Mr. Speaker, 8 months ago standing outside this dome,

the President of the United States spoke these words as he was sworn in

for a second term: ``We will persistently clarify the choice before

every ruler and every nation, the moral choice between oppression,

which is always wrong, and freedom which is eternally right. All who

live in tyranny and hopelessness can know the United States will not

ignore your oppression or excuse your oppressors.''

Beautiful words, honorable sentiments, if only the Bush

administration were conducting this war in Iraq in a way that actually

reflects those values.

Last week, Human Rights Watch released a report that details once

again how Iraqi war prisoners were subjected to acts of sadistic

cruelty at the hands of their supposed liberators. This time it was at

Forward Operating Base Mercury, where beatings and other forms of

humiliation took place on a daily basis for several months. Often, this

was not even about interrogation or securing some vital piece of

national security. ``In a way, it was sport,'' said one sergeant in the

82nd Airborne, a way to ``work out your frustration.''

What is perhaps most tragic is that our soldiers who have committed

these acts are themselves victims as well, victimized by their

incompetent and amoral superiors who give a wink and a nod to torture

and then blame it on a few bad apples. One officer in the 82nd

Airborne, Captain Ian Fishback, was appalled by the prisoner abuse and

tried in vain for a year and a half to get some clarification from his

superiors about how prisoners should be treated, given that the

administration had essentially tossed the Geneva Conventions in the

trash can. He got no answers because the Pentagon seemed to want the

abuse to continue but did not want to take any responsibility for it.

That is how it works with this crowd: The powerless take the fall

while the high-level decision makers who make bad decisions are left in

place to make more bad decisions. So it is that Lynndie England faces

jail time for her conduct at Abu Ghraib while Tommy Franks gets the

Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The prisoner abuse episode is consistent with everything else about

the way this war has been handled. It indicates both a moral blind spot

and a staggering incompetence that has cost nearly 2,000 Americans

their lives. The Bush administration had no plan for how to conduct

this war, they had no plan for securing the country once Saddam was

deposed, and now they have no plan for ending the war. We need a

compassionate and we need a viable exit strategy, one that ends the

occupation but still gives us a constructive role in the rebuilding of

Iraqi society. If the President will not do it, we will. If the

President will not lead, we will.

Two weeks ago, I held an informal bipartisan hearing to discuss plans

to withdraw our troops and end the war. We heard from a panel of Middle

East experts and military strategists, just the kind of people George

Bush should have listened to along his march to war, all of whom

testified about the need for a change in U.S. policy in Iraq. The

hearing was not about endorsing one particular approach. My goal was to

put ideas on the table, to start a conversation that the Nation wants

and the Nation deserves. Two-thirds of the American people disapprove

of the President's handling of Iraq, and yet it has been some sort of

taboo around this place to discuss troop withdrawal. The American

people are way ahead of Congress on this. It is about time we caught

up, it is about time we realized