Madam Speaker, the two most

important issues facing our country right now are the seemingly endless

and tragic war in Iraq and the need to ensure America's safety here at

home.

President Bush's speech to the Nation last night regrettably

demonstrates that either he doesn't understand the security challenges

we face, or that he is intentionally misleading the American people for

partisan political purposes.

This is a tough election year, and I can understand why the President

and the Republican Party are desperately clinging to a campaign of

misinformation, mudslinging and fear, given their failures on the

economy, the war and homeland security. But their campaign is not

responsible, and it ill serves our troops, our people and our future.

The President continues to try to convince Americans that the war in

Iraq is part of the war on terror. Last week, the President said, and I

quote, one of the hardest parts of my job is to try and connect the war

in Iraq to the war on terror.

I can understand why it is so difficult for the President,

considering that Saddam Hussein's regime and Iraq were not responsible

for the attacks of 9/11 or the war on terror. The only prewar

connection between Iraq and Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda was that they

were enemies. The bipartisan Senate intelligence committee report just

released last week states that Saddam Hussein distrusted Osama bin

Laden so much that he, quote, issued a general order that Iraq should

not deal with al Qaeda.

And, more importantly, while there was not an Iraq/al Qaeda

connection before the invasion, certainly there appears to be one now.

And that is what the President would say makes Iraq the central front

in the war on terror.

But, once again, the President is wrong.

First, the only role the U.S. occupation in Iraq currently plays in

the war on terror is making it worse. Our presence in Iraq has created

more terrorists than we have captured or killed. In fact, the U.S.

occupation of Iraq is one of al Qaeda's chief recruitment tools, and

the American people have caught on to this.

According to a recently released poll, by a 45 to 32 percent margin,

people believe that reducing America's overseas military presence,

rather than expanding it, will have a greater effect on reducing the

threat of terrorism.

The most effective weapon against terrorists is cooperation among

nations in sharing critical intelligence to round up and disrupt

terrorist organizations and activities. That effort is hampered by the

recruitment and growth of terrorists because of the Iraq war.

It is time for the President to be honest with the American people

and to admit that the biggest threat to Iraq's future is the presence

of U.S. troops fanning the flames of Sunni-Shiite civil war. And one of

the biggest threats to the United States' security is the powerful

motivation our presence in Iraq gives terrorists who seek to do us

harm.

The President and this Congress have wasted resources, time and

precious lives in a diversion from making Americans safer, and it has

been an enormous and costly diversion by this administration. But the

facts are clear that we have not done enough to make America safer. In

fact, we have done just the opposite by getting bogged down in the war

in Iraq and fanning the flames of hatred and violence.