Mr. President, first let me extend my condolences to

the Republican leader and to the people of Kentucky for the loss of

their courageous native son.

Mr. President, I rise this morning because in recent days we have

learned, to our great dismay, that this administration has let one of

our most sacred promises go unfulfilled.

In Rhode Island last week I visited veterans convalescing at our VA

hospital in Providence. On Tuesday, members of Rhode Island's branch of

the Disabled American Veterans came to talk with me in Washington. They

came to appeal for those returning from the war in Iraq.

Of course, there are many brave veterans whom I have met with

throughout my State over the past several years at American Legion

posts, senior centers, Fourth of July and Memorial Day parades, and at

our many community dinners in towns all over Rhode Island. They were

men and women, young and old. They served in our Nation's wars from

World War II to Vietnam to the conflict in Iraq. Like the DAV members I

met yesterday, they wanted us to hear what they had to tell us: the

infuriating truth that we are failing to support our troops as they

return from Iraq and Afghanistan.

When we ask ordinary men and women to do the extraordinary and stand

up and serve in harm's way, we know that we can never fully repay what

they and their families have given us. The service of Lance Corporal

Otey, which we just heard about from the Republican leader, certainly

emphasizes that point. But we can surely pledge to these men and women

that we will give them what they need in the field, and when their

service is ended we will care for them adequately. Breaking that

promise is a dishonor to them and to their sacrifice, and it is not

supporting our troops.

I believe--as do many of my colleagues--that the best way to support

our troops would be to deploy them back out of Iraq and define a more

sensible and responsible strategy against terror. Some on the other

side of the aisle have claimed our calls for a new strategy in Iraq

mean we do not support our troops. This argument is truly horrible,

thoroughly false, and I hope people watching can understand how it

shows the depths to which this debate has plummeted.

To add on that for a moment, I say that not because on this side of

the aisle we are too thin-skinned to take a shot in the give-and-take

of politics. That is the nature of what we signed up for. That is not

what this is about. What this is about is that the battle of slogans we

are seeing over this important issue for our country right now

displaces the exchange of ideas and a thoughtful and realistic

discussion of what our new strategy options are, and in that sense it

greatly disserves the American people.

Let's judge the support for our troops within this Chamber and within

the administration by real actions, not inflammatory and phony

rhetoric. By that measure, it is fair to question whether the Bush

administration and those in this Chamber who support the President's

Iraq policy truly understand the need of America's veterans--men and

women fighting in Iraq--and those who will soon join them there as this

President escalates this conflict.

We want our troops now in Iraq to come home safely. They want to send

tens of thousands more there. They have sent them without adequate

support personnel, equipment, or armor. Indeed, during the course of my

campaign to come to this place, I heard from mothers who had to go into

their pocketbooks to pay for body armor for sons and daughters headed

for Iraq because they could not count on this administration to provide

them that basic need.

Also, we have sent them without adequate assurance that should they

be injured in the line of duty, they would be properly cared for when

they return. That is not supporting the troops. In America, we have the

best doctors, nurses, facilities, and medical equipment. From combat

medics to VA hospitals, the military can and does provide our Active-

Duty military personnel and veterans with medical care that is second

to none. But despite all this, our military and veterans health care

system has a crushing, all-encompassing problem; that is, access to

that care.

When service men and women enter the VA system, too often they begin

a long, uphill battle for access to the care and benefits they need to

get well and rebuild their lives. The war in Iraq has triggered a flood

of new veterans that risks overwhelming the VA system. Mr. President,

700,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are expected to enter the

military and VA health care systems in coming years at a projected cost

of as much as $600 billion.

According to the Army Times, the number of service members being

approved for permanent disability retirement has ``plunged''--to use

their word, ``plunged''--by more than two-thirds since 2001. The Army's

physical disability caseload has increased by 80 percent since 2001. As

it attempts to process new benefits claims in fiscal year 2006, the VA

is experiencing a 400,000-case backlog. Veterans frequently wait 6

months to 2 years before they begin to receive monthly benefits.

These problems are especially acute in the area of mental health.

More than 73,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan treated by the VA

since 2002 have been diagnosed with a potential mental disorder. More

than 39,000 have been tentatively diagnosed with post-traumatic stress

disorder, and 35 percent of Iraq veterans have sought psychological

counseling within a year of returning home. But where the VA spent over

$3,500 per veteran on mental health care back in 1995, it spends just

over $2,500 today--a drop of close to $1,000 per veteran.

These are troubling statistics, but they fail utterly to capture our

dismay at the reports published over the past several days in the

Washington Post and Newsweek magazine of the unacceptable living

conditions for outpatients at Walter Reed Medical Center and the

stifling bureaucracy that blockades many veterans' access to care.

The Washington Post wrote of soldiers living in Walter Reed

facilities infested with mold and mice, unable to get new uniforms to

replace those cut from their bodies by military doctors in the field,

forced to bring photos and even their own Purple Hearts to prove to

file clerks that they, indeed, served in Iraq. Waiting months, as the

VA processes benefit claims in what Marine Sgt. Ryan Groves

these soldiers and their families move

from appointment to appointment and submit form after form, often to

replace earlier forms already lost by the system. Many suffer, as we

saw on television the other night on ABC, from brain injuries, from

post-traumatic stress disorder, or from other mental health conditions,

but Walter Reed's outpatient facilities lack sufficient mental health

counselors and social workers to help them navigate the system.

The Post tells us many Walter Reed outpatients now face ``teams of

Army doctors scrutinizing their injuries for signs of preexisting

conditions, lessening their chance for disability benefits.'' Veterans

often must navigate this convoluted system alone, carrying stacks of

medical records from appointment to appointment. The Post quoted Vera

Heron, who lived on the post for over a year helping care for her son.

Here is what she said:

The care of our veterans returning home from Iraq should be among our

Nation's highest priorities. For these soldiers and their families to

feel as forgotten and abandoned as they do means simply that this

administration is not serving them as it should. It is not serving them

as they served us. It is not supporting our troops.

The Air Force Times just reported that soldiers at Walter Reed have

now been told not to speak to the media and that the Pentagon has--and

this is a quote

This administration cannot and must not just bury its failure to

support our troops behind a muzzled spokesperson cadre. I commend our

Armed Services Committee, including my senior Senator, Rhode Island's

Jack Reed, for that committee's announced hearing on conditions at

Walter Reed Hospital. I hope they will be relentless in their

investigation.

My colleagues and the constituents we represent wholeheartedly

support our troops and our veterans. Anything else one hears is a lie.

We believe it is time for our soldiers to redeploy out of Iraq because

we believe that is our Nation's best strategy forward in the Middle

East and to combat terror. But we also believe that as they serve and

when they get home, we must make good on our promises--our promise to

train and equip them in their service and our promise to care for them

in their injury and illness. It is our obligation to do this. In the

face of all we have heard and seen, that obligation, like so many

others, has been failed by this administration. I thank the Chair, and