Mr. President, I rise once again today to comment on

the deeply disturbing consequences of the President's misguided

policies in Iraq. I have spoken before about my grave concern that the

administration's Iraq policies are actually strengthening the hand of

our enemies, fueling the insurgency's recruitment of foreign fighters,

and unifying elements of the insurgency that might otherwise turn on

each other.

But today I want to focus on a different and equally alarming issue,

which is that the Bush administration's policies in Iraq are making

America weaker. None of us should stand by and allow this to continue.

It is shocking to me this Senate has not found the time and the

energy to take up the Defense authorization bill and give that bill the

full debate and attention it deserves. Our men and women in uniform and

our military families continue to make real sacrifices every day in

service to this country. They perform their duties with skill and

honor, sometimes in the most difficult of circumstances. But the Senate

has not performed its duties, and the state of the U.S. military

desperately needs our attention.

The administration's policies in Iraq are breaking the U.S. Army. As

soldiers confront the prospect of a third tour in the extremely

difficult theater of Iraq, it would be understandable if they began to

wonder why all of the sacrifice undertaken by our country in wartime

seems to be falling on their shoulders. It would be understandable if

they and their brothers and sisters in the Marine Corps began to feel

some skepticism about whether essential resources, such as adequately

armored vehicles, will be there when they need them. It would be

understandable if they came to greet information about deployment

schedules with cynicism because reliable information has been hard to

come by for our military families in recent years. And it would be

understandable if they asked themselves whether their numbers will be

great enough--great enough--to hold hard-won territory, and whether

properly vetted translators will be available to help them distinguish

friend from foe.

At some point, the sense of solidarity and commitment that helps

maintain strong retention rates can give way to a sense of frustration

with the status quo. I fear we may be very close to that tipping point

today. It is possible we may not see the men and women of the Army

continue to volunteer for more of the same. It is not reasonable to

expect that current retention problems will improve rather than worsen.

We should not bet our national security on that kind of wishful

thinking.

Make no mistake, our military readiness is already suffering.

According to a recent RAND study, the Army has been stretched so thin

that active-duty soldiers are now spending 1 of every 2 years abroad,

leaving little of the Army left in any appropriate condition to respond

to crises that may emerge elsewhere in the world. In an era in which we

confront a globally networked enemy, and at a time when nuclear weapons

proliferation is an urgent threat, continuing on our present course is

irresponsible at best.

We are not just wearing out the troops; we are also wearing out

equipment much faster than it is being replaced or refurbished. Days

ago, the chief of the National Guard, GEN H. Steven Blum, told a group

of Senate staffers that the National Guard had approximately 75 percent

of the equipment it needed on 9/11, 2001. Today, the National Guard has

only 34 percent of the equipment it needs. The response to Hurricane

Katrina exposed some of the dangerous gaps in the Guard's

communications systems.

What we are asking of the Army is not sustainable, and the burden and

the toll it is taking on our military families is unacceptable. This

cannot go on.

Many of my colleagues, often led by Senator Reed of Rhode Island,

have taken stock of where we stand and have joined to support efforts

to expand the size of our standing Army. But this effort, which I

support, is a solution for the long term, because it depends on new

recruits to address our problems. We cannot suddenly increase the

numbers of experienced soldiers so essential to providing leadership in

the field. It takes years to grow a new crop of such leaders. But the

annual resignation rate of Army lieutenants and captains rose last year

to its highest rate since the attacks of September 11, 2001. We are

heading toward crisis right now.

Growing the all-volunteer Army can only happen if qualified new

recruits sign up for duty. But all indications suggest that at the end

of this month the Army will fall thousands short--thousands short--of

its annual recruiting goal. Barring some sudden and dramatic change,

the Army National Guard and Army Reserve too will miss their annual

targets by about 20 percent, missing their targets this year by 20

percent in terms of recruitment. GEN Peter Schoomaker, the Army's Chief

of Staff, told Congress recently that 2006 ``may be the toughest

recruiting environment ever.''

Too often, too many of us are reluctant to criticize the

administration's policies in Iraq for fear that anything other than

staying the course set by the President will somehow appear weak. But

the President's course is misguided, and it is doing grave damage to

our extraordinarily professional and globally admired all-volunteer

U.S. Army. To stand by--to stand by--while this damage is done is not

patriotic. It is not supportive. It is not tough on terrorism, nor is

it strong on national security. Because I am proud of our men and women

in uniform, and because I am committed to working with all of my

colleagues to make this country more secure, I am convinced we must

change our course.

As some of my colleagues know, I have introduced a resolution calling

for the President to provide a public report clarifying the mission the

United States military is being asked to accomplish in Iraq, and laying

out a plan and a timeframe for accomplishing that mission and

subsequently bringing our troops home. It is in our interest to provide

some clarity about our intentions and restore confidence at home and

abroad that U.S. troops will not be in Iraq indefinitely. I have tried

to jump-start this discussion by proposing a date for U.S. troop

withdrawal: December 31, 2006.

We need to start working with a realistic set of plans and benchmarks

if we are to gain control of our Iraq policy, instead of simply letting

it dominate our security strategy and drain vital resources for an

unlimited amount of time.

So this brings me to another facet of this administration's misguided

approach to Iraq, another front on which our great country is growing

weaker rather than stronger as a result of the administration's policy

choices, and that is the tremendously serious fiscal consequences of

the President's decision to put the entire Iraq war on our national

tab. How much longer can the elected representatives of the American

people in this Congress allow the President to rack up over $1 billion

a week in new debts? This war is draining, by one estimate, $5.6

billion every month from our economy--funds that might be used to help

the victims of Hurricane Katrina recover, or to help

address the skyrocketing health care costs facing businesses and

families, or to help pay down the enormous debt this Government has

already piled up.

Not only are we weakening our economy today, this costly war is

undermining our Nation's economic future because none of that

considerable expenditure has been offset in the budget by cuts in

spending elsewhere or by revenue increases. All of it--every penny--has

been added to the already massive debt that will be paid by future

generations of Americans.

For years now, this administration has refused to budget for the cost

of our ongoing operations in Iraq that can be predicted, and has

refused to make the hard choices that would be required to cover those

costs. Instead--instead--the President apparently prefers to leave

those tough calls to our children.

I want to finish my statement.

Mr. President, in effect, we are asking future generations to pay for

this war, and they will pay for it in the form of higher taxes or fewer

Government benefits. They stand to inherit a weakened America, one so

compromised by debt and economic crisis that the promise of opportunity

for all has faded. And there is no end in sight.

In addition to that, the war will leave other costly legacies. Here

again, it is the members of the military and their families who will

endure the most severe costs. But even if the war ended tomorrow, the

Nation will continue to pay the price for decades to come.

Linda Bilmes of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard estimates

that over the next 45 years, the health care, disability, and other

benefits due our Iraq war veterans will cost $315 billion. We owe our

brave troops the services and benefits they are due. We owe it to them

and to their children and to their grandchildren to guide the course of

this country and this economy to ensure that we are in a position to

deliver for our veterans and for all Americans.

I cannot support an Iraq policy that makes our enemies stronger and

our country weaker, and that is why I will not support staying the

course the President has set. If Iraq were truly the solution to our

national security challenges, this gamble with the future of our

military and with our economy--who knows?--might make sense, if that

were the case. If Iraq, rather than such strategically more significant

countries as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, were at the heart of the global

fight against violent Islamic terrorism, this might make some sense. If

it were true that fighting insurgents in Baghdad meant we would not

have to fight them elsewhere, all the costs of this policy might well

make sense.

But these things are not true. Iraq is not--is not--the ``silver

bullet'' in the fight against global terrorist networks. As I have

argued in some detail, it is quite possible that the administration's

policies in Iraq are actually strengthening the terrorists by helping

them to recruit new fighters from around the world, giving those

jihadists on-the-ground training in terrorism, and building new,

transnational networks among our enemies. Meanwhile, the costs of

staying this course indefinitely, the consequences of weakening

America's military and America's economy, loom more ominously before us

with each passing week. There is no leadership in simply hoping for the

best. We must insist on an Iraq policy that makes sense.

I yield to the Senator from California for a question.

I thank the Senator from California. She accurately

described the way in which we got in this situation. I called it on the

Senate floor, in October 2002, shifting justifications. The one we

began with, the one that sold the American people, was that somehow

there was a connection between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Most

of the American people apparently believed it because the President

told them so at the time of the invasion. That would have been the

ultimate justification because everybody assumed the Iraq invasion had

something to do with that.

Ever since that myth has been exploded, the administration has been

trying any way, scampering any way they can to come up with other

justifications--the obviously failed attempt to suggest the imminent

threat of weapons of mass destruction from Saddam Hussein, and then 6

to 7 months later, a year later, the President suddenly announces what

he was really trying to do was to start a domino effect. We were going

to fight a war that was going to create a domino effect of democracy

around the world, which is a lovely ideal and notion, but nobody

thought that was the justification when we voted here. I am guessing

that it wouldn't have gotten one single vote if Members thought we were

buying into that kind of project.

The Senator is right, not only with regard to how we got into the war

but also with regard to how this administration is conducting the war.

It is a mixture of so many inconsistent justifications that it doesn't

make sense.

I had 18 town meetings in northern and central Wisconsin, some of

them at very conservative areas, during the August recess. These were

places where most of the people supported the Iraq war. They came to my

town meetings and said: Why is this happening? Why were we given false

pretenses to get into the war, and why is it that there isn't a serious

plan to finish the war? Because of the failure of the administration to

handle this war in any sensible way, the very people who supported the

war are starting to say: Let's just leave.

So the President presents us with a false choice. He says: We have to

stay the course. And if you don't believe in staying the course, then

you must be for cutting and running. He is causing the movement in

America to simply leave Iraq because of his failure of leadership.

What our resolution does--and I thank the Senator from California for

her cosponsorship--is modest. It just says: Mr. President, within 30

days, could you give us a written plan that lays out the best way you

want, without being bound to it, what is the plan, what is the mission,

what are the benchmarks we have to achieve, by what time do you think

we can achieve those benchmarks, and at what point and through what

stages do you think we can begin and then complete the withdrawal of

our American troops.

I say to my friend through the Chair, I think her comments and her

question are right on the point.

I yield for another question.

Mr. President, I thank the Senator from California. The

Senator has very nicely returned to the main point of what I was trying

to illustrate today. We certainly agree on the problems of how we got

into this war and our very troubled feelings about that and also the

myriad of problems with the way the war is being conducted. But what

the Senator from California has done is returned us to the main point I

wanted to make today: This strategy is weakening America. I am not

talking about some general sense. We are talking specifically about our

military. We are talking specifically about our Army. We are talking

specifically about our National Guard.

Yes, we know about this in Wisconsin. We have some 10,000 Guard and

Reserve. The vast majority of them have been called up for action

overseas. There are serious concerns that have been reported--which, by

the way, were beginning prior to 9/11--about equipment. It is to the

point where my National Guard people ask me to ask the Secretary of

Defense, Are we going to replenish these things for our National Guard?

What is the guarantee? I received a rather weak answer, as I recall.

The equipment needs are only at 34 percent for the National Guard--a

dramatic decline in the last 4 years. Since 9/11, we have allowed the

situation to become much worse in terms of equipment for our National

Guard, whether it be for use in a foreign conflict or whether it be

used to handle a terrorist situation domestically or whether it be used

to help deal with one of the natural disasters that obviously can and

do occur.

I appreciate the Senator heightening this point. This isn't about

opposing a war. This is about mistakes being made by an administration

in terms of forgetting the main point of fighting terrorism and

forgetting about the need for our military to be strong both

internationally and to be able to help, as the National Guard must,

domestically.

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