Madam Speaker, yesterday we reached a tragic milestone.

Staff Sergeant George T. Alexander, Jr., of Texas, died from wounds he

sustained while serving in Iraq. His death brought the U.S. death toll

in Iraq to 2,000 soldiers. In addition to that, over 15,000 soldiers

have been wounded, and over 400 are now amputees. My thoughts and

prayers are with Staff Sergeant Alexander's family, and with all the

families that have lost a loved one in Iraq.

However, I hope the administration will use this milestone as an

opportunity to be honest, to square with the American people about why

we are fighting in Iraq, and to develop a stronger plan that will

secure Iraq and conclude our involvement the war.

Mr. Speaker, it is often said that to govern is to make choices. When

it comes to the Iraq War, President Bush has made the wrong choices.

Instead of putting the entire resources of the United States behind the

efforts to find those responsible for the September 11th terrorist

attacks, the President chose to use those tragic events as an excuse to

go to war in Iraq.

Where is Osama bin Laden? Have we stopped looking for him? We have

invaded Iraq. We have the shock and awe campaign. Thousands of Iraqis

are dead, and now 2,000 of our soldiers are dead. We have left Iraq,

and Baghdad in particular, in shambles. We have appropriated money for

the reconstruction of Iraq, and we told the American people that we

would basically pay for the major reconstruction with the proceeds from

the oil that we would pump in Iraq. None of this is true; no weapons of

mass destruction, no money coming from the oil fields in Iraq, no

rehabilitation having been done. The insurgents not only are bombing

all of the different sites in Iraq, they are killing schoolteachers.

We have created a breeding ground for terrorists. Oh, we claim they

are coming from Syria. We claim that Iran has a hand in it. What is

interesting now is Condoleezza Rice is telling us that we are going to

get Iran to help us with Iraq. At the same time, Iran is developing and

making more sophisticated its nuclear ability, but now we are going to

try and join in with them to help us with Iraq? With this business of

trying to make the American people believe that all of the insurgents

are coming from Syria, we have created a new bogeyman for the people to

focus on.

But that is not all about this terrorism, in this fight against

terrorism. It seems to me that the President of the United States finds

occasions by which he comes to the American public and he tells us that

we have to be worried about a new terrorist threat. Every now and then

he reminds us that the terrorists are still out there, and somehow we

have to stay in Iraq. If we do not, we are going to be vulnerable to

all of these terrorists. But if we stay the course, not only is he

going to help keep us safe, no matter how many sacrifices we have to

make, the right thing to do is to stay the course.

Mr. Speaker, that is easy to talk about and say when you are talking

about somebody else's children. The President chose to go to war based

on false and misleading intelligence. Look where it has gotten us. Look

at the scandals surrounding the White House today because we tried to

make the intelligence fit the decision that had already been made to go

to war.

We are finding, and I guess we will know soon, once the indictments

come down, who leaked the information about Valerie Plame and outed her

because they were so mad at her husband, who had been sent to Niger to

help put the story together that somehow Saddam Hussein had been

seeking yellowcake in Niger. When Mr. Wilson came back and said it was

not true, then they went after Mr. Wilson. Somehow the Vice President's

office knows all about this.

Mr. Speaker, it is time to bring our soldiers home. It is time for

Republicans and Democrats alike to understand that we do not need to

lose another American soldier in Iraq.

He chose to go to war without international support or heed the

warnings of those in Congress that urged him to slow the march to war.

The President chose to send our soldiers to war without the body

armor and armored vehicles necessary to keep our soldiers safe.

And, he chose to go to war without an adequate number of troops or a

clear plan for how to succeed in Iraq.

For those decisions, American soldiers are paying the price--and for

2,000 soldiers they have paid the ultimate price.

It is time that the President recognizes the dangers of ``staying the

course'' and develops a plan that accomplishes our mission in Iraq and

allows all our soldiers to return to their families.

Madam Speaker, over the past several weeks, members of the Republican

Caucus have been trying to cut the Federal budget by $50 billion. They

claim that it is to help pay for the rebuilding efforts in the wake of

Hurricane Katrina and Rita.

Perhaps most shocking, the Republicans are trying to cut hundreds of

millions of dollars from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

If the Republicans are successful in their efforts to cut

discretionary funding by 2 percent, the VA's budget will be cut by more

than $600 million which translates to nearly 100,000 fewer veterans

receiving health care this year.

It is heartless and cruel to cut the VA's budget in order to make

room for more tax cuts for the wealthiest of Americans, while 159,000

U.S. soldiers are fighting in Iraq and tens of thousands more are

deployed throughout the world.

I urge my colleagues to oppose these cuts and urge the American

people to call their representatives and tell them to oppose these

cuts.

Our soldiers and their families have sacrificed too much for us to

turn our backs on them when they return home.

Madam Speaker, I close by thanking our soldiers for their service and

pray for their safe return.