Mr. Speaker, this evening, as on most Tuesday evenings when

Congress is in session, I rise on behalf of the fiscally conservative

Democratic Blue Dog Coalition. We are a group of 47 conservative to

moderate Democrats that simply want to come here, put an end to the

partisan bickering, and restore common sense and fiscal discipline to

our Nation's government.

This evening, as we begin this hour-long conversation, we are going

to focus on Iraq, and specifically we are going to focus on how your

tax dollars are being spent in Iraq.

You have heard a lot of talk this evening about Iraq. And I can

assure you as long as we have our men and women in uniform in harm's

way, we are going to support them. They are doing everything that has

been asked of them and then some. My brother-in-law is in the U.S. Air

Force. He has been in the region several times. My first cousin is in

the U.S. Army, and he is in Iraq this evening. It has affected all of

us in one way or another. We have all had family or friends serve

there.

This evening we are going to specifically focus on how your tax money

is being spent in Iraq. For the last 5 years, the President has pretty

much asked for a blank check, and if you ask him to be held accountable

for how your tax money is spent in Iraq, he will tell you that you are

unpatriotic. It is time that we stood up to this President and demanded

the kind of accountability on how your tax money is being spent in Iraq

just as we demand accountability from local and State governments when

they receive a Federal grant. To put it another way, $16 million of

your tax money is being spent in Iraq every hour; $16 million of your

tax money is being spent in Iraq every hour. That is $16 million an

hour that can't go to replace the bridge in Minnesota that fell. And,

by the way, there are thousands more structurally deficient bridges in

this country, and this should have been a wake-up call for all of us to

get about the business of rebuilding this Nation's infrastructure and

begin to invest in America again.

Just in my congressional district during the month of August, some

people think we go home and go on vacation for a month, but what we

really do is we go home and see the people, which I think is an

important part of this job. If you are going to represent folks, I

think it is important you get out of Washington and you go home and you

see them. And as I traveled my 29 counties and 150 towns in Arkansas's

Fourth Congressional District, every town I went to I learned of a

project, of a need. On the western side, they want to finish I-49,

which can create jobs and economic opportunities. An interstate where

construction started on it back when I was about 5 years old entering

kindergarten. I am now 46 and have a daughter in college.

When I go to the eastern side of my district, I hear a lot of talk

about wanting to complete I-69, which was announced 5 years before I

was born. In the central part of the district, I hear a lot of talk

about four-laning U.S. 82, four-laning 167, how we need money to invest

in getting off the Sparta aquifer and having more and more commercial

and residential people getting their water from other alternative water

sources. As I traveled and toured Millwood Lake, I learned about how

this wonderful recreational lake, a lake that contributed to the

economy, it is now becoming very difficult to fish in about a quarter

of it and they are worried about the rest of it. Why? Because of the

neglect. The neglect in our Nation's infrastructure, the neglect in our

waterways, in our highways. And yet we continue to spend $16 million an

hour of your tax money in Iraq. Mr. Speaker, I say it is time to start

investing in America again, and we are going to talk more about that

this evening.

During the past 6 years, we have had a President that has given us

the largest debt ever in our Nation's history, the largest deficit ever

in our Nation's history, for the past 6 years, during the time that we

had Republicans controlling the White House, the House and the Senate.

We have passed a budget this year that will put us back in balance by

2012 and will begin to restore common sense and fiscal discipline to

our Nation's government.

But this is what the new Democratic majority inherited in January: a

debt that is $8,993,600,200,089 and some change. That is a big number.

What does it mean? If you break it out and divide it by every man,

woman and child living in America, including those born today, each one

of us, our share of the national debt: $29,704. It is what those of us

in the Blue Dog Coalition refer to as the ``debt tax,'' d-e-b-t, which

is one tax that cannot be repealed, that cannot be cut. And that is one

of the reasons that we are not able to invest in America's priorities,

investing in our homeland, investing in our veterans, investing in

education, investing in rebuilding America's infrastructure. No. We are

too busy paying interest on this debt.

Our Nation is borrowing about a billion dollars a day, but before we

borrow a billion dollars today, we are going to spend a half billion

today paying interest on the debt we have already got. That is above

and beyond the $16 million an hour that we are sending to Iraq, much of

which goes unaccounted for.

So we are going to spend this hour addressing that and other issues

surrounding Iraq. And I am absolutely delighted to be joined by a

number of my Blue Dog colleagues. I mentioned there are 47 members in

the Blue Dog Coalition, and I would like to take this opportunity to

welcome the four newest members: Christopher Carney from Pennsylvania's

Tenth Congressional District, Gabrielle Giffords from Arizona's Eighth

Congressional District, Bart Gordon from Tennessee's Sixth

Congressional District, and Zach Space from Ohio's Eighteenth

Congressional District.

At this time I am pleased to yield to a fellow Blue Dog, someone who

has become very involved in this conservative-moderate Democratic

movement on Capitol Hill, someone who is not afraid to take a stand for

what is right, and that is my friend Joe Donnelly from Indiana's Second

Congressional District.

You mentioned something that really piqued my interest, and

that is making sure that we are providing our soldiers with the best

technology in armored vests. And I want to thank you for raising that

this evening.

I've got a constituent in my district whose son is getting ready to

go back for the second time, Arkansas National Guard, 39th Brigade,

being asked to go back for a second time. And when you sign up for the

National Guard, you're supposed to spend 1 year out of 5, and now they

were there in 2003 and 2004, they're being asked to go back again by

Christmas of this year or early next year. And he raises a very

important issue. This is a constituent from Garland County in Pearcy,

Arkansas, near Hot Springs, and that is, he wants to ensure that our

men and women in uniform, his son, has the best armored body gear and

protection available. There are a lot of tests going on right now;

there is a lot of debate going on. There have been hearings on this in

the Congress. But 5 years into this war you would think, if our

government, if this administration is sending $16 million an hour of

your tax money to Iraq, the very least they could do is ensure that our

brave men and women, our soldiers that do everything that is asked of

them, have the very best in body gear and protection.

I thank the gentleman. And he makes some very good points.

And regardless of how you feel about what's going on in Iraq, and I

personally have voted three times for a new direction in Iraq, but one

of the things that I think we can all agree on is that we need more

accountability for how our tax money is being spent in Iraq. And we

need to ensure that money is going to provide our men and women in

uniform with the very best equipment that's available to them today,

not what was the best equipment 5 years ago, but what is the best

equipment today to best protect them as they perform their duty and

service to our country. And that's one thing that we can all agree on.

At this time, I'm pleased to introduce another fellow Blue Dog, a new

Member in his first term in the 110th session of Congress who is

rapidly and quickly becoming very involved and immersed in the fiscal

issues of the Blue Dog Coalition, and that's my friend, Mr. Mike Arcuri

from New York's 24th Congressional District, who just returned from a

trip to Iraq.

I thank the gentleman from New York for his insight on his

recent return from a trip to Iraq.

I was last there August 11, 2004, when we had the 39th Brigade from

Arkansas' National Guard there. Now they're ready to go back, and I

hope to be able to go back while they're there because the least we can

do is go there when our troops are there from our respective districts

and let them know that we support them and make sure that some of this

millions of dollars is being spent on providing them the very best

equipment that technology and money can afford to buy.

What we're talking about this evening is the cost of Operation Iraqi

Freedom. The gentleman from New York is absolutely correct, we need a

new direction in Iraq. Basically, we're there fighting their civil war

for them. And as long as they're shooting at us instead of shooting at

one another, there is no incentive for them to learn how to get along.

No one fought our Civil War for us, and I'm absolutely convinced that

the only people that can decide the fate of Iraq are the Iraqi people.

We have had a lot of victories there. We went there because of

weapons of mass destruction. We now know there are no weapons of mass

destruction. It's debatable whether there ever was or not, but that's

an issue that we can debate all night. But hindsight is 20/20. We

stayed until Saddam was removed from power. We stayed until he was

brought to justice and executed. Clearly, he was an evil dictator. We

have evil dictators all over the world, many of whom remain in power

today. We stayed until a new Iraqi Government was installed. We stayed

and tried to train their police and military force. And yet this

administration continues to move the goal post on our soldiers. And so

how many victories are they going to have to accomplish before we allow

them to come home and allow the Iraq people to decide the fate of their

own country?

The cost of Operation Iraqi Freedom, this is one statistic that is

not debatable. You want to know how well it's going? In 2003, we spent

$53 billion of your tax money in Iraq. In 2004, that increased to $75.9

billion. In 2005, that increased to $84.7 billion. In 2006, that

increased to $101.7 billion. And in 2007, $135.2 billion so far. The

administration is getting ready to come back here shortly for more.

That's $11.3 billion a month, that's $370 million a day. You do the

math. That's between 15 and $16 million an hour of your tax money going

to Iraq and, as Congressman Donnelly mentioned, much of which is

unaccounted for.

At this time, I yield to my friend, fellow Blue Dog member from my

neighboring State of Tennessee, and that's Lincoln Davis, an active

member of the fiscally conservative Democratic Blue Dog Coalition

that's never afraid to speak his mind. We're glad to have him here with

us this evening. And sorry about Tennessee's loss this Saturday. We're

looking forward to playing y'all in football.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Tennessee. He

raises an excellent point. All this started after 9/11, and we all know

Osama bin Laden was responsible for 9/11. We now have some 25,000

troops in the Afghanistan region. Contrast that to be a quarter million

troops in the Iraq region. Eighty-something percent of the people in

Afghanistan want us there. Contrast that with Iraq. 71 percent of the

Iraqi people don't want us there, and 60 percent of them think it is

okay to kill a U.S. soldier. I believe it is time for a new direction

in Iraq. Three times this year I have voted for a new direction in

Iraq.

Let me be perfectly clear: As long as we have got troops in harm's

way, I am going to support them. As I indicated, my brother-in-law is

in the Air Force. He has been in the region. My first cousin is in the

U.S. Army and is back for the second time in Iraq right now.

Back home in Arkansas, young people I have taught in Sunday school

and duck hunted with will soon be going back for a second tour of duty

in Iraq. I will be there every step of the way to support them. But I

also want this administration and this Congress to give them a mission

that is obtainable, one that will take them out of harm's way.

I have had too many soldiers from my district die in Iraq. Just in

the last few weeks, Specialist Donovan Witham from Malvern, Arkansas,

gave his life in Iraq. Just a few days ago, I was able to spend some

time with his family in their living room letting them know that his

service to this country will not be forgotten. I will make sure of

that. His family remains in my heart and in my prayers, as do all the

family members of the nearly 4,000 troops that we have lost in Iraq.

I appreciate the gentleman joining me and his commitment to

our brave men and women in uniform. I thank the President for going to

Iraq. He was there, I think it was his third trip, he was there for a

few hours. I spent a day in Iraq. You have been several times. I think

it is important that we go and we let our soldiers know we support them

and make sure some of this money over there is being spent on them and

providing them the best equipment that money can buy. They deserve

nothing less.

But the type of folks that I think the President needs to spend a lot

more time listening to are the type of Members of Congress that have

served in the military, like Patrick Murphy from Pennsylvania. Patrick,

not too long ago, was known as Captain Murphy and spent not a few hours

in Iraq, but a few months in Iraq, nearly a year. Patrick Murphy from

Pennsylvania's Eighth Congressional District, a fellow Blue Dog member

who helped write H.R. 97, which is a bill endorsed by the Blue Dog

Coalition to provide for Operation Iraqi Freedom cost accountability to

ensure that this $16 million an hour of your tax money, Mr. Speaker,

which is going to Iraq, is being spent on our soldiers.

With that, I yield to the gentleman from Pennsylvania, Congressman-

Captain Patrick Murphy.

I thank the gentleman from Pennsylvania for his insight as

someone who has served in the war in Iraq as a captain in the Army, and

we appreciate his service here in the Congress and his insight into

helping us draft proposals like H.R. 97 to restore accountability and

common sense on how your tax money is being spent in Iraq and ensuring

that it is directed towards our brave men and woman in uniform and

protecting them and keeping them safe.

Mr. Speaker, it is time for a new direction in Iraq, and that is what

this Blue Dog hour has been about this evening. I thank my colleagues

who have joined me.