Mr. President, with tonight's Presidential debate coming

up, the whole Nation will be watching John Kerry and George Bush debate

the all important issue of why America went to war in Iraq, when Iraq

was not an imminent threat, had no nuclear weapons, no persuasive links

to al-Qaida, no connection to the terrorist attacks of September 11th,

and no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

It is now clear that from the very moment President Bush took office,

Iraq was his highest priority as unfinished business from the first

Bush administration.

His agenda was clear: find a rationale to get rid of Saddam.

Then came 9/11. In the months that followed, the war in Afghanistan

and the hunt for Osama bin Laden had obvious priority, because al-Qaida

was clearly the greatest threat to our national security.

Despite all the clear and consistent warnings about al-Qaida,

President Bush treated it as a distraction from his obsession with

Saddam. By the summer of 2002, President Bush was restless for war with

Iraq. The war in Afghanistan was no longer in the headlines or at the

center of attention. Bin Laden was hard to find, the economy was in

trouble, and so was the President's approval ratings in the polls.

Karl Rove had tipped his hand earlier by stating that the war on

terrorism could bring political benefits as well. The President's

undeniable goal was to convince the American people that war was

necessary with Iraq--and necessary right away--because Saddam was a

bigger threat.

That conclusion was not supported by the facts or the intelligence,

but they could be retrofitted to support it. Senior administration

officials kept suggesting the threat from Iraq was imminent.

At a roundtable discussion with European journalists last month,

Secretary Rumsfeld insisted: ``I never said imminent threat.''

In fact, Secretary Rumsfeld had told the House Armed Services

Committee on September 18, 2002, ``. . . Some have argued that the

nuclear threat from Iraq is not imminent--that Saddam is at least 5-7

years away from having nuclear weapons. I would not be so certain.''

In May 2003, White spokesman Ari Fleischer was asked whether he went

to war ``because we said WMD were a direct and imminent threat to the

United States.'' Fleischer responded, ``Absolutely.''

What else could National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice have been

suggesting, other than an imminent threat--an extremely imminent

threat--when she said on September 8, 2002, ``We don't want the smoking

gun to be a mushroom cloud.''

President Bush himself may not have used the word ``imminent'', but

he carefully chose strong and loaded words about the nature of the

threat--words that the intelligence community never used--to persuade

and prepare the Nation to go to war against Iraq.

In the Rose Garden on October 2, 2002, as Congress was preparing to

vote on authorizing the war, the President said the Iraqi regime ``is a

threat of unique urgency.''

In a speech in Cincinnati on October 7 that year, President Bush

echoed Condoleezza Rice's image of nuclear devastation: ``Facing clear

evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof--the smoking

gun--that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.'' He says he did

not use the word ``imminent.'' What could be more imminent than talk

like that?

At a political appearance in New Mexico on October 28, 2002, after

Congress had voted to authorize war, and a week before the election,

President Bush said Iraq was a ``real and dangerous threat.''

At a NATO summit on November 20, 2002, President Bush said Iraq posed

a ``unique and urgent threat.''

In Fort Hood, TX, on January 3, 2003, President Bush called the Iraqi

regime a ``grave threat.''

Nuclear weapons. Mushroom cloud. Unique and urgent threat. Real and

dangerous threat. Grave threat. This was the administration's rallying

cry for war.

When he was Secretary of Defense during the first Gulf War, Vice

President Cheney said, ``We were not going to get bogged down in the

problems of trying to take over and govern Iraq.''

As Senator Edwards has said, Secretary Cheney was against getting

bogged down in Iraq before he was for it.

Here is another quote from the New York Times in 1991, by Secretary

Cheney:

That was Secretary Cheney, his words. He was against the war, too,

before he was for it.

But, it was Vice President Cheney who first laid out the trumped up

argument for war with Iraq to an unsuspecting public. In a speech on

August 26, 2002, to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, he asserted: ``. . .

We now know that Saddam has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear

weapons . . . Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear

weapons fairly soon.'' As we now know, the intelligence community was

far from certain. Yet the Vice President had no doubt.

On September 8, 2002, Cheney was even more emphatic about Saddam. He

said, ``[We] do know, with absolute certainty, that he is using his

procurement system to acquire the equipment he needs in order to enrich

uranium to build a nuclear weapon.'' The intelligence community was

deeply divided about the aluminum tubes, but Cheney was absolutely

certain.

One month later, on the eve of the watershed vote by Congress to

authorize the war, President Bush said it even more vividly. He said,

``Iraq has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes . . .

which are used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. If the Iraqi

regime is able to produce, buy, or steal an amount of highly enriched

uranium a little larger than a single softball, it could have a nuclear

weapon in less than a year. And if we allow that to happen, a terrible

line would be crossed . . . Saddam Hussein would be in a position to

pass nuclear technology to terrorists.''

In fact, as we now know, the intelligence community was far from

united on Iraq's nuclear threat. The administration attempted to

conceal the disagreement from the public by classifying the information

and the dissents by the intelligence community until after the war,

even while making dramatic and excessive public statements about the

immediacy of the danger.

The second major claim in the administration's case for war was the

linkage between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida.

The National Intelligence Estimate found no cooperative relationship

between Saddam and al-Qaida. On the contrary, it stated only that such

a relationship might happen if Saddam were ``sufficiently desperate''--

in other words, if America went to war. But the intelligence estimate

placed ``low confidence'' that, even in desperation, Saddam would give

weapons of mass destruction to al-Qaida.

President Bush ignored all that. He was relentless in raising

America's fears about Saddam after the devastating 9/11 tragedy. He

drew a clear link--and drew it repeatedly--between al-Qaida and Saddam.

In a September 25, 2002, statement at the White House, President Bush

flatly declared: ``You can't distinguish between al-Qaida and Saddam

when you talk about the war on terror.'' How could any President make a

preposterous statement like that?

He kept piling it on. In his State of the Union Address in January

2003, President Bush said, ``Evidence from intelligence sources, secret

communications, and statements by people now in custody reveal that

Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al-

Qaida.'' He said Saddam could provide ``lethal viruses'' to a ``shadowy

terrorist network.''

Two weeks later, in his radio address to the Nation, a month before

the war began, President Bush described the ties in detail, saying

``Saddam Hussein has longstanding, direct and continuing ties to

terrorist networks...''

He said: ``Senior members of Iraqi intelligence and al-Qaida have met

at least eight times since the early 1990s. Iraq has sent bomb making

and document-forgery experts to work with al-Qaida. Iraq has also

provided al-Qaida with chemical and biological weapons training. An al-

Qaida operative was sent to Iraq several times in the late 1990s for

help in acquiring poisons and gases. We also know that Iraq is

harboring a terrorist network headed by a senior al-Qaida terrorist

planner. This network runs a poison and explosive training camp in

northeast Iraq, and many of its leaders are known to be in Baghdad.''

In fact, there was no operational link and no clear and persuasive

pattern of ties between the Iraq and al-Qaida. That fact should have

been abundantly clear to President Bush, since Iraq and al-Qaida had

diametrically opposite views of the world.

Al-Qaida and its religious fanatics detested Saddam, because Saddam

was a secular dictator. Yet, President Bush had more than half the

country believing that Saddam and al-Qaida were in cahoots on 9/11.

Secretary of State Colin Powell now agrees that there was no link

between 9/11 and Saddam's regime. So does Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld.

A bipartisan 9/11 Commission Staff Statement put it plainly: ``Two

senior bin Laden associates have adamantly denied that any ties existed

between al-Qaida and Iraq. We have no credible evidence that Iraq and

al-Qaida cooperated on attacks against the United States.''

The bipartisan 9/11 Commission report stated clearly that there was

no evidence of a collaborative ``operational'' connection between

Saddam and al-Qaida. The report said there was no evidence ``indicating

that Iraq cooperated with al-Qaida in developing or carrying out any

attacks against the United States.''

This past July, the Senate Intelligence Committee issued a bipartisan

report whose title was, ``Prewar Intelligence Regarding Iraq Weapons of

Mass Destruction and Links to Terrorism.'' The report said there was

not ``an established formal relationship'' between al-Qaida and Saddam

Hussein.

But in his march to war, President Bush exaggerated the threat

anyway. It was not subtle. It was not nuanced. It was pure,

unadulterated fear mongering, based on a devious strategy to convince

the American people that Saddam had helped commit 9/11 and had the

ability to provide nuclear weapons to al-Qaida, so that immediate war

was necessary.

America went to war in Iraq because President Bush insisted that

nuclear weapons in the hands of Saddam Hussein and his ties to al-Qaida

were too

dangerous to ignore. None of that was true, so all that President Bush

says now is that Saddam was a brutal dictator and that America and the

world are better off without him. Talk about flip-flops.

How dare President Bush accuse John Kerry of flip-flops on Iraq. My

response is ``Physician, heal thyself.'' President Bush is the all-time

world-record-holder for flip-flops. Nothing John Kerry has said

remotely compares with President Bush's gigantic flip-flops on the

reasons he went to war.

The war in Iraq itself has not made America safer and has not made

the world safer. None of the President's post war rationalizations are

sufficient to justify war.

Almost every week, President bush tries a new rationale for the war.

He's said our goal was ``sovereignty'' for Iraq, ``dignity'' for Iraq's

culture, and ``for every Iraqi citizen, the opportunity for a better

life.''

On April 30, 2004, he suggested the war was about human rights,

saying ``there are no longer torture chambers or rape rooms or mass

graves in Iraq.''

He's suggested the war was for freedom and democracy.

He's said, ``The rise of a free and self-governing Iraq will deny

terrorists a base of operation, discredit their narrow ideology, and

give momentum to reformers across the region.''

He has said the war was ``a victory for the security of America and

the civilized world.''

None of this rationale is an adequate justification for war, and the

President did not even try to make them a justification until long

after the war began and all the other plausible justifications had

proven false.

Saddam was not an imminent threat. The war in Iraq was a perilous

distraction from the real war on terrorism--the war against al-Qaida.

President Bush got it exactly wrong. To him, the war in Afghanistan was

a distraction from the war he wanted against Saddam.

The war on in Iraq has clearly made America more hated in the world,

especially in the Islamic world, and it has made Americans more

vulnerable to terrorist attacks both here at home and overseas.

We'll hear much more about this issue in tonight's Presidential

debate, and the debate will go in Congress and in communities across

the country between now and the election. The most important decision

any President ever makes is the decision on war or peace. No President

who misleads the country on the need for war deserves to be reelected.

Any President who does so must be held accountable, and November 2 is

the chance to do it.

Mr. President, we know that some defenders of the President are

desperate to support him. They say any dissent is only helping the

terrorists. They even claim that al-Qaida wants John Kerry to win this

election.

It's despicable to make charges like that. It is not unpatriotic to

tell the truth to the American people about the war in Iraq. In this

grave moment of our country, to use the words of Thomas Jefferson,

``Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.''