Mr. Speaker, I rise this evening with my fellow

colleagues in the Congressional Black Caucus to discuss our Nation's

progress in the war in Iraq.

First and foremost, Mr. Speaker, I would like to honor those soldiers

who have paid the ultimate price of war through the sacrifice of their

own lives. I continue to pray for their families and friends who are

struggling to cope with their grief and loss.

I also pay tribute to the soldiers who have returned from Iraq,

forever changed as a result of injuries sustained during their tour of

duty. Just a week or so ago, I visited Walter Reed Army Hospital and

looked into the faces of young 19 and 20 year olds as they told stories

as to how they lost their legs or lost their arms or lost their hands.

I said to one young man, How do you handle this? I mean, looking at

your life and where you go from here, how do you handle this? He said,

Well, I simply look at it as a day's work. As I stood there, I could

not help but think about the fact that this young man, if he were to

live another 50 years, will be living without a leg and without an arm.

So we pay special tribute to these young people, many of whom just came

out of high school, fighting a war.

So often, Mr. Speaker, the stories of the men and women performing

their daily operations in Iraq get lost as we debate the merits of the

war and our post-war intelligence, and I want to make it very clear

that the Congressional Black Caucus has and will continue to support

our troops. We see them as some very brave men and women who every day

go out in sometimes 130 degree heat, in difficult circumstances, in

many instances not having the proper equipment that they need although

we paid for it; and yet and still they go out, and they give the best

they have. So we honor them.

We read newspaper accounts here and television reports of another

soldier killed in Iraq by a roadside bomb, and we are momentarily

touched; but, ultimately, Mr. Speaker, after the moment has passed, our

lives continue on. Unfortunately, the lives of the five soldiers who

are reported to have died in Iraq from my home State of Maryland will

not continue on. The families of Command Sergeant Major Cornell W.

Gilmore, 45 years old; Lieutenant Kylan A. Jones, 31 years old;

Corporal Jason David Mileo, 20 years old; Specialist George A.

Mitchell, 35 years old; and Staff Sergeant Kendall Damon Waters-Bey, 29

years old. He was one who was either the second or third person to lose

his life in Iraq, and we just want it made very clear that our prayers

are with the families and friends of these strong and wonderful people.

Mr. Speaker, please do not mistake my intentions. I am not invoking

the names and memories of our troops to fulfill any political purpose.

Whatever the political affiliation of these soldiers and their

families, they deserve to be remembered and honored for swearing to

protect our freedoms and for laying down their lives in the pursuit of

their mission.

Mr. Speaker, it is because of these courageous Americans that so many

of my colleagues and I in the Congressional Black Caucus vehemently

opposed launching war on Iraq. As elected representatives, we realize

that the decisions we make here in the Congress of the United States of

America reach far beyond these hallowed halls. We understand that the

price of war cannot be captured in any budget.

Speaking of moneys appropriated by the Congress, just today we read

in the news reports that Halliburton will be returning some $27 million

to the Government of the United States because it overcharged our

government; and I tell my colleagues, Mr. Speaker, it bothers me

because I shall never forget that when the Congressional Black Caucus

and others got up before this war started and began to talk about this

war and began to address the issues of why we were going to do this

preemptive strike when it seemed that inspections were working, when we

talked about it was so important and we emphasized that we not lose

lives if we could avoid it, when we asked the question how all of this

would be paid for and we could not get the President to meet with us or

even talk to us, but here and then we were called by some unpatriotic,

unpatriotic. I ask the question, if that was unpatriotic, what is it

when we have a corporation during a time of war that turns around and

has to return some $27 million to the Treasury of the United States of

America? That is a key question, and is that patriotic? I would submit

to my colleagues that it is not.

The key is that as we debate over and over again the 9 million people

who are unemployed in this country, when we debate over and over again

the fact that there are 44 million people who have no health insurance,

when we debate over and over again the fact that so many of our people

are going through so many difficult circumstances, and then we think

that as April 15 approaches people will be making sure that they write

those checks out to the Government of this United States and then we

turn around and find out that we have been overcharged $27 million,

something is absolutely wrong with that picture.

Mr. Speaker, something is wrong with our auditing and oversight if a

company like Halliburton can be paid that much for something they did

not provide. The price of war is far greater than the original $79

billion funding request and even greater than the $87 billion

supplemental request that Congress doled out to support the war effort

last year.

The price of war is the human blood spilled in Iraq's deserts. The

price of war are the tears of children shed over flag-draped caskets.

The price of war are the widowed wives and husbands working a second

job or collecting government assistance to support their families. The

price of war is the young man who I ran into at BWI Airport the other

day who said that he was a Reservist and because of the war he was not

getting the type of money that he would normally get and he and his

wife not only were getting divorced but the fact is that he was trying

to find a way to file for bankruptcy.

War and death are inextricably linked, Mr. Speaker. Therefore, in our

considerations to authorize war, we must decide whether the cause is

great enough to die for. Mr. Speaker, I believe that fighting for

freedom is always a worthy cause. As Martin Luther King once said, ``An

injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.''

However, Mr. Speaker, that is not how the urgency of this war was

communicated to the American public. President Bush did not initially

come to the American people and say that we must engage our military

forces to remove Saddam Hussein because he is a bad dictator and is

oppressing his people. Rather, the President very clearly, time and

time again, told the American people that Saddam Hussein had weapons of

mass destruction and must be disarmed.

On October 16, 2002, the President said, ``The Iraqi regime is a

serious and growing threat to peace. On the commands of a dictator, the

regime is armed with biological and chemical weapons, possesses

ballistic missiles, promotes international terror and seeks nuclear

weapons.''

On January 16, 2003, President Bush, as the Commander in Chief, said,

``In the name of peace, if he does not disarm,'' talking about Saddam

Hussein, ``I will lead a coalition of the willing to disarm Saddam

Hussein.''

The message was clear and the stage was set. The United States had to

deploy our troops and disarm Saddam Hussein.

But early last year, Mr. Speaker, we noticed a rather curious

phenomenon. As the polling numbers for American approval of the war

adjusted, so did the rationale the administration used to convince the

American public that this war was not necessary.

Former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill is quoted as saying that he

was surprised that no one in a National Security Council meeting ever

asked why Iraq should be invaded. He was shocked, when he probably

could have predicted that there would be so much death, that there

would be so much harm not only to our American soldiers but to innocent

Iraqi people by the thousands. He sat there shocked that no one asked

the question why are we going to invade Iraq.

In a recently published book describing the operations of the Bush

White House, Secretary O'Neill says, ``It was all about finding a way

to do it. That was the tone of it. The President saying go find me a

way to do this.''

Mr. Speaker, the conscience of the Nation should be shocked and awed

by

this sort of back-door and backup policy-making. The lives of our

American soldiers should not have been bartered away in closed-door

meetings between people whose own children are not asked to stand in

harm's way.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot help but think of Staff Sergeant Kendall

Waters-Bey. The family of United States Marine Staff Sergeant Kendall

Damon Waters-Bey is from my district. In fact, his family used to live

about five blocks away from my home. Mr. Speaker, the words of his

father will forever be ingrained in the DNA of my memory. As he held a

picture of his son, Michael Waters-Bey, he said, ``I want the President

to get a good look at this, really good look here. This is the only son

I had, only son.''

I ask, Mr. Speaker, was Mr. Waters-Bey's son at the forefront of the

National Security Council's consciousness as they made their decision

to take this country into war? I would think not, because otherwise I

am sure they would have come to a different conclusion.

Mr. Speaker, if you remember, in November of 2002, the United States

called for U.N. weapons inspectors to comb Iraq in search of hidden

weapons of mass destruction. After 4 months, the weapons inspectors

found nothing. Then, the United States concluded that it was our

responsibility, our right to invade Iraq forcibly and disarm Saddam

Hussein. During that time, Mr. Speaker, many of my colleagues and I

came to this House floor urging, begging, pleading, and petitioning

this President to give the inspections process a chance. We asked the

President to work with our international allies to exhaust every

diplomatic option possible before deploying American troops to disarm

Hussein. Yet our letters and pleas went unanswered.

Now here we are today, almost a year later, Mr. Speaker. It has been

almost a year since we declared the U.N. inspections process to be

ineffective, almost a year after the first soldier died in Iraq. Almost

a year later and we still have not found any weapons of mass

destruction. Yes, we have found Saddam Hussein but, no, we have not

found any weapons of mass destruction. It is interesting that Saddam

Hussein is still alive and over 500 of our bravest men and women in

uniform are not.

Now, Mr. Speaker, we have the Secretary of State, Secretary Powell,

in a recent Washington Post interview, saying that if he had been told

that Iraq did not possess stockpiles of banned weapons, he is not sure

that he would have supported the Iraq invasion. Almost a year to this

day, Mr. Speaker, Secretary Powell told the U.N., and I quote, ``Our

conservative estimate is that Iraq today has a stockpile of between 100

and 500 tons of chemical weapon agents. That is enough to fill 16,000

battlefield rockets.'' Yet just last week, former chief U.S. weapons

inspector David Kay told a Senate committee that, and I quote, ``Iraq's

large-scale capability to develop, produce, and fill new chemical

weapons munitions was reduced, if not entirely destroyed, during

Operation Desert Storm and Desert Fox. Thirteen years of U.N. sanctions

and inspections.''

Considering these facts, Mr. Speaker, we must ask ourselves if the

ultimate goal of this preemptive war was to disarm Saddam Hussein, was

our mission really accomplished? Could we have reached the same end by

utilizing a different means? If we had enough intelligence to determine

that Saddam was hiding chemical and biological weapons from the U.N.

inspectors, then why has the Intelligence Community not been able to

lead us to those weapons? Mr. Speaker, something is wrong with this

picture.

I am glad the President has finally agreed that there should be a

commission to look into the apparent intelligence failures, but the

Congress should have a role in that selection process. In the name of

the over 500,000 troops that were deployed in Iraq, I call on the

President to ensure that this process remains immune from election year

politics, and I call on the President to hold himself and his

administration accountable for the findings of any commission report.

Mr. Speaker, last year, around this time, the President addressed a

group of Governors and said, and I quote, ``The country expects leaders

to lead.'' I would agree with President Bush on that point. The country

expects leaders to lead and not to mislead the American people blindly

down a path of war.

Mr. Speaker, I wish now to yield to the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms.

Jackson-Lee).

I want to thank the gentlewoman for her statement. I

also want to thank her for her compassion. And so it is tonight, Mr.

Speaker, the Congressional Black Caucus, which has earned the title of

being the conscience of the Congress, but I often say the conscience of

the Nation, has come together to try to address these issues. As the

gentleman from New York and as the gentlewoman from California stated

very clearly, what we are about this evening is trying to make sure

that we let the American people know what is going on, because we

believe that they need to know and they need to understand what goes on

in this Congress and how it affects them on a daily basis.

But the fact still remains that there are families tonight who are

sitting watching this, and they are asking the question, as the

gentlewoman from California said, of why is it that my son is no longer

with me? Or why is it that my mother is no longer with me, a child may

say.

But the fact is that we must be clear. We have asked this President

over and over again to meet with the Congressional Black Caucus which

represents over 26 million people. And as I have often said, they are

not just African American people. As a matter of fact, more than a

third of them are white. The fact is that we believe very strongly that

when we come to this floor, we are speaking for America. And so it is,

Mr. Speaker, the Congressional Black Caucus urges our constituents and

urges the Nation to pay close attention to all that is going on with

regard to this war and all that is not.