Mr. Speaker, the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice,

appeared on ``Meet the Press'' yesterday morning and made this

assertion, and I quote Dr. Rice: `` . . . when we were attacked on

September 11, we had a choice to make. We could decide that the

proximate cause was al Qaeda and the people who flew those planes into

the buildings and, therefore, we would go after al Qaeda and perhaps

after the Taliban and then our work would be done . . .

``Or we could take a bolder approach, which was to say that we had to

go after the root causes of the kind of terrorism that was produced

there, and that meant a different kind of Middle East. And there is no

one who could have imagined a different kind of Middle East with Saddam

Hussein still in power.''

Mr. Speaker, what happened to the weapons of mass destruction? In the

run up to the war, no one said anything about a bolder approach.

We were told about uranium purchases from Niger. We were told about

the world's most dangerous weapons falling into the hands of the wrong

people. We were told by Dr. Rice herself about the specter of mushroom

clouds over American cities. We were treated to a campaign of fear and

deception about weapons of mass destruction because the Bush

administration knew that was the only way to convince the Nation and

the Congress to commit to this war.

They knew that this bolder approach, this ideological pipe dream, was

an absolute nonstarter.

So what are we supposed to tell Cindy Sheehan and the thousands of

other mothers, fathers, spouses, siblings, and friends of dead soldiers

and soldiers who were wounded? That their children died or were wounded

not to protect America but for some ``bolder approach,'' because the

Middle East is the personal chess board of a gang of neoconservatives

who have not had to sacrifice a thing for this war?

Mr. Speaker, I traveled to Iraq a few weeks ago to meet the troops to

learn more about their mission. I cannot tell the Members how impressed

I was with the courage, the loyalty, and intelligence of our soldiers

from the officers down to the citizen soldiers of the National Guard.

They are, indeed, the best America has to offer.

My question is: Why can we not have political leaders with the same

honor and integrity as the men and women who wear the uniform, who take

the risks, who make the sacrifices? It is nothing short of tragic the

way the Pentagon and the White House have let down and even exploited

the men and women in their charge. They sent them to Iraq on false

pretenses, on a poorly defined mission, without all the tools they

needed and without a plan to bring them home.

I have been calling for our troops to come home this entire year. I

have called for hearings. I have introduced resolutions. I have forced

a vote in this Chamber. But, Mr. Speaker, I am not just speaking for

myself. A majority of Americans clearly share this anxiety and

skepticism about the war.

I have tried to jumpstart the conversation about how to go about

ending the occupation. At the hearing I convened last month, some very

sound ideas were laid out about how to end this debacle and how the

United States can play a constructive role in the rebuilding of Iraqi

society.

But the President will not engage on this level. He will not engage

in this conversation. He offers nothing but platitudes and vague

assertions. Terrorism is bad and freedom is good, he tells us. We need

to stay the course, he tells us. We will be there as long as we need to

be there, he tells us.

This is not enough. The American people and our soldiers deserve

better. They deserve a plan, an endgame, a clear strategy to return

Iraq to the Iraqi people and the troops to their families back home.