Mr. Speaker, I am honored to rise tonight

with my distinguished colleagues in the newly formed Get Out of Iraq

Caucus. We stand together in this hallowed place to advocate for the

majority of Americans who believe that President Bush must get our men

and women home from Iraq. It was the great politician and diplomat

Adlai Stevenson who said: ``Patriotism is not a short and frenzied

outburst of emotion but the tranquil and steady dedication of a

lifetime.'' I want to thank each and every American who believes

strongly in this cause for making that dedication and speaking out

about what you believe to be wrong for our great Nation.

I want start off by reading a very telling quote: ``War should be the

politics of last resort. And when we go to war, we should have a

purpose that our people understand and support.'' This quote was made

by none other than former Secretary of State Colin Powell, a senior

member of the Bush Cabinet leading up to the war in Iraq. The truth is

that this war was not a last resort, and it most certainly does not

have the full support of the American people. The truth is that this

Administration has continuously changed the truth about their motives

for going to war. First they said it was about weapons of mass

destruction, then when we found out the truth that there weren't any in

Iraq, they said the war was now about Saddam, and today they tell us

it's about establishing democracy in Iraq. The real truth is that this

Administration has no real plan, they had no plan before going to war,

they have no plan to get out of this war and most dangerous they have

no plan to win this war. The truth is that our men and women of the

Armed Forces are the ones caught in the middle, the ones who have to

fight and risk their lives in a war that has not end in sight.

Earlier this week I offered an amendment to the Defense

Appropriations bill which would have increased funding for training the

Iraqi National Army by $500 million. This Amendment would have doubled

the amount of money appropriated for training the Iraqi National Army

within the Iraq Freedom Fund. However, Mr. Inslee's amendment to lift

the $500 million cap on funds for training the Iraqi National Army was

accepted into this Appropriation. Therefore, I will work with Chairman

Young and Ranking Member Murtha to insure that additional funds are

appropriated for training the Iraqi National Army. The Jackson-Lee and

Inslee amendments reinforce the point that the best way to get U.S.

troops out of Iraq is to train the Iraqi troops to take care of their

own nation. Clearly, more money is needed to not only train these

inexperienced troops to defeat the insurgency, but also to pay troops

to enlist in this new army despite the obvious danger they face. At

this time of increased danger for our troops, this Amendment reiterates

the fact that we need to be transferring more responsibility upon the

Iraqis to take care of their nation and develop a plan to remove our

U.S. troops.

To this date at least 1,783 members of the U.S. military have died,

152 from the State of Texas alone, since the beginning of the Iraq war

in March 2003. Since May 1, 2003, when President Bush declared that

major combat operations in Iraq had ended, at least 1,585 U.S. military

members have died. There have been at least 1,909 coalition deaths in

Iraq, which means that more than 93 percent of the coalition deaths

have come from the U.S. Armed Forces. This President told us that there

would be an international coalition going in to fight the Iraq War, the

truth is that it is our troops and our troops alone who are on those

front lines suffering mass casualties and the burden of this war.

Just last month I wrote to President Bush respectfully requesting him

to rescind and repeal the Defense Department rule that bars public

viewing of the flag-draped coffins of fallen soldiers upon their

arrival back to the United States in the spirit of patriotism, honor,

and respect for the service that they have given. This overly

restrictive rule contravenes the First, Ninth, and Tenth Amendments to

the United States Constitution as well as the principles of due process

and equal protection as it relates to the decedents, their families,

and each American who wishes to honor one who has fought for his or her

Nation. In addition, this rule violates the Freedom of Information Act

by arbitrarily narrowing the scope of material that may be accessed

under the law. While the stated objective of this policy is to protect

the privacy of the decedents' families, its effect reaches

unjustifiably broad and in a manner repugnant to the foundations of the

democracy in which we live. The American public has been allowed to

view and honor fallen soldiers of wars dating as recently as the

Persian Gulf War in 1990-1991 under prior Administrations of both

political parties. The current policy is clearly deceitful to the

American people, who deserve to know the full truth about the War in

Iraq.

When our American troops are the ones fighting abroad, it is our

military families who must also suffer. They wait every day and night

hoping to hear from the loved ones, praying that they are not put in

harm's way, that they may come home soon. Too many families have not

been so lucky, finding out the news of a loved one's death is not only

emotionally traumatizing it can have long term effects for the family

that may never be repaired. Such is the case with the family of Army

Spc. Robert Oliver Unruh a 25-year-old soldier who was killed by enemy

fire near Baghdad on September 25th of last year. Unruh was a combat

engineer, who had been in Iraq less than a month when he was shot

during an attack on his unit. Several days after learning of his death,

his mother had gone to

the hospital complaining of chest pains, Hamilton said. She was feeling

better the next day but saw her son's body Saturday morning and

collapsed that night in her kitchen. The poor woman literally died of a

broken heart, her beloved son killed in action, the emotion of it all

was just too much for her to take. There is also the story of the

Danner family in Branson, Missouri who had to spend this last Father's

Day sending their father off to War in Iraq. Col. Steve Danner will be

heading to Fort Riley, Kan., on Monday to begin training before he

begins a two-year tour in Iraq with the Army National Guard 35th

Support Command. At 52, Danner isn't hesitating to fulfill his duty,

but said it's going to be tough to leave his family. ``I'm as ready as

I'm going to be,'' Danner said. ``My main regret is my youngest

daughter is going to be a senior at Branson and I'll miss her softball

games and probably her graduation next year. We have to recognize it's

a reality. I've done this a lot of years. It's my turn again.''

Danner's wife, Katie, said she was ``shocked'' when she learned her

husband would be headed to Iraq. ``I knew there was always a

possibility, but you would have thought, at his age, that the war

wouldn't be at a point where they would need his talents,'' she said.

The Danners have four children, Aryn Danner Richmond, 29, of Phoenix,

Andrew, 20, Alex, 19, and Audrey, 17. Katie Danner said they understand

why their father needs to leave, but ``I don't think they really know

what it will be like for Dad to be gone.'' It's a true shame that loyal

soldiers like Col. Steve Danner have to be called up at the age of 52

because of this war and the current recruiting shortage. It's stories

like that that make my heart ache and that strengthen my resolve to

defend the rights and welfare of our American soldiers and their

families.

We must all stand as champions for our men and women fighting abroad.

These soldiers who bravely reported for duty, they are our sons and our

daughters, they are our fathers and mothers, they are our husbands and

wives, they are our fellow Americans and they deserve better than the

predicament that this Administration has placed them in. Many of these

soldiers are now themselves standing up and demanding answers about

this war. One such brave individual is Sgt. Camilo Mejia, whose case I

know that many tremendous anti-war organizations have championed.

Camilo spent six months in combat in Iraq, and then returned for a 2-

week furlough to the U.S. There he reflected on what he had seen,

including the abuse of prisoners and the killing of civilians. He

concluded that the war was illegal and immoral, and decided that he

would not return. In March 2004 he turned himself in to the U.S.

military and filed an application for conscientious objector status,

for this he was sentenced to one year in prison for refusing to return

to fight in Iraq. He has eloquently stated: ``Behind these bars I sit a

free man because I listened to a higher power, the voice of my

conscience.'' He was finally released from prison on February 15th of

this year. I applaud this young man for making a conscious decision not

to fight in a war he does not believe in, it's a disgrace that this

young man who truly is a conscientious objector was treated like a

criminal.

Time and time again this Administration has said that there are no

plans for a draft, that we have an all-volunteer Army, but all of us

know the real truth that there is in effect a back door draft taking

place. Individuals who have been out of the Armed Forces for years and

many who were told that they had fulfilled their commitment are now

being taken away from their families and put in this war. Under the

Pentagon's ``stop-loss'' program, the Army can extend enlistments

during war or national emergencies, about 7,000 active-duty soldiers

have had their contracts extended under the policy, and it could affect

up to 40,000 reserve soldiers depending on how long the war in Iraq

lasts. The Army has defended the policy, saying the fine print on every

military contract mentions the possibility that time of service may

change under existing laws and regulations. It’s just cowardly to hide

behind fine print when it comes to peoples’ lives being at stake in this

war, every day their tours are unjustly extended is another day they

risk their lives. However, many of these individuals are now fighting

back against this injustice, rightfully asking why they, who have

already proudly served their Nation, must now be recalled for a war

that has already claimed too many American lives. Fewer than two-thirds

of the former soldiers being reactivated for duty in Iraq and elsewhere

have reported on time, prompting the Army to threaten some with

punishment for desertion. The former soldiers, part of what is known as

the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR), are being recalled to fill

shortages in skills needed for the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The military families know the helplessness that many of their loved

ones serving in Iraq feel because they are being given no voice in this

war they are being told to fight. An article in the Christian Science

Monitor article written in July 2003, almost two years ago when this

war was still in its infancy, had a number of very telling quotes from

U.S. soldiers in Iraq. One soldier said: ``Most soldiers would empty

their bank accounts just for a plane ticket home.'' Another soldier, an

officer from the Army's 3rd Infantry Division said: ``Make no mistake,

the level of morale for most soldiers that I've seen has hit rock

bottom.'' The open-ended deployments in Iraq and the constantly

shifting time tables prompted one soldier to remark: ``The way we have

been treated and the continuous lies told to our families back home has

devastated us all.'' In yet another Army unit, an officer described the

mentality of troops: ``They vent to anyone who will listen. They write

letters, they cry, they yell. Many sometimes walk around looking

visibly tired and depressed. . . . We feel like pawns in a game that we

have no voice [in].'' These quotes were taken almost two years ago, I

can only imagine how these soldiers and others like them feel seeing

that this war is still going on and with no real end in sight. These

quotes individually are sad, but collectively they represent a pattern

and unfortunately once again it is our men and women in the Armed

Forces who are paying the price.

Even members of this Administration who orchestrated this war have

their failures in this war. L. Paul Bremer, has said ``horrid'' looting

was occurring when he arrived to head the U.S.-led Coalition

Provisional Authority in Baghdad on May 6, 2003. ``We paid a big price

for not stopping it because it established an atmosphere of

lawlessness,'' Bremer said. ``We never had enough troops on the

ground.'' Prior to those comments he had also stated last September

that: ``The single most important change . . . would have been having

more troops in Iraq at the beginning and throughout.'' He said he

``raised this issue a number of times with our government'' but

admitted that he ``should have been even more insistent.'' Even Defense

Secretary Rumsfeld, the architect in many ways for this war admitted

U.S. intelligence was wrong in its conclusions that Iraq had weapons of

mass destruction. ``Why the intelligence proved wrong [on weapons of

mass destruction], I'm not in a position to say,'' Rumsfeld said. ``I

simply don't know.'' When asked about any connection between Saddam and

al Qaeda, Rumsfeld said, ``To my knowledge, I have not seen any strong,

hard evidence that links the two.'' With leadership such as this, how

are our troops supposed to have any confidence in this Administration

and their handling of this war??

This Administration is creating new veterans everyday by sending our

soldiers to Iraq, meanwhile it has done nothing to help--the courageous

veterans we already have here in our Nation. There are over 26,550,000

veterans in the United States. In the 18th Congressional district of

Texas alone there are more than 38,000 veterans and they make up almost

ten percent of this district's civilian population over the age of 18.

As soldiers return home from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, perhaps

the most disturbing trend is their inability to find jobs because of

their veteran status. Take the story of Staff Sgt. Steven Cummings from

Milan, Michigan. Cummings' wife took out two mortgages and the couple

accumulated $15,000 in debt during his 14 months overseas, because his

salary was less than he was making as a civilian electrical controls

engineer. Looking back, those almost seem like the good times. In the

year since he's been home, Cummings has been laid off from two jobs.

While other reasons were given for the layoffs, Cummings thinks both

were related to his duty in the Michigan National Guard and the time

off it requires. Like some other veterans who have returned from

Afghanistan and Iraq, he is struggling to find work. ``I don't know

what I'm going to do now. I'm in the exact position I was when I came

back from Iraq,'' said Cummings, a father of two. ``I'm 50 years old

and I have a mortgage payment due. I'm tired of it.'' Cummings, a

member of the 156th Signal Battalion who did telecommunications work in

the Iraqi cities of Baghdad and Mosul, said he is surprised to find

himself in this predicament. Cummings said he thought he was returning

to Gentile Packaging Machinery Co., where he worked for 11 years in

Bridgewater, Mich., but he was told he was laid off the first day he

was back to work, he said. Cummings said he considered suing the owner,

but freshly home from war, it just seemed overwhelming to do so because

he felt ``devastated, betrayed, worthless.'' A few months later through

a veterans program he was able to get work at Superior Controls Inc.,

in Plymouth, Mich. But, he said he was laid off from that job on May

20. He said he was told the company was downsizing, but he believes it

was because he complained about a company policy that said it could not

promise to hire returning veterans from war. Some are changed by war,

and find the civilian jobs they had before are no longer as meaningful.

This has also been the case with Cpl. Vicki Angell, 32, who was

assigned to the 324th Military Police Battalion out of Chambersburg,

Pa. She gave up her job as a customer service supervisor at

an equipment company to serve in Iraq, and it took her a year to find a

job she was happy with as an editor at The Sheridan Press in Hanover,

Pa. ``You send out a lot of resumes. You try to do everything you can

do, but it's really hard to account for the time you are in Iraq, and

really to try to make that, the things you were doing in Iraq relevant

to what an employer is looking for today,'' Angell said. Sgt. Benjamin

Lewis, 36, who also lost a stepson to the War in Iraq, was a civilian

chef who worked at a restaurant in Ann Arbor, Mich., that burned down

while he was deployed in Iraq with the Michigan National Guard, said

some employers directly told him they could not hire him because he

could be deployed again and needed weekends and time off in the summer

for drilling. Others, he said, asked if he struggled mentally because

of his time at war. He got so desperate he considered returning to Iraq

with a new unit. It is because of cases such as these and many others

throughout our nation that I am a proud cosponsor of H.R. 1352, the

Veterans Employment and Respect Act offered by my colleagues

Representatives Allyson Schwartz and Joe Schwarz. This vital

legislation already has 161 Congressional cosponsors and would give

companies up to $2,400 in tax credits for each veteran from the

Afghanistan and Iraq wars that they hire. Unfortunately, we may be able

to give companies incentive to hire recent war veterans but it seems we

cannot get this Administration to put the same effort in looking after

our veterans in the first place.

As soldiers return home from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan the need

for medical care, living assistance, and disability benefits are

steadily increasing. This puts a strain on an already-overburdened

Veterans Administration, which has not been adequately funded by the

Bush Administration to meet these challenges. The fact is that more

than 30,000 veterans are waiting six months or more for an appointment

at VA hospitals, and there are more than 348,000 veterans on the

waiting list for disability claim decisions. This President has long

ignored pressing domestic concerns for a war that did not need to be

fought and for which so many good American men and women have given

their lives.

It was our second President John Adams who aptly said: ``Great is the

guilt of an unnecessary war.'' Unfortunately for our nation, our

current President has not felt the weight of this guilt, for if he had

our loved ones in the Armed Forces would be home now. This

Administration told us that the international community would join us

in Iraq; they said the world would be a better place because of this

war and then they said major combat in Iraq was over. Today as we see

our men and women every day giving their lives in Iraq, we know that

this war has only caused a greater divide between our nation and the

international community, this war has only increased hatred for our

nation, it has not made us safer as promised, it has in fact put us in

greater danger. President Abraham Lincoln speaking after the conclusion

of the Civil War, gave a vision for our nation that I hope we can

follow today, he said: ``With malice toward none; with clarity for all;

with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us

strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds;

to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and

his orphan-to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting

peace, among ourselves and with all nations.'' Before I conclude I

would like to take time to read some of the names of the soldiers from

Houston who have given their lives in Iraq and honor them with a moment

of silence.