responsibility and an expectation to do good. It is far too convenient to bash the government and blame it for all our ills. In America, the people are the government. I think the people expect and deserve a government that acts in their name and on their behalf in a way that reflects the hope and promise America has meant for over two centuries.

America's future is in our hands, and it is within our power to nurture, heal, and defend. That is my mission, and that is the mission of this Congress. The safety net is ours to weave and ours to protect. We must do it.

□ 1830

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. HAYES) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. HAYES addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

WE MUST ADDRESS GUN VIOLENCE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. MCCARTHY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. MCCARTHY of New York. Mr. Speaker, as the House begins its work in the 110th Congress, we must address the issue of gun violence. Congress has a responsibility to make sure violent criminals cannot legally purchase guns. I am not proposing any new laws or a ban on buying guns. Instead, we must help our States enforce current laws that prevent criminals from buying guns.

The NICS system, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, is the database used to check potential firearm buyers for any criminal records. In large, NICS has been a very good success. Since 1994 more than 700,000 individuals were denied a gun for failing their background check. However, the NICS system is only as good as the information in its database.

Mr. Speaker, 25 States have automated less than 60 percent of their felony convictions into the NICS system. In these States, many felons won't turn up on the NICS system and would be able to purchase a gun with no questions asked.

In 13 States, domestic violence and restraining orders are not accessible through the NICS system. Common sense would dictate that you don't sell a gun to somebody that has a restraining order. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

On March 8, 2002, Peter Troy purchased a .22 caliber semiautomatic rifle. His own mother had a restraining order against him as a result of his violent background. It was illegal for him to purchase a gun, but he simply fell through the cracks. Four days later, Peter Troy walked into Our Lady of Peace Church in Lynbrook, New York, opened fire and killed two innocent people. Peter Troy had no business buying a gun, and the system created to prevent him from buying the gun failed.

We must fix the NICS system. That is why I introduced H.R. 297, the NICS Improvement Act. This legislation would provide grants to States to update the NICS system. States would be able to update their NICS database to include felons, domestic abusers and other violent criminals. We need the NICS Improvement Act to become law, and we need to pass more bills like it.

These ideas impose no new restrictions on gun owners, but give the government the tools to ensure existing laws are effective and enforceable. In fact, the NICS Improvement Act already passed the House in the 107th Congress by voice vote. Last Congress, a Judiciary subcommittee passed the measure. Unfortunately it did not get to the full committee.

This is commonsense gun legislation that we can all agree on. This bill will save lives while not infringing on anybody's second amendment rights.

Mr. Speaker, I call on Congress to act quickly on H.R. 247. If we can prevent tragedies like this happening throughout the country, we could save lives and enforce the laws already on the books.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring one other subject up. This country is facing a shortage of blood. I would encourage all people in this country to give blood. It is easy, it is painless, and it can save someone's life.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. BUTTERFIELD) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BUTTERFIELD addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

IRAQ WAR

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. ZOE LOFGREN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. ZOE LOFGREN of California. Mr. Speaker, we did not need to invade Iraq. From the beginning, I found President Bush's stated reasons for the Iraq war unconvincing. Now we know they were also untrue.

At the time the decision was being sold to Congress, I was unable to get any level of assurance that there was a workable plan for victory. There weren't answers to questions like, ''What is the strategy for stabilization after the military victory?'' or, ''What is the exit plan?''

The American forces were to be greeted by grateful Iraqis bearing flowers, but I was never able to learn what plan B was if this rosy scenario did not prove out. Now we know there was no plan B.

I voted against the war in Iraq, but even though I opposed the invasion, I never dreamed that the President's policies and course of action would be as disastrous as they have been for Iraq, for the Gulf region and for America.

I think the real question America now faces is what is the least catastrophic end to this debacle, and how can we obtain it. Answering such a question would include options of utilizing diplomacy in the region as recommended by the bipartisan Iraq Study Group. It would include America calling upon neighboring States to take strong measures to avoid a spread of the conflict beyond Iraq as that nation disintegrates into tribal and sectarian violence. The Saudis are aware of the peril and Iran is aware of the prospects.

But President Bush has once again offered a proposal based on wishful thinking instead of the unpleasant reality. Having been the cause of the destabilization of Iraq, America has a moral obligation to take what steps are possible to obtain new stability. But wanting to create stability within Iraq and being able to accomplish that goal with U.S. military forces is not the same thing. That is why I have decided to cosponsor Representative John Murtha's resolution directing the redeployment of our troops at the earliest practicable date while maintaining a quick reaction U.S. force and an over-the-horizon presence of U.S. Marines in the region. Like Representative MURTHA, I feel like the solution to the war in Iraq is a diplomatic one.

America is a country that doesn't take disappointment well. Our culture is one where the phrase ''failure is not an option'' just makes sense. That attitude has served us well historically in science, industry and war. But it can also lead to problems and to decisions based on wishful thinking instead of on facts.

Political leaders don't want to be the ones to bring the bad news to an American public raised on the phrase ''failure is not an option.'' Some even suspect that the President's escalation plan may have as a goal running out the clock so the next President will be the one who has to deliver the bad news.

Right now I think another American phrase is better for this situation: When you are in the hole, the first thing to do is stop digging.

It is time to stop digging. Sending in more troops is not going to bring stability to Iraq because the primary problem between the Iraqis is political, not military.

We are not going to be met with flowers by the Iraqis today, or probably ever. More than 60 percent of the Iraqi public believes it is a good thing to attack and kill Americans stationed in Iraq. We have to accept that we are part of the problem in Iraq, not part of the solution.

Real leadership deals with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. And

here is something to keep in mind: The American public already knows it is time to stop digging. Now they are ready to hear Congress say it out loud.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. GEORGE MILLER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. GEORGE MILLER of California addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

HONORING MUHAMMAD ALI ON HIS 65TH BIRTHDAY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from Ohio (Mrs. JONES) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. JONES of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor a man known as ''The Greatest,'' Muhammad Ali on the occasion of his 65th birthday. We passed the legislation today, but unfortunately I didn't have a chance to speak. Those that know me know that I am a huge boxing fan, and Muhammad Ali is certainly one of the reasons why I enjoy the sport so much.

I can recall watching his fights and being in awe of his style and gracefulness in the ring. He was a masterful self-promoter, and won over throngs of fans and media alike with his charm and charisma. But it is his undeniable skill that kept him at the top of his game. His style is something that has often been imitated but never duplicated.

Muhammad Ali defeated almost every top heavyweight in his era, an era which has been called the Golden Age of Heavyweight Boxing. Ali was named ''Fighter of the Year'' by Ring Magazine more times than any other fighter and was involved in Ring Magazine ''Fight of the Year'' bouts more than any other fighter.

He is an inductee into the International Boxing Hall of Fame and holds wins over seven other Hall of Fame inductions. He is also one of only three boxers to be named ''Sportsman of the Year'' by Sports Illustrated.

But Muhammad Ali was more than an athlete, he was a revolutionary. He was a man that was not afraid to stand up for what he believed in. His prowess in the ring pales in comparison to his character and integrity as a human being. He refused to fight in the Vietnam war, famously stating, ''I ain't got no quarrel with those Vietcong.'' His actions led to his banishment from boxing in the United States and forced him to fight abroad.

Near the end of 1967, Ali was stripped of his title by the Professional Boxing Commission and would not be allowed to fight professionally for more than 3 years. He was also convicted for refusing induction into the Army and sentenced to 5 years in prison. Over the course of those years in exile, Ali fought to appeal his conviction. He stayed in the public spotlight and supported himself by giving speeches, primarily at rallies on college campuses, that opposed the Vietnam war. In 1970, he was allowed to fight again, and in late 1971 the Supreme Court reversed his convictions.

When I was a law student at Case Western Reserve University, Muhammad Ali was scheduled to speak. I was driving down the street in this little boxcar, and I looked out my window to the right, and who was walking down the street but Muhammad Ali. I rolled my window down in my modest way and said, ''What are you doing walking down the street? Get in my car.''

Muhammad Ali got in my car.

I had two little boys in the back seat, and throughout the ride to the campus he recited poetry to these two young men.

When we arrived at campus, I said, ''Mr. Ali, do you have a ride back to the airport?''

He said, ''No.''

I said, ''Now you do. You've got a ride.''

So he spoke. We drove the young people home to their parents. One little boy got out of the car and ran up to the house and said, ''Mommy, mommy, guess who is in the car? Muhammad Ali.''

That mom slapped the little boy and said, ''Stop lying and get in this house.''

Muhammad Ali gets out of the house and goes to the door and knocks on the door, and the mother almost fainted.

So then I drive him back to the airport.

That was such a wonderful experience, to see this man of such great talent spend so much time with these young people.

I will never forget the opportunities that I had to meet Muhammad Ali. On another occasion he came to speak in Cleveland connected with Warith Deen Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad. But Mr. Speaker, it is such a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the life of the man known as ''The Greatest,'' Muhammad Ali.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. SOLIS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Ms. SOLIS addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

THE KUCINICH PLAN FOR IRAQ

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. KUCINICH) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. KUCINICH. Mr. Speaker, Congress is beginning to focus on the necessity to take a new direction with respect to Iraq. There are some in the administration who are saying well, there is no plan. What can we do? We have to stay the course. We have to send more troops. We have to make a renewed effort.

Once again I am offering for the attention of this Congress a plan that I put together that meets the requirements of being able to bring our troops home and create stability in Iraq and reunite the United States with the world community in the cause of peace and security.

Here are the elements of the Kucinich plan:

First, the U.S. announces it will end the occupation, close military bases and withdraw.

The insurgency has been fueled by the occupation and the prospect of a long-term presence, as indicated by the building of permanent bases. A U.S. declaration of intention to withdraw troops and close bases will help dampen the insurgency which has been inspired to resist colonization and fight invaders and those who have supported U.S. policy. Furthermore, this will provide an opening for parties in Iraq and in the region to set the stage toward negotiations and peaceful settlement.

Second, the U.S. announces it will use existing funds to bring the troops and the necessary equipment home.

Congress appropriated $70 billion in bridge funds on October 1 for the war. Money from this and other DOD accounts can be used to fund the troops in the field over the next few months and to pay for the cost of the return of the troops, which has been estimated at between 5 and $7 billion while a political settlement is being negotiated and preparations are made for a transition to an international security and peacekeeping force.

Number three, order a simultaneous return of all U.S. contractors to the United States and turn over all contracting work to the Iraqi government.

The contracting process has been rife with corruption with contractors stealing from the U.S. Government and cheating the Iraqi people, taking large contracts and giving a few percentages to Iraqi subcontractors. Reconstruction activities must be reorganized and closely monitored in Iraq by the Iraqi government with the assistance of the international community. The massive corruption as it relates to the U.S. contractors should be investigated by congressional committees and Federal grand juries. The lack of tangible benefits, the lack of accountability for billions of dollars while millions of Iraqis do not have a means of financial support, nor substantive employment, cries out for justice. It is noteworthy that after the first Gulf War, Iraqis reestablish electricity within 3 months despite sanctions. Four years into the U.S. occupation, there is no water or reliable electricity in Baghdad despite massive funding from the U.S. and the Madrid Conference. The greatest mystery involves the activities of private security companies who function as mercenaries. Reports of false flag operations must be investigated by an international tribunal.