 4,000 shoulder-fired missiles left

over from the old regime; and 250,000 tons of unsecured explosives.

The insurgency's size and strength are unlikely to decrease any time

soon. Attempting to kill or capture every last insurgent is an

impossible task. And as long as that is the thrust of our strategy, we

will continue along a downward spiral.

Confronted with a growing native insurgency, America is left with

three options, and two of them are not really options at all. The first

one is to withdraw immediately. Given the current state of Iraqi

security forces, we cannot cut and run. This option is a nonstarter.

Even if you believe that the United States should never have entered

Iraq, it does not follow that we should leave now. The chaos that would

result would be much worse than the vacuum of authority left by the

downfall of Saddam, and the humanitarian consequences could be even

greater.

From a strategic standpoint, immediate withdrawal undermines

America's credibility and destabilizes the entire region. The second

option is to stay on the same path, as the President says, for as long

as it takes. I believe that this course of action would only cause the

problem to grow worse. As of May of 2003, the administration was

predicting that only 30,000 troops would remain in Iraq by the fall of

that year. Twenty months later, five times that many remain. The most

compelling reason not to continue down the same path is that the

occupation has become counterproductive to stability and progress in

Iraq. With United States forces serving as a focal point for tensions

and violence, factions within Iraq have turned against us when they

should be confronting each other peacefully in setting up a new Iraqi

Government. The indefinite U.S. presence is forestalling the political

compromises that are ultimately necessary to end the violence in Iraq.

I am proposing a third option, an option that Prime Minister Alawi

and President Bush announce a timetable for a phased drawdown of U.S.

forces in Iraq. This could be done in concert either with Prime

Minister Alawi in Iraq with President Bush or with the new Prime

Minister who will be elected after these elections. Changing the

dynamic in Iraq means handing the security of the Iraqi people back to

the Iraqis and bringing an end to the occupation. Under this proposal,

the United States would draw down the majority of our forces by the end

of this year. Only a small and mobile force would remain by mid-2006, 2

years after the transfer of sovereignty.

Announcing a timetable for a phased-in withdrawal over the next 12 to

18 months will change the underlying dynamic in Iraq in several ways.

First, it would help win the support of the Iraqi people for a

political process and a government untainted by the appearance that the

United States controls them. Second, announcing a drawdown would

splinter insurgent groups who have set aside their own differences in

order to unite against the United States. Foreign jihadists, Sunni

nationalists, and Shiite extremists have little in common except their

opposition to the United States' presence in Iraq.

Third, a timetable for withdrawal would encourage the Iraqi

Government and the factions within Iraq to deal with each other rather

than relying on American troops to make the sacrifices. A withdrawal

could be structured in such a way as to create incentives for violent

factions within Iraq to come to the negotiating table rather than

engaging in armed insurrection.

Fourth, renouncing any long-term presence in Iraq would enhance

America's legitimacy throughout the world. It would be the first step

in putting the division that we have had with our allies behind us so

we can focus on the war on terror. Fifth, the central political

question in Iraq is not whether the United States should leave, but how

soon. The politics in Iraq are such that the incoming government, no

matter who is elected, will demand that the United States withdraw as

soon as it is confident of its own survival. The fact that 70 to 80

percent of the Iraqi people do not want us there makes it clear, if

elections determine who is in power in Iraq, whoever is elected Prime

Minister will want to work with the United States to set up a timetable

for a withdrawal.

Finally, a timetable for withdrawal would be that light at the end of

the tunnel for our military which has been severely overstretched and

unfairly deployed. While in Iraq, I met with many of our soldiers and

Marines. Their spirits are high. Morale is strong. They are prepared

for any mission. But they and their families want a reasonable

expectation of when this mission will end. From a standpoint of

readiness, a phased drawdown in Iraq would forestall what could

otherwise soon become a recruiting and retention crisis in the Armed

Forces.

We can withdraw the vast majority of our forces in Iraq by the end of

this year under a realistic plan. This is not a cut and run strategy,

but a phased drawdown that would leave a small, mobile and low-profile

U.S. presence in Iraq for a reasonable time frame in agreement with the

new Iraqi Government. This smaller contingent of approximately 30,000

troops could continue to fill specialty roles, such as training Iraqi

forces and engaging in quick strikes against insurgent or terrorist

infrastructures that minimize the risk of civilian casualties. A

smaller, more remote presence would not patrol Iraqi cities or streets,

but it would be enough to prevent outbreaks of civil warfare.

Two factors will allow Iraq to move forward while our troops come

home. First, our highest priority must be on training high-quality

Iraqi security forces. It must be our number one priority. For too

long, the Bush administration assumed that Americans would bear an

indefinite burden of security in Iraq. But lasting security can only be

provided by Iraqis. In the words of President Bush, ultimately the

success in Iraq is going to be the willingness of the Iraqi citizens to

fight for their own freedom. With the United States providing an open-

ended guarantee for security, there is little urgency for Iraqis

opposed to the insurgency to take charge and to fight it.

In addition, the training program was set back for months by a focus

on quantity over quality. A couple weeks' training is clearly not

enough. One of the reasons why there were problems with our policy on

training in the beginning was that we would train Iraqi soldiers for 2

weeks and then send them out into battle and oftentimes many of those

Iraqi soldiers when faced with the violence of an insurgency would run

away or, in some instances, join the insurgency.

While I was in Iraq, I met with General Petraeus and surveyed the

training of Iraqi security forces. General Petraeus gets it. He knows

that to fight a sophisticated insurgency, these Iraqis will need to be

highly skilled. Despite the rocky start, the training program is moving

forward. I believe 12 to 18 months is enough time to train Iraqi

security forces with the skills they will need to confront the

insurgency.

As important as training Iraqi security forces is, creating jobs for

Iraqis is also important. It is outrageous that of the $22 billion that

Congress has committed to Iraq reconstruction, only $4 billion has

actually been spent. And a huge percentage of that $4 billion has gone

to provide security for foreign contractors. When General Petraeus took

the 101st Airborne into Mosul, he used riches from Saddam's palaces to

keep Iraqi soldiers on the payroll. He invested in local reconstruction

projects that put people to work immediately. It was one of the reasons

that Mosul was relatively quiet for so long. It may not be a model of

free market capitalism, but it is a model for success in a country that

is desperate for jobs. It is worth replicating. As the United States

begins to reduce our military involvement in Iraq, our investment in

Iraq's reconstruction must endure.

Last week, President Bush spoke eloquently about America's special

responsibility to spread freedom around the globe, but his inaugural

address did not include a single mention of the actual war we are

fighting, the war that 150,000 of our servicemen and -women are

fighting every day in one of the most volatile and violent places on

Earth. In the realm of rhetoric and abstraction, President Bush has

clearly defined ideas about the struggle for human freedom, but his

policy for Iraq has not yet included a clear path for when or how we

will leave.

Our national conversation about Iraq needs more realism. It needs

more focus on the future rather than on the past. We need to refocus on

our original goal, a stable Iraq that does not threaten its neighbors,

develop weapons of mass destruction, export terrorism, or terrorize and

murder its own people. Hard experience and tragedy have taught us that

prolonged military occupation in Iraq will not end the insurgency, will

not stabilize Iraq or bring us closer to our strategic goals. It will

only cause more casualties and more hatred toward America within Iraq

and beyond. Iraqis want freedom, and they also want control over their

daily lives and their country's future. The best hopes for a stable,

peaceful Iraq are achieved by making it clear to the Iraqis that the

occupation is not indefinite and that soon they will bear the burden of

creating a responsible, democratic state.

Iraq's political development is occurring on a clearly defined

timetable. Elections will be held this Sunday; a constitution drafted

by August 15; an election to ratify that constitution by October 15;

new elections by December of this year; and a permanent government in

place by the end of December. Iraq needs a similar timetable for taking

responsibility for its own security. By laying out a timetable for a

phased-down withdrawal, the United States sends a clear message to

Iraqis, and all citizens of the world, that we believe Iraq is capable

of governing itself and making decisions about its future.

The removal of Saddam Hussein was a victory for the United States,

but lasting success in Iraq will not be achieved until the country is

stable and American soldiers have the opportunity to come home and be

with their families. I believe adopting a strategy of phased-down

withdrawal is the only course of action for the United States, and I

would hope that the Members of the Congress of the United States would

engage in this very important policy issue and have an influence on the

direction this country takes in the weeks and months ahead.