Mr. President, news from the Pentagon last week hit so

many families throughout our great State of Arkansas particularly hard.

Four years into the conflict in Iraq, the Army National Guard put

13,000 reservists, including nearly 2,000 from the largest National

Guard unit in Arkansas, the 39th Infantry Brigade, on notice that they

should be prepared for a second deployment at the end of this year. The

Pentagon's decision to potentially deploy these troops marks the first

time during Operation Iraqi Freedom that full Guard units would be

called up for a second tour of duty. Our Arkansas troops already have

performed bravely in Iraq, and we know they will do so again.

Today, along with many Arkansans honorably serving in the Active-Duty

military, over 1,600 of our citizen soldiers have been activated for

service in the Middle East and along our southern border with Mexico.

The 142nd Fire Brigade based in Fayetteville, AR, mobilized last week

and is expected in Iraq this summer. Eighty members of the 213th Area

Support Medical Company are preparing for their mobilization orders in

June. Many of these members served in Iraq before with the 296th

Ambulance Company. The headquarters company, the 871st Troop Command,

is also expected to be mobilized in June.

Since the war began, our troops have performed their mission with

incredible bravery and skill in some of the harshest conditions

imaginable. Their families have supported them and kept them in their

prayers, have been there with them each step of the way, both in the

harsh conditions and when they have returned. Their communities have

supported them, many of which are rural communities. They are

communities that, when these soldiers have been deployed, have to find

someone else to fill positions while they are gone, positions such as

mayor or principal of the school, fire chief or police chief, small

businesses that keep the economies in those small rural communities

thriving.

Because of the sacrifice of these brave men and women, their

families, and these communities, we have seen a popularly elected

government replace a ruthless dictator.

We have seen a democratic constitution approved by the Iraqi people

replace the authoritarian rule they had known. Tragically, we also have

seen civilian mismanagement of this war which is not reflective of the

tremendous sacrifice put forth by our men and women in uniform. Today,

more than

3,300 servicemembers, 56 with Arkansas ties, have given their lives--

the ultimate sacrifice in this undertaking--and more than 24,000 have

been wounded.

Now, as our troops contemplate the thought of returning to Iraq to

continue an undefined mission, President Bush has chosen to question

the resolve of Congress to provide our troops with the resources they

need to finish the job. He has questioned us. I take great exception to

the President's comments. I find them disingenuous, and I wish to make

clear to the American people that Congress is committed to providing

our troops with everything they need to safely and effectively complete

their mission. I believe that we have worked diligently to bring about

a bill which would provide just that.

Last month, I voted with the majority of my Senate colleagues for an

emergency spending bill that was above the President's request for our

troops and would provide nearly $100 billion for operations in Iraq and

Afghanistan. We met each of his requests and provided every nickel he

asked for and more. The additional dollars we approved provide for

their combat equipment, housing, and much needed health care,

particularly addressing mental health issues for those suffering from

traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. Our

soldiers in the field deserve no less. Our returning veterans deserve

no less. We should be doing everything we possibly can to provide what

the President has asked and more. We do just that in the supplemental

bill we will send him.

Our legislation also sets measurable benchmarks for the Iraqi

Government such as assuming control of their own security operations,

containing the sectarian violence, and making the tough decisions

toward political reconciliation that desperately need to be made--the

very same benchmarks the President himself has continually called for.

The Senate did this in record time. In the past 2 years, it took well

over 100 days to get to a supplemental. This Senate, recognizing the

urgency of the issue, moved quicker than we have in the last 2 years.

We have been more expeditious, and we acted in less than 50 days to get

it passed in the Senate. We now anticipate sending him a bill next

week. Despite our best efforts to find common ground, however, the

President has threatened to veto this bill once it reaches his desk,

although the final language still needs to be negotiated in a

conference package. I hope it will be done in a way that does expedite

getting the resources and needs to our soldiers.

What is so egregious about our approach that the President will not

consider signing it and has been so adamant? The President points to

two particular issues. First, he claims this bill would impose

restrictions on our military commanders and set an arbitrary date for

withdrawal from Iraq, giving our enemies the victory they desperately

want. I argue that the constantly shifting objectives of this war make

it difficult to imagine an end to the U.S. commitment, unless we

present the benchmarks the President has spoken about and called for.

The American people are exhausted with this war, and the President's

justification for staying in Iraq becomes harder and harder to stomach

each and every day if we do not call on the Iraqis to step up to the

plate and seize their opportunity to create their own security.

As Iraq slides deeper into an increasingly violent civil war, the

President's high-risk military strategy has increased our military's

involvement. This strategy comes at a time when the U.S. intelligence

community reports that al-Qaida has become an increased threat to our

national security because we have devoted so much manpower, resources,

and attention solely to Iraq. We have in a sense spread ourselves so

thin in one place that how can we react in the multiple places where

al-Qaida is strengthening itself? It also comes at a time when our own

military reports that its readiness has dramatically eroded because it

has been overextended and underequipped.

Listening to my military leaders in Arkansas, my guardsmen and

reservists, who know full well what is going to be asked of them, one

of the first things on their list of concerns is the lack of medical

and dental readiness for their soldiers. They find that when some of

their troops get called up, because they are citizen soldiers and they

may not have regular health care--which is a whole other issue to be

dealing with in this body--they are held back on medical hold because

they don't meet medical readiness or, in some of the more horrific

stories, they just simply pull that soldier's teeth and send them to

Iraq because they don't have time to give adequate dental care to bring

them to that medical-readiness status. It is unacceptable and

inexcusable that we should be putting those many pressures on the brave

men and women who fight for this country.

Our bill seeks to address these issues. In the Senate bill, we

acknowledge that the conditions in Iraq have changed substantially

since we originally authorized the war in 2002. We are no longer

fighting an enemy that will one day show the white flag and surrender.

Instead, we are now in a referee position of a brutal fight for

dominance between two warring religious sects and countless militia who

are all hungry for power. Oftentimes, soldiers come home and say they

don't even know who the enemy is when they go into these communities

and seize what they think are civilians and don't know whether it is a

militia that will lash out and cause great harm.

While I agree with President Bush that we should not leave Iraq in

chaos, we don't have to. That is the point we make in this bill. We

don't have to if we make sure, as we do in this bill, that the Iraqis

understand what our expectations are of them, the benchmarks we have

laid down, and the expectations we have of the Iraqis to stand up so

our American soldiers can step down, as President Bush has so

frequently said.

U.S. troops should not be in the position of policing a civil war

with an open-ended commitment. The American people realize that and are

clamoring for us to move forward in a positive way to bring our troops

home.

That is why U.S. policy must focus on policy that encourages Iraqi

leaders to take responsibility for their country and attempt to find a

political solution to this grave conflict.

America is no stranger to that. In looking for our own freedom

hundreds of years ago, we realized there were commitments that had to

be made. We knew there were steps that had to be taken, courageous

steps that had to be taken. The Iraqi people know that, too. We must

encourage them now to take those steps.

Our efforts are already having their intended effect.

The President has also chided Congress for providing much needed

emergency funding. This is one of the other areas he brings complaint

about our supplemental--for providing this much needed emergency

funding for items such as Katrina recovery, agricultural disaster

relief, the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP,

and firefighting, just to name a few. He has attempted to paint this

funding as pork barrel funding when the reality is these are dollars

which will be used to rebuild the gulf region; dollars which will be

used for farmers to offset losses over the past several years from

drought and hurricanes and other types of natural disasters; dollars

which will be used for health care needs for our Nation's neediest

children, our most precious blessing; and dollars for our first

responders and on and on.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with my grandmother one time

when she said to me: It is crazy, but some people will sometimes ask

you, Which of your children do you love the most? How do you respond to

something like that? As the mother of twins, it is impossible.

President Bush is the father of twins. He knows how important it is

that all of your children--all of your children--know they are loved.

Yes, some, though, who are the neediest may need more attention. That

is why--that is why--the soldiers, the brave men and women serving in

uniform from this country, are the

first priority on our list here. But that does not mean we forget the

rest of the members of our American family. That does not mean we

forget the children who need health care or the farmers who are

experiencing disaster or, Heaven forbid, we forget the members of our

American family in the gulf region who have yet to get the resources

and the help from their Federal Government they need to begin to

rebuild their lives.

These are people who are a huge part of our American family and who

strengthen the fabric of this great country. It is so critically

important that they, too, be included as a part of strengthening this

country to which our soldiers will one day return home. These are funds

which are needed now. The supplemental offers the best opportunity to

address these emergencies. It is the typical place where we address

emergencies in the Congress.

Moving forward, I am pleased President Bush met with Majority Leader

Reid and Speaker Pelosi yesterday. I see that as a sign of progress.

But I am also very disappointed that the President continues to put

veto threats out there about a bill that is so vitally necessary to our

soldiers and to our entire American family.

For the security of our country and for the sake of our troops, it is

time for a new direction. It must be a direction that better reflects

the ability, the reality, and the real progress that ultimately lies

with the Iraqis taking responsibility for their own future. We know--we

know--it can happen if the Iraqis understand what is expected of them.

This new direction must also acknowledge we must do more for our

troops when they are in harm's way particularly but also when they come

home. The love and care--particularly health care--they and their

families need is essential to keeping our American family whole. They

not only deserve our appreciation and support, they deserve the very

best equipment, armor, and other battlefield amenities necessary to

complete their mission and to bring them home, as well as the proper

care, benefits, and attention once their military service is complete.

Our troops are worthy of this commitment from us. We should come

together as a Congress and an executive branch to make that expression,

to show our troops and to show our entire American family that at this

time, at this difficult time in our Nation's history, we come together

in a bipartisan way, in an American way, to recognize the needs of this

great country and to move us forward.

I strongly believe this bill offers the necessary guidelines to bring

our soldiers home safely, and as soon as possible, to care for this

incredible country--these communities they will return home to, to keep

them whole and to keep this incredible fabric of our American family

strong.