While I am supporting passage of this authorization, there are several provisions of this legislation that I oppose. The first regards civil service protections for civilian employees at the Department of Defense (DOD). H.R. 1588 gives the DOD broad authority to strip almost 700,000 civilian employees of fundamental rights relating to due process, appeal and collective bargaining rights. This means the DOD will be able to fire employees with no notice and no opportunity to respond, prevent discrimination actions from being heard by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, strip employees of their right to join a union and repeal the laws preventing nepotism. Civil service employees at DOD have defended our nation bravely and made enormous sacrifices to support the military effort in Iraq. DOD should not be given unlimited authority to trample on their basic rights.

H.R. 1588 also unnecessarily weakens long-standing environmental protections at our military facilities by lowering the accountability standard DOD must follow when recovering imperiled species under the Endangered Species Act. The new standard fails to ensure that DOD conservation plans are actually effective in assisting the recovery of imperiled species. H.R. 1588 also creates a far less protective definition of ‘harassment’ of marine life by military activities under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. This new definition allows DOD to avoid ensuring its activities are conducted in a manner to minimize harm to marine life such as whales, dolphins, and sea lions.

Although I fully appreciate the importance of military training and readiness, the DOD has not made the case that exemptions to important and long-standing environmental laws are necessary or that training is greatly impaired because of those laws. Furthermore, the President already has the authority to waive environmental laws if he deems it a matter of national security, and not once has a waiver requested by the President been turned down. Until our national security is at stake, no government agency—including the DOD—should be above laws that preserve our air and water and sustain America’s wildlife.

This measure also authorizes $9.1 billion for the unproven and untested National Missile Defense system. This costly program fails to address the rising threat of a chemical or biological weapons attack by terrorists and will divert precious resources away from the very real human investments needed to keep our military, intelligence agencies and domestic security agencies strong. I have voted time and again to remove funding for the National Missile Defense system, but the Republican Majority defeated each attempt. It is a mistake to fund this unproven program while our citizens at home are without the appropriate resources they need to respond to a terrorist attack on American soil.

I have met with National Guard members, Reservists and regular military personnel who have chosen to put their lives on the line to protect our freedoms. They have sacrificed a tremendous amount, even when their service means putting their family’s financial solvency at risk. We owe them our support and our gratitude.

As I stated above, this is not a “blank check” for the President. Rather, this legislation will go a long way toward helping our troops in their time of need.