

Mr. ROMERO-BARCELÓ. Mr. Speaker, as I stand before the House today, America enjoys a period of unparalleled prosperity and peace. Our country is strong, and life is good for most Americans. Unemployment is at one of the lowest rates ever. Education is a reality for everyone, and the possibility of higher education is more achievable than ever. For once, in our halls, we are debating how to spend a surplus instead of cutting and retrenching Federal programs.

These are heady times, and we stand at the eve of the millennium with hopeful hearts. As the new century approaches, we realize that divisions are blurring and that there is more that brings us together as Americans and even as citizens of the world. The principles proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution continue to shine forth through the test of time, and our democracy is a shining beacon throughout the world. It is now the perfect time to reflect deeply into our future and ponder where do we want our Nation to go and what do we want our Nation to become in the years ahead.

There is immense potential for our Nation to grow and boundless opportunities for each of us to reach our potential. We are blessed with peace and stand as citizens of the most powerful, most advanced Nation in the world. It is indeed a privilege to be an American. That privilege also entails deep responsibilities and allegiance to the principles of freedom and liberty for which we pledge our own lives.

There is one injustice that besmirches our Nation's final reputation as the utmost defender of freedom, liberty, and quality. The 3.8 million citizens of Puerto Rico, as well as the nearly 200,000 citizens of the other four territories, have pledged their lives, just like the rest of their fellow citizens in the 50 States, to the cause of freedom. However, the sad truth is that throughout the century we have been sent to the front to protect the rights and freedoms of people who had more rights in our own country than we have.

Imagine, Mr. Speaker, that those who struggle alongside their fellow citizens to enable their country to fulfill its destiny do not enjoy the same rights nor the same benefits as any other citizen in the 50 States. How can this be possible? How has our Nation enabled this discrimination to continue unchecked?

Some say that the issue of the 4 million U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico and the territories is not on their radar screens this year or even in this Congress. If there is a war, I am certain we would be on their radar screens. Everyone knows that more U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico have served on the front than residents of many other States. This duplicitous standard of equal in danger and war but unequal in times of peace and prosperity must not and cannot continue to be tolerated, Mr. Speaker.

I call on my colleagues in Congress to eliminate the ignorance and the indifference that discriminates against the most needy of our society, the children, the aged, the disadvantaged, the handicapped, by virtue of living in a territory.

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Mr. Speaker, I urge Congress to take the necessary steps to prevent this neglect and discrimination by enabling their equal participation in the most fundamental safety net programs that can make the difference for their future health and well-being, just as it does for all other elderly, disabled and needy children in any of the 50 States.

Mr. Speaker, if equality must be demanded in order to be achieved, then I am demanding it. How can some American citizens be less equal than others merely because they live in a territory and not in a State? Have those of us who live in a territory not proven our patriotism and our loyalty during this century? Can we afford to continue to ignore and trample the right to equality in our Nation?

Our Nation fights against injustices throughout the world, but in our own house it promotes unequal policies and programs that adversely affect the lives of its own citizens. Our Nation looks to invest in the future. What could be better than ensuring that all of our citizens enjoy the same rights and privileges? In the millennium let us truly stand as one Nation.

The U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico have a stake in this, our country, and have earned the right to be treated equally with our fellow citizens in the 50 States. I am calling on the wise stewardship of the leaders of this Congress to ensure that when the new century dawns, all Americans are truly equal and equally enjoy not only peace but also our Nation's economic prosperity.

FUNDING FOR NATIONAL DEFENSE

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BLILEY). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from California (Mr. MCKEON) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. MCKEON. Mr. Speaker, I rise to address the House on a subject that is very important to me and our Nation. This subject is funding for our national defense. When the Clinton administration's budget was released, we heard a lot of talk that the President had finally been convinced about the need to increase defense spending. This was significant because his previous six budgets have fallen short of meeting our defense requirements despite the fact that the military deployments and operations tempo were increasing under this administration. However, as we examine the President's budget request more closely, we find once again that the increase which he had promised is failing to materialize. While the President is proposing a slight increase

in procurement accounts, research and development accounts are being cut. Furthermore, military construction spending is being slashed by over 35 percent. This is particularly disturbing for two reasons: One, because we are still paying money to finish the base closure process; two, our armed services are having difficulties retaining men and women who are currently serving. As the military-civilian pay gap increases, we cannot expect to retain military personnel while at the same time expecting them to live in 1940 and 1950 era housing while working in outdated facilities. Two weeks ago in the Committee on Armed Services the four service chiefs testified about an \$8.7 billion shortfall that they are facing in the next fiscal year. The actual shortfall is greater because the President is relying on favorable economic assumptions and changes in budget rules to make his defense numbers look better than they really are. For example, the Secretary of Defense testified last month before the Committee on Armed Services that low inflation and fuel costs were being factored into the fiscal year 2000 budget. Now, we know that gasoline costs are down. But I was reading in the paper yesterday that they are projecting a 25 percent increase this year. What happens if in the President's budget where he is proposing that we pick up \$8 billion because gasoline and oil prices are dropping that in reality they turn around and increase?

Apart from the obvious problems of relying on economic assumptions, it was revealed last week that the Senate is planning on using the projected economic savings as an offset for the fiscal year 1999 supplemental appropriations bill. If these assumptions are used to offset the supplemental bill, then the fiscal year 2000 defense budget will be stretched even thinner. This will make it even more difficult to address shortfalls in research and development, military construction and readiness accounts and will further delay congressional initiatives to improve pay and retirement benefits for active duty military personnel as well as for our veterans.

Mr. Speaker, as a member of both the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I look forward to working with other Members to truly address the needs of those who are providing for the defense of this country.

PROTECT AMERICA'S WORKERS AND SYSTEMS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to reflect for a moment this morning about the importance of our being able to provide livable communities for Americans. A lot of what

we deal with on the floor of the House of Representatives at times seems a little obscure to citizens back home, but really what they care about is to make sure that their families are safe when they go out the door in the morning to go to school. They want those families to be healthy, they want them to be economically secure.

I am particularly concerned about that element of safety, Mr. Speaker. I have been witnessing events around the country of late that give me pause. In the Pacific Northwest this last November, we had a tragedy where a bus driver was shot and the bus careened through the guardrail, plunging down below into an apartment house. Thirty passengers were injured. We had a situation just a couple of weeks ago in San Diego where a bus driver was attacked, was raped and we are still trying to solve that situation. Last year in Wisconsin we had a situation where a bus passenger boarded and splashed gasoline around and seriously burned several passengers.

The point of this litany here is not that transit is inherently dangerous. In fact it is not. The statistics are clear that people are far safer taking mass transit than they are driving a car when you look at the accidents, drunk driving, drive-by shootings and carjackings. But we can and should make that transportation experience as safe as possible for the general public and the men and women who provide that service.

The Federal Government has in fact already taken steps, for example, in the area of air traffic. The men and women who provide services to us on airline flights are covered under Federal law. It is important not just for the people who deliver that service but, of course, sending that important signal about what the expectation is from the Federal Government to preserve safety is also very important to protect the passengers themselves.

That is why I am introducing legislation this week to fill this gap, because sadly there is no Federal protection, clear Federal signal about public safety as it relates to the employees who provide transit service by bus and by rail, nor do the 6 million Americans who take transit every day have the peace of mind that such a clear signal would afford. The legislation would make it a Federal crime to intentionally damage mass transit vehicles, impair the ability to safely operate the vehicle, commit an act that would cause the death or serious bodily injury to an employee or a passenger. It is a comprehensive approach to make sure that we do fill this gap, that we do make sure that we are doing everything we can to protect the workers and passengers of America's transit systems.

I hope that my colleagues will join me in cosponsoring this legislation. I think the 6 million riders who rely on mass transit every day to make their communities more livable expect no less of us.

HMO'S PULLING OUT AND NOT RENEWING THEIR CONTRACTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Today, Mr. Speaker, there is one issue that I hear an awful lot about from constituents in my district. I just finished eight town meetings. The question they ask me repeatedly is why are Medicare health maintenance organizations no longer available? It is not an easy question to answer because the issue is a complex one and there is no simple explanation.

Today I would like to share with Members my understanding of some of the major reasons why HMOs have decided not to renew their plans in central Florida and elsewhere in this country. Thus far this action has affected over 440,000 Medicare beneficiaries across this country.

Mr. Speaker, the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 restructured the system for setting the rates by which Medicare pays HMOs. The Balanced Budget Act may have been overly ambitious in setting its deadlines and these ambitious deadlines may be having the opposite effect. HCFA, the Health Care Financing Administration, created numerous problems by issuing interim final regulations that contain overly expansive interpretations of the BBA and are frankly contrary to congressional intent. HCFA also has been rigid in its implementation of the 1997 Balanced Budget Act, even though the act called for flexibility in implementing the new Medicare choice. Nevertheless, HCFA has chosen to be heavy-handed and these regulations have led to less rather than more options and choices for Medicare beneficiaries.

Health plans must also be more flexible to the new Medicare program. The new payments, the requirement for implementation of a risk adjuster, new patient protections with their emphasis on quality and the user fee for providing information to beneficiaries all must be taken into consideration. However, Mr. Speaker, the primary question we are talking about this morning is the disparity in the payments to the various counties. I believe the payment methodology is the main reason why payments are falling behind the rate of medical care inflation and that is why the HMO plans are leaving the Medicare program.

In addition, HCFA has decided to implement a new methodology for calculating the adjusted community rate (ACR). This is how health plans determine the minimum amount of Medicare noncovered benefits that they must provide and the premiums that they can charge for such benefits. The deadline may have been unworkable under the existing time frame.

So, in conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I believe that one of the most compelling reasons for HMOs leaving was that they were asked to file their adjusted

community rate, by May 1. It was just not feasible. There should have been more flexibility by HCFA. I wrote a letter to the HCFA administrator to express my concern about the fact that the plans were required to submit proposals by May 1 instead of the traditional November 15 deadline based upon the regulations that were not issued until mid-June of that year.

In central Florida, I have found that many of my constituents no longer have HMOs. They are concerned, I am concerned, and others of us on the Committee on Commerce have expressed deep concern to the administrator of HCFA and we are hoping that the flexibility that is required in the program will be implemented by the new administrator.

The plans that withdrew their Medicare HMO coverage indicated they did so because of the new filing date for ACR's coupled with the knowledge that the risk adjuster proposal being designed by HCFA could result in less payments to plans.

So, Mr. Speaker, for these reasons and others we now must act.

We need to act in a bipartisan manner to help create real choice in Medicare which includes HMO's for all of our senior citizens.

SUNDRY MESSAGES FROM THE PRESIDENT

Sundry messages in writing from the President of the United States were communicated to the House by Mr. Sherman Williams, one of his secretaries.

INTRODUCTION OF LEGISLATION REGARDING GHB, A DATE RAPE DRUG

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON-LEE) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, this morning I rise to thank the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. UPTON) and the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. KLINK) for the hearing that they will hold this week as part of the responsibilities of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of the Committee on Commerce. This coming Thursday, that hearing will be held, and I will testify before the Committee on Commerce on GHB, a date rape drug. This uncontrolled substance has been used to commit date rape by rendering victims helpless to defend themselves against attack.

The GHB legislation that I am sponsoring, H.R. 75, is a result of a tragedy that took place in Texas involving a young woman named Hillory J. Farias. Hillory was a 17-year-old athlete and model student who died from an overdose of GHB on August 5, 1996. Throughout the 105th Congress, we worked very hard to hold hearings to introduce this legislation and to introduce this Congress to the importance