Mr. Speaker, during

the August recess, I had the opportunity

to meet with a number of my

constituents from all walks of life and

hear what was on their mind. The question

that came up over and over was

are we going to invade Iraq and, if we

were, what did that mean? How many

troops would it take? Would we have to

attack civilian centers? How long

would we have to stay in Iraq? Would

our allies join us? How much would it

cost? Who would rule Iraq after we invaded?

How would this affect our efforts

in Afghanistan? How would this

affect our efforts to promote peace in

the Middle East?

I have thought long and hard about

this matter as I am sure all of my colleagues

have. I believe the questions

my constituents have raised are legitimate

and require genuine and detailed

replies. I also believe that as a Member

of this body, I need to know in very

specific detail how the United States

will find and allocate the necessary resources

for such a venture without

jeopardizing our current priorities in

Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Dismantling and destroying the al

Qaeda terrorist network and stabilizing

and restoring a functioning representative

government in Afghanistan are top

priorities for U.S. policy.

We are a long way from achieving

these goals. Known al Qaeda and

Taliban fighters continue to operate in

parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Other top al Qaeda leaders are known

to be in Iran. Al Qaeda funds have been

relocated to Sudan. The task of creating

a stable post-conflict government

in Afghanistan has barely begun, and

warlords are reasserting their hold

over former territory. Development aid

has been slow to arrive and even slower

to take effect, and most is unable to

reach very far beyond Kabul.

Mr. Speaker, I recognize that it will

take years for Afghanistan to become

truly stable and able to meet the needs

of its own people, but right now the

country is already beginning to slip

backward. It is imperative that we stay

the course and succeed in Afghanistan,

and it will cost the United States a

great deal in time, personnel, effort,

and money.

Completing the mission in Afghanistan

requires holding together the

international coalition Washington assembled

following the September 11 attacks.

War in Iraq, especially any unilateral

action, would almost certainly

shatter that coalition and alienate significant

partners. A unilateral U.S. invasion

of Iraq will make it difficult to

get Arab support for a fair and lasting

resolution to the Middle East conflict.

It would also inflame anti-American

sentiment in the region. Diplomacy

and coalition building aside, the military

challenges of war and especially

its aftermath in Iraq are still quite formidable.

Iraq, like Afghanistan, is a

multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nation

with no apparent popularly supported

opposition. Armed paramilitary and

clandestine organizations opposed to a

U.S.-led occupation of Iraq are likely

to engage in guerrilla attacks against

American soldiers. Internal strife and

even civil and ethnic war are even

more likely. Experts on Iraq from both

prior Republican and Democrat administrations

have indicated that it could

take a decade or more of U.S. troops

occupying Iraq before it is stable once

more.

I will listen closely to the speech

that President Bush will deliver next

week at the United Nations. I welcome

the fact that the administration has

decided to reach out to our allies and

to work with the United Nations on

this matter. The President has also

made the right decision to come before

Congress and seek specific authorization

for any military action in Iraq.

Many questions remain to be answered

before deciding how best to prevent the

regime of Saddam Hussein from developing

or deploying offensive weapons

against other nations.

In the meantime the U.S. and the

international community must continue

to put maximum pressure on the

Iraqi regime and press for resumption

of unconditional international weapons

inspections. The President should continue

to work through the United Nations

Security Council, and the U.S.

should exercise restraint and continue

to build an international coalition, including

Arab nations, dedicated to

completing the job in Afghanistan and

willing to work jointly for more genuinely

representative government in

Baghdad.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion let me

just say that I am deeply concerned

with the policy that the administration

has articulated thus far on Iraq. It

will take a far more compelling presentation

to convince me and many of my

constituents that war is the right and

only course remaining for the United

States to take in Iraq.