Mr. Speaker, the notion that the Iraq war is all about

building freedom and democracy across the broader Middle East has been

a staple of White House talking points for nearly as long as we have

had our troops in harm's way.

But a few weeks ago, courtesy of a front-page story in The Washington

Post, we learned something interesting about the President's actual

nuts and bolts commitment to democracy. He doesn't have one. That April

5 story by Peter Baker reveals that when it comes to promoting

democracy, the bottom line reality doesn't match all the fancy

rhetoric.

The administration, in fact, is dramatically reducing funding for

programs and organizations that do the nitty-gritty work of helping

nations train their people to build and sustain a democratic

infrastructure, political parties, unions, a free press and other

institutions.

The National Democratic Institute of International Affairs and the

International Republican Institute will, according to The Post, be

running out of USAID grant dollars in a matter of days. Only a special

earmark is keeping them open for business.

The U.S. Institute of Peace has seen funding for its democracy

programs in Iraq slashed by nearly two-thirds. The National Endowment

for Democracy recently received its last $3 million to spend in Iraq.

As one vice-president at the U.S. Institute of Peace pointed out to The

Post, the combined cost of all the programs dedicated to encouraging

Iraqi democracy amounts to less than what we spend on the military

occupation in Iraq in a single day.

Of course, in addition to being expensive in treasure, this military

campaign has carried a devastating human cost, namely, 2,390 American

men and women killed, all in the name of democracy that is in danger of

never taking hold. It is not surprising, I guess, that this

administration would shortchange democracy promotion. After all, these

are the folks who thought there was no hard work involved in creating a

free society. They thought all you had to do was drop a few bombs, kick

out a brutal dictator, and democracy would miraculously and

spontaneously spring from the oil wells or something. That is one of

the reasons their post-war planning was so tragically inadequate.

But this war was never really about building democracy in any real

sense. If that had been the justification presented to the American

people in 2002, this body and our colleagues on the other side of the

Capitol would never have authorized the President to use military

force.

No, it was only after the whole weapons of mass destruction thing

turned out to be a fraud that the administration started casting about

for another rationale. And they came up with this fanciful notion that

the war would give rise to democracy, not just in Iraq, but among its

neighbors and across the region.

Mr. Speaker, we can encourage democratic elements in Iraq without a

military campaign that is killing Americans, killing Iraqis, and

fomenting a civil war. It is time to bring our troops home and start

investing in true democracy building efforts.

I have offered a new approach to national security called SMART. This

stands for Sensible Multilateral American Response to Terrorism. And

its core is the notion of investing in nations' democratic potential

without resorting to military force.

There are many elements to SMART. It calls for fighting terrorism and

stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction through stronger

multilateral relationships and improved intelligence. It demands that

the United States live up to its nuclear nonproliferation commitments.

It would redirect money we are spending on obsolete Cold War weapons

toward homeland security and energy independence. But perhaps most

important of all, it is a humanitarian program designed to improve

living conditions in troubled regions of the world, to address the

oppression and the deprivation that often give rise to terrorism in the

very first place. That means supporting programs that promote

sustainable development; human rights education; peaceful conflict

resolution, educational opportunities, particularly for women and

girls; and democracy building.

It is time for the United States to actually put its money where its

mouth is on promoting democracy.