Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor the

brave soldiers who have sacrificed so much to ensure our Nation's

freedom.

I am extremely proud of all of Western North Carolina's brave men and

women, including the 210th and 211th Military Police Units, who have

fought courageously to establish a united, free, and sovereign Iraq.

The sacrifices these men and women make are unimaginable, whether

it's spending time away from their families, enduring financial

hardships, or laying their very lives on the line for freedom. And

while these sacrifices are great, we must not forget that they are

fighting to protect the world from the grip of terrorism. By risking

their lives in Iraq and abroad, these brave men and women, including my

son, are protecting the lives of American families and making our

country safer.

Four men from Western North Carolina have given their lives in the

Iraq conflict. Attending the funeral of one of those men--CW03 Mitchell

Carver--served as a stark reminder that freedom is not free. It is not

the press who protect a Nation's right to free speech; instead, it is

men like Mitch Carver who choose the responsibility to do so. And Mitch

Carver is not alone. In the eight years I have been privileged to serve

as a representative on the Board of Visitors of our Nation's military

academy at West Point, I have seen thousands of young men and women

take the oath to protect us. Theirs is a simple pledge: ``Duty, Honor,

Country.''

To me the great and central question in our debate is this: Are the

Iraqi people capable of and deserving of democracy? The answer is quite

simple. Any man or woman, nation, or civilization that thirsts to live

free from tyranny, desires to speak freely, and wishes to freely and

fairly elect their leaders is worthy of the great gift of democracy. We

have seen the images of Iraqi men and women with tears in their eyes as

they cast their first votes in the parliamentary elections. Iraq has

embraced democracy with a contagious enthusiasm. Democracy is never

easy, but in due time Iraq will be a beacon of hope for the Middle

East. To turn our backs on the Iraqi people as they are making such

great strides would be arrogant and foolish. In short, it is

abandonment not only of the Iraqi people, but also of the principles

which we have preached and practiced as a nation for more than two

hundred years.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to our brave troops and our

Iraqi allies. We owe the men and women in our Armed Forces a debt of

gratitude--their courage should inspire us all. I encourage all

Americans to join me in continuing to keep our troops and their

families in our thoughts and prayers.