Mr. Speaker, let me add just to what the gentleman from

Ohio (Mr. Strickland) was saying. He was asking why this administration

cannot make veterans a priority, but I would suggest that we are not so

much even asking the administration to recognize veterans as a

priority, but just asking them to give them a decent kind of regular

order priority, because the fact of the matter is this administration,

and it is sad to say, has not only failed to give the veterans

priority. They have really treated them like about second- or third-

class citizens.

The administration really has decided to put veterans, some of whom

have lost limbs and health and their lives in Iraq, on a second or

third tier below other folks that the administration values more

highly. That is a fairly dramatic thing to say, but let me back up what

I mean by that.

The administration has decided to put people who earn over $400,000 a

year and got about almost a third of the tax breaks that the President

handed out, the President refuses to ask any of those folks to

contribute in any way to the Iraq war, and so basically the

administration has put veterans behind those folks on a lower tier. He

has not just put them on a lower priority. He has put them on a second-

class tier, but it is not just folks earning a high income.

The President has also put Halliburton on a higher tier than the

veterans who have actually fought the wars. We have not seen this

administration really get aggressive about the misuse of funds in Iraq.

We Democrats had to hold sort of a rump hearing. The gentleman from

California (Mr. Waxman) and the Senator from North Dakota had a hearing

to find out what happened to all this money that disappeared into the

financial swamps of Iraq.

Exactly, Mr. Speaker. And if the gentleman will continue

to yield, three times, three times the amount of money it would take to

fix this problem with veterans so they would not have to stand in line

for 6 months to get treatment when they come back from Iraq, this

administration lost three times as much money in the financial

netherworld of Iraq, and they refuse to do anything about it because it

is embarrassing.

Mr. Speaker, let me mention maybe one of the most

embarrassing things, and I read about this today. When I said that this

administration has put veterans on a lower tier of value, let me tell

my colleagues the sort of icing on the cake. Today, I read that a group

of veterans from the first Persian Gulf War who were tortured by Saddam

Hussein in the Abu Ghraib prison brought a lawsuit in the American

courts against Iraq, the Iraqi Government, and they were granted a

significant judgment, several millions of dollars for the abuse, and it

was horrendous abuse. These were fliers who

went down in the first Persian Gulf War, were captured by Saddam's

forces, and were terribly tortured; and they won a judgment that seemed

to me to make the right decision considering what they went through.

They now are attempting to enforce that judgment against Iraq and

against the oil revenues that are generated in Iraq.

So what did the administration do? Did it come to the aid of these

veterans who were so terribly tortured at Abu Ghraib? No. This

administration went to court to refuse to pay these veterans the

judgment they had received against the Iraqi oil field money,

essentially, which is now pouring into Iraq.

And the irony of this is pretty amazing because our Secretary of

Defense, Rumsfeld, has said we are going to pay damages to the Iraqis

who were subject to the abusive conditions in Abu Ghraib by our forces.

The same defense Secretary who said we ought to pay the Iraqis who were

abused in Abu Ghraib, unfortunately, in our situation, in our custody,

now steps in and refuses to allow our Americans to get payment when

Saddam Hussein tortured them. What kind of convoluted cockamamie,

knuckleheaded policy is that.

Mr. Speaker, there is an explanation, and it is very

clear what the explanation is. The explanation is that this

administration puts on a higher tier of value the Iraqi provisional

government in dollars than these American veterans who were tortured.

They put them on a higher tier, number one. Number two, the

administration puts Halliburton on a higher tier than veterans because

they refused to give this $9 billion back that could be used to finance

veterans, number two. Number three, this administration puts people who

earn over $400,000 a year and got a tax cut that the administration

refuses to even talk about now, it puts them higher than the people who

went to Iraq and came home sometimes without legs.

I do not believe that is consistent with American values on how we

ought to look at respective contribution by Americans to our freedom,

which was the ultimate contribution of these veterans. But it shows a

skewed value judgment by the administration. That explains why this

administration takes the position.

Mr. Speaker, I think I know, if I can posit a hypothesis,

in general how the President would answer, perhaps in more diplomatic

terms than I will offer, but I think he would say: Mr. Strickland, with

all due respect, you just do not get it. Our administration has made a

decision for the first time in American history to fight a war, but the

only people we are going to ask to sacrifice are veterans. Nobody else

is going to have to sacrifice.

And the soldiers that are active duty.

And Reservists, some of whom are going to have to go back

for a second and third deployment. These are the only Americans that we

have asked to suffer and sacrifice because I, as President of the

United States, do not think this is worth fighting enough to ask any

other Americans to sacrifice rather than that small, less than 1/2

percent of the population. So as a result, I, as President, have made a

decision that if the veterans get in my way by needing health care or

if the veterans get in my way by having a judgment because they got

tortured by Saddam Hussein and if they get in my way because they want

to get Halliburton to pay the 9 billion bucks back that was

fraudulently used by at least somebody over in Iraq, then it is just

tough.

They are not going to get in my way, because I as president am not

going to touch tax cuts, I am going to do deficit spending, I am going

to continue to cut these veterans off from getting payment, because if

I get away with it, that is good enough for me. That is the only answer

I can think of.

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman will yield further, I want

to tip a hat to these veterans groups, who are really one of the least

demanding groups of people I have ever worked with, considering how

they have been mistreated since this Iraq war started and since this

administration started to cut health care. Incredibly, they have been

respectful in bringing this to our attention. But, frankly, if they

were yelling at the top of their lungs and circling the White House

with pitchforks and torches, I think that would be, frankly,

understandable.

I was talking to somebody the other day saying if you are a World War

II veteran right now and you have a urological concern and you want to

get an exam, you have to wait like four months in the State of

Washington to get in for an examination. That is just not right. Those

lines are getting longer, and they will continue to get longer because

of these cuts in the general VA budget.

The gentleman from Ohio (Mr. Strickland) has talked with some

eloquence about raising the deductible that individual veterans have to

pay. Now they are also trying to soak veterans for $250 up front before

you get your first dollar of health care payments, if you make the

enormous sum of $22,000, which puts people right up in the Donald Trump

category, I am sure.

They are also cutting the general budget, or not raising it to the

level it demands, for the whole hospital system, which means these

waiting lines get longer, just as the number of people who need them

get larger. So it is a multiple. It is like a death by a thousand cuts.

Let me suggest one reason why we do not hear as much as we should

about this issue. If you look at the pictures of our Iraqi veterans who

are coming home, and we in Congress on both sides of the aisle have

visited with them and know how courageous these mostly young and not-

so-young people are, if you look at pictures of them, they are a lot of

times alone. They have gone back a lot of times to a small town and are

living in somebody's basement, and you see them sitting on the edge of

a chair with a missing limb. They are kind of alone. There is not a big

group around them except maybe their immediate family. They do not have

a blaring group of bugles and a press corps to advocate their cause.

Maybe that is what we ought to be doing here tonight, and in some small

way I guess we are.

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman would yield, when they

stripped the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. Smith) of his chairmanship,

he was sort of politically decapitated, if you will, because he had a

dissenting voice in the Republican caucus. He wanted to bring to the

country's attention the fact that veterans were not getting their due.

That was a courageous step by him. As a result, the leadership

essentially lynched him and excommunicated him from the leadership

position he held, after 25 years.

Think of what that message is to Iraq. We saw Iraqis really

courageously go to the polls. That was amazing. They had a 58 percent

or 60 percent turnout, almost 82 percent in a lot of the Shiite areas.

There were people who walked through violence to get to the polls. This

was a lot of personal courage there that we should respect in a lot of

ways. One would think we ought to honor that and send some messages to

Iraq about how to run a democracy.

Well, look at just three examples, how under the leadership of the

current House, what our lessons to Iraq are. Number one, to the Sunnis,

we want the Sunnis to come into the Iraqi government. We want the

minority group to participate in the government, because if we do not

get the Sunnis involved in the Iraqi government, this insurgency is

going to continue to bloom. So our message is to the Shiites, embrace

the Sunnis. Let them come in and have a voice in your government. Let

dissent have a voice. Reach a consensus through embracing the minority.

What do they do here in the House of Representatives? To their own

Member, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. Smith), who had a dissenting

viewpoint, kind of the position the Sunnis are in as a minority, boom,

off with his head, silence him. Take him out of the political discourse

here by removing his chairmanship. That is not a good message to the

Iraqis about how democracy ought to run.

If the gentleman will yield further, the President had

some eloquent language about freedom around the world, which is

something we all aspire to. I guess we are saying people ought to have

freedom in the House of Representatives to stand up for veterans, and

not be punished as the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. Smith) was. That

is wrong, and we are going to continue to be a voice for veterans so

this administration does not cut their health care.