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Bring Our Children Home Now

By Nancy Lessin, [AlterNet](#)

September 22, 2003

Editor's Note: Nancy Lessin, the co-founder of [Military Families Speak Out](#), a rapidly growing antiwar group organized by family members of soldiers posted in Iraq, gave the following speech at a congressional hearing organized by Congresswoman Maxine Waters on Sept. 9.

We want to thank congresswoman Maxine Waters for giving us this very special opportunity to bring our message to members of Congress. And thank you to Congressman Conyers and Congressman McDermott as well.

My name is Nancy Lessin, and I am a co-founder of Military Families Speak Out. We formed this organization last November, 2002 with two families speaking out against what we saw as an illegal and immoral invasion of Iraq. In our case, my stepson Joe, a Marine, deployed in August, 2002 and my husband and I we jolted by those drumbeats of war.

Leaders in Washington, D.C. were saying, "We've got to go to war!" But they weren't going anywhere – nor were their loved ones. Our loved ones, however, were being put in harm's way, and try as we might, we did not see that this was for any good reason.

We were not convinced that the mysterious weapons of mass destruction, supposedly hidden somewhere in Iraq, were imminent threats to this country. We never saw a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. We could not see how invading Iraq would address the terrible tragedy of Sept. 11th or solve the problem of terrorism.

We could not help believing that if the greatest natural resource in Iraq was olive oil, the leaders of this country would not have been talking about launching a virtually unilateral, preemptive war of aggression against another sovereign nation. The sign my husband and I made one year ago this month had Joe's picture on it, and it said, "Our son is a Marine – Don't send him to war for oil!"

Much has happened since the fall of 2002.

An invasion of Iraq in March has turned into a military occupation. Hundreds of troops and untold thousands of Iraqis have died. We don't have

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an accurate picture, but we know there has been untold damage from injuries, illnesses, psychological trauma and suicides

Our organization has grown, from two families in November to 600 in July, 2003. And last month, together with Veterans for Peace and other veterans groups, we launched the "Bring Them Home NOW!" campaign. We're working our way through 6,000 emails that we have received since then, and we estimate that our membership is now between 800 and 1,000 military families, and growing every day.

Members of Military Families Speak Out are here today to speak of the betrayal that we have experienced; that our loved ones have experienced; that this nation has experienced. Our loved ones took an oath to defend this country and our Constitution from all enemies, foreign and domestic. But there is a commitment our government makes to our troops in return: that it will not send our young men and women in uniform into reckless misadventures that put them at risk needlessly.

This is the part of the bargain that has been broken.

Yes, war is hell; but this is something else, and our loved ones and all our troops have been betrayed. We were all betrayed by this administration when it cited a litany of reasons for invading Iraq that shifted like desert sands and seemed to be based upon quicksand. We were betrayed by an administration that went against the international community and called millions of protesters a "focus group."

We were betrayed by a lack of planning – active military and their families are now dealing with back-to-back two year deployments, announced a few weeks ago. And today National Guard and reservists and their families are reeling from the news about their tours of duty being extended. And yes, there is a problem with troops being short on water, short on food, short on supplies and short on equipment. This morning we received an email from a mother whose son is in Iraq. The email read:

"Our soldiers have been killed because there were not enough Kevlar vests to go around. One of my son's friends was shot in the back in Fallujah and two of his platoon members were killed in an ambush in May because they only had 30 vests for 120 men. No one at his checkpoint had a vest, thus nine people were injured."

We're betrayed by a President who on May 1st landed on a photogenic aircraft carrier decked out with a massive sign reading "Mission Accomplished" – and more of our troops have died since then than during so-called "major combat." We're betrayed by an administration that allows our loved ones to be occupiers, securing safety for Halliburton and Bechtel to reap billions.

We're betrayed by an administration that sought to cut combat pay as our president was saying (from his safe and secure and guarded location in Washington, D.C.), "Bring 'em on!" to the armed Iraqi resistance.

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We're betrayed by an administration that supports cuts in already inadequate veterans' benefits, ignoring the fact that when and if our loved ones come home, they will be neither safe nor sound – physical and psychological damage will put them at risk for decades to come.

As the Veterans for Peace cadence goes, "They wave the flag when you attack; When you come home, they turn their back."

We were betrayed Sunday night when President Bush began his PR campaign to secure 87 billion new dollars for the U.S. military occupation. These dollars – especially the \$61 billion earmarked for the military occupation – will not benefit our troops, the people of this country or the people of Iraq.

As long as we are telling these uncomfortable truths, we will share one more betrayal.

We were betrayed last October when Congress turned over to the president a power given to Congress and Congress alone by our Constitution – the power to declare war.

But even given all of this, we understand the opportunity that now faces this nation, and this Congress, to turn things around.

For some of our families – unfortunately a growing number – our Bring Them Home NOW campaign, and anything you might do in Congress, is too late. Their loved ones will never be coming home; they have already paid the ultimate price. But the voices of these families are strong through their tears. I would like to read the statement of Jane Bright :

"My son, Sgt. Evan Ashcraft, was killed July 24, 2003 at 2:30 in the morning on a lonely road near Mosul, Iraq. He was 24 years old. He died alone, no family nearby, no one to hold his hand or pray over him as he left this world.

Evan was a gifted student, musician and athlete. He started college courses in mathematics and computer science when he was 13 years old. He played classical piano. He had hopes and dreams. He and his soul mate, Ashley, had big plans. Evan planned to get his college degree after he left the Army. Evan and Ashley had been married 3 years. Evan was one of the best and the brightest. He was a leader, his team loved him and he them.

The young men and women who are dying in Iraq are our future generation of leaders. They are the future of America. They represent the best that America has to offer. Those who survive Iraq will undoubtedly face years of anguish over what they have witnessed in this immoral war, all in the name of oil. In the meantime we, the American public, sit by, mute, as we watch our young die. We must halt this unconscionable action in Iraq immediately and bring our young people home.

It's too late for my son, but it's not too late for the many tens of thousands still in Iraq. Bring them home now!"

Jane Bright
Mother of Sgt. Evan Ashcraft, Deceased

For tens of thousands of others – we hope it is not too late. We ask that members of Congress listen to what these families have to say here today.

And we ask something else: We ask that you take the time today, or tomorrow or the next day, to step out into this nation's front yard. Visit the Black Wall – the Vietnam Memorial. And listen with your hearts. Reflect on the more than 58,000 names on that wall.

If there is a legacy for these dear, departed souls – it is now. This is the time. This is the moment. And you, our Members of Congress, are the people. Turn this around – and Bring Them Home NOW!

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