

This section, known as 1002, it is noted, is not all to be used for oil development, only 2,000 acres within it. Let me try and explain what that means.

ANWR is approximately the size of the State of South Carolina, yet, within the northern portion of that, the area in red is the only portion we are talking about, a grand total of 2,000 acres, about the size of the footprint left by the airport in this city.

If we did another analogy, if we can consider a large conference table, we are talking about drilling in an area the size of a postage stamp. That is not, that is not an area that is going to despoil the future. Its disturbance is negligible.

This area does not have, as some critics have said, only 6 months' worth of oil. We are looking at an area that has between 5.7 billion and 16 billion, B, with a B, billion barrels of recoverable oil within ANWR. If Members consider that within every day we import 10 million barrels, we can recognize that clearly this would go a long way as we compare the potential of ANWR to our other sources of foreign oil in providing the kind of natural domestic security that we desperately need.

This cannot be minimized, it cannot be brushed aside. This is a crucial element of the puzzle. It is a crucial element for the long-term viability of our Nation and our energy.

One last point, very quickly. In addition to oil for the future energy needs of this country, we are producing spin-off jobs in almost every State of this Nation. These statistics are somewhat old, I have seen them elevated by as much as 20 percent, but we could produce between 500,000 and 700,000 jobs in this country. Can Members imagine what 500,000 to 700,000 jobs would do to spur this economy, well-paying jobs, in addition to the energy independence?

There are two elements we need, stability and predictability of our source of energy. That is what will spur the future. That is what will give us our independence, our independence from foreign oil and our security at home.

Mr. CANNON. Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend, the gentleman from Utah, and I would like to thank all my colleagues from the Western Caucus for the relatively short time we have taken on the floor today. I can assure my colleagues we will be back in future special orders, trying to flesh out for the people of America these issues and how important they are to the future of America, to the future of jobs, half a million jobs based on a decision made by this body whether or not we will open up a small area in Alaska for drilling. I think that is an important issue.

The gentleman from Utah did a little magic trick with the chart and made it disappear for a moment. There is no magic, there is no magic for solving this problem of energy in America. We need to deal with the realities of these policy issues. We need to get away

from demagoguery and toward the very important issue of the price of gasoline for our cars, the price of gas for heating our homes, the price of energy for running our factories and creating jobs for the American people.

VETERANS AFFAIRS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MARIO DIAZ-BALART). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. WATERS) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to address an issue that some of us started to talk about last week. Mr. Speaker, last week 11 Members came to the floor to speak about the deep cuts in the President's budget. After we made our presentations on the floor, we were inundated with calls by veterans from all over America. They called us, they wrote us, and they are asking Members to join us. They want us to make a special appeal to our Republican friends, to the President, not to cut veterans services.

We are back here tonight. I have more Democratic Members who have joined me. They have come to the floor this evening to appeal to our Republican colleagues and to the President not to cut the veterans budget.

The budget is supposed to outline the Federal Government's priorities for the next year. Apparently, some of our colleagues have decided that their priorities are massive deficits, huge tax cuts that benefit only the most privileged, and drastic cuts to government programs that millions of people depend on. While the Republican budget did not include a dime in funding for the war in Iraq, it did cut the Department of Veterans Affairs by \$25 billion.

Mr. Speaker, on the same day that the President of the United States sent our soldiers into war, the Republicans in Congress pushed through a budget that slashed the very programs that our soldiers will count on when they return from their mission. This is unacceptable. I believe that we must live up to our duty and support the men and women who fought throughout our Nation's history to protect our freedom.

However, it seems that many of our colleagues have forgotten the promises we made to our veterans when we sent them to war. This budget, the President's budget, has slashed government spending so that veterans are being impacted in the most unusual and negative way.

The cuts that the veterans are being forced to take are simply unkind and unfair. For example, in January of 2003, Mr. Bush cut off access to the VA health care system for approximately 174,000 veterans. Specifically, the President announced that new VA care would no longer be available to so-called "Priority 8" veterans who are not already enrolled in the VA system;

that simply means veterans who earn about \$24,000.

It is ironic that the President announced this cut on the same day he did a photo op at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, touting veterans care for vets of the Afghanistan conflict.

It is also ironic that the President was touting care for the veterans of the Afghanistan conflict when we are still, in our districts on a daily basis, responding to the cries of veterans who served in the Vietnam-era War and who served in the Persian Gulf War, veterans who still are not able to access their benefits. We are still dealing with veterans who have been inflicted with all of the diseases that come from the exposure to Agent Orange and other kinds of exposures.

In July of 2002, the President had the Veterans Affairs Department direct all VA regional directors to stop, stop, all marketing activities to enroll new vets in the VA system. This was an effort to curb VA expenditures by not letting the public know about available services. According to several major veterans groups, the President's budget last year fell \$1.5 billion short of the inadequate funding that was exhibited in that budget.

THIS YEAR'S BUDGET

So it should not come as a surprise when our President or his party short-changes our veterans, yet again. History has shown that they will.

But Republicans decided that what they have done over the past couple of years was not enough. So when they drew up the Fiscal Year 2004 budget they called for even greater cuts to the Department of Veterans' Affairs. The budget will cut \$844 million from health programs next year.

In addition, the budget called for increased co-payments for pharmaceutical drugs and primary care that veterans need—something that used to be provided for free.

And mandatory spending would be cut by 463 million—this year alone. This means that the Montgomery GI Bill education benefits, vocational rehabilitation, and subsidies for VA home loans will be cut.

The Republicans even cut funding for headstones, markers and flag for deceased veterans.

Nor does the Republican's budget provide additional funding for the Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act which is a comprehensive effort to eliminate chronic homelessness among veterans within a decade.

I would like to share with you two quotes that I think highlight the anger that many veterans felt after they saw the Republican Veterans' budget.

The first is from John Keaveney of New Directions, Inc, a veterans group located in Los Angeles. He says: "To propose cuts in VA nurses, doctors, hospitals and other important services to veterans at a time of war feels to many veterans like an act of treason. . . . It seems inexcusable at a time like this to virtually tear up the agreement America has had with veterans for more than 100 years which is to care for those who have borne the brunt of battle."

And the other is from Dwight Radcliff of US Vets also located in Los Angeles. He said: “. . . the men and women who fought for this country are still struggling to obtain the benefits and services to which they are entitled. In being pro-active, it is imperative that during this time of war, we begin to prepare to address the needs of those who are currently in service as well as the forgotten heroes who still sleep in the streets. It is extremely unfair to tell those who have waited so long and also those who will return shortly that their effort for this country was unappreciated.”

Mr. Speaker, I call on the President and the Republican leadership to restore the funding to the Department of Veterans' Affairs and to restore our veterans' confidence in their government which they so bravely defended.

Mr. Speaker, I am going to call on some of my colleagues who are here to make their presentations this evening. I yield to the gentleman from Missouri (Mr. CLAY).

Mr. CLAY. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for yielding to me, and commend her for taking this time in a special order on such a timely matter, while our troops are in the deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq fighting for their lives and while this administration is attempting to cut the budget of the VA.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to voice my opposition to cuts in benefits due our Nation's veterans. I urge my Republican colleagues to reconsider the drastic cuts made to the Department of Veterans Affairs. I oppose these cuts, this mistreatment, and believe our Nation's heroes deserve better. I sincerely urge my colleagues and all Americans to consider just what a vote to reduce the budget to our veterans, both on and off the battlefield, really means.

Today, I submit, there is politics and then there is the presumption of politics; there is patriotism, and then there is the presumption of patriotism; there is support for our troops, and there is the presumption of support for our troops, all the contradictions involving the politics of war and peace.

The notion of who is a true patriot and who is not and the welfare of our troops in combat all have been played out recently in this very Chamber. For my part, I have opposed the war, supported our troops in combat, and now stand to support our troops upon their return.

For those who follow my votes, they may be confused. Do not be, because certainly I am not. Recently, on March 20, 2003, I placed into the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD a statement that noted my long-standing opposition to the war in Iraq. Yet, with the fighting having begun, I offer my support and prayers for the men and women who, out of duty to their Nation, find themselves in harm's way.

On top of this budget, the current administration has also submitted a budget to pay for the war we are currently engaged in. That supplemental budget request is for \$75 billion to fight the war in Iraq for 6 months. With the prospect of a long and arduous cam-

paign and occupation of Iraq, the costs will likely soar even higher.

We have 2.3 million disabled veterans who demand our patriotism, just as we demanded theirs in time of war. I echo the appeal of honor and dignity made on March 17, 2003, by some of the veterans groups in response to the GOP budget.

I quote: “Is there no honor left in the hallowed halls of our government that you choose to dishonor the sacrifices of our Nation's heroes and rob our programs, health care, and disability compensation to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy? You will be reducing benefits and services for disabled vets at a time when thousands of our service members are in harm's way, fighting terrorists around the world, and thousands more of our sons and daughters are preparing for war against Iraq.”

Needless to say, the shooting war started in earnest 2 days later.

I submit to Members, there is politics and then there is the presumption of politics; there is patriotism, and then there is the presumption of patriotism; and there is support for our troops, both on and off the battlefield, and there is the presumption of support for our troops.

In a world where the cost of everything, even our Federal budget, is increasing at breakneck speed, does it make sense to cut benefits to the very people who we promised to take care of if they stood at a post and took care of us in some foreign land, often under an obscure objective that only our highest leaders know about and understand?

In today's world, with the threat of international terrorism in our own backyard, war has come to us all. However, for those men and women who stand up, swear an oath of allegiance to defend our Nation at all costs, and do the bidding of Congress and our President, we are now being asked to turn our backs on them.

□ 1830

How can Congress, in the span of a few days, vote support for the troops fighting in Iraq and then seriously consider revoking by nearly a billion dollars the benefits we promised our warriors past, present, and future for the sacrifices they have sworn and continue to swear to make for the good of our Nation. This is an insult. This is an abomination. We know it. America knows it, and our veterans know it.

It is more patriotic to send our troops into battle with our congressional blessing but upon their return tell them their sacrifices are not deserving of benefits this Nation has traditionally offered those who risk injury, emotional stability and even their lives to keep this Nation secure.

I urge Congress to reject any reduction in benefits to our fighting men and women and support the Democratic alternative. At a time of war and sacrifice by the men and women of our Armed Forces, Congress cannot and must not let these cuts stand. The al-

ternative offered by the gentleman from South Carolina (Mr. SPRATT), the ranking member of the House Committee on the Budget, provides for \$1.1 billion in additional discretionary spending in FY 2004 and \$17 billion more over the course of 10 years to the Veterans department budget.

If we want their full measure on the battle fields, they deserve a full measure of benefits upon their return. I thank the gentlewoman for yielding to me.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from California (Mr. BACA).

(Mr. BACA asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. BACA. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from California (Ms. WATERS) for taking the leadership on behalf of veterans.

As a veteran who has served in the 101st and 82nd Airborne Division in 1966 to 1968, I am outraged, I am outraged regarding the 2004 budget adopted by this House committee, \$28.8 billion cuts in veterans programs over 10 years; \$14.6 million in veterans benefits cut in mandatory veterans program; \$14.2 billion cuts in discretionary veterans health care. I speak on behalf of the 2.3 million disabled veterans including more than 1.2 million members of Disabled Veterans of America.

Is there no honor left in the halls of government? Is there no honor left in the halls of government that you would choose to dishonor the sacrifice of our Nation's heroes and rob them of their programs, health care and disability compensation? During this time of war it is crucial to let our soldiers know that they will be taken care of once they return home. I state once they return home that they will be taken care of. Unfortunately, I am ashamed by what the Republican Congress and President Bush have done to our veterans lately.

Since the troops have been deployed to the Persian Gulf, veterans benefits have been shipped away. Shame on you. Shame on you. They are fighting and dying for us. They are fighting and dying for us. And what are we doing? We are pulling the rug out from underneath them. The Republican budget resolution that passed last week cuts \$449 million from veterans health care programs. What kind of message does it send to the hundreds and thousands of American men and women in uniform currently risking their lives overseas? Is this the kind of message that we want to send to our young soldiers fighting for freedom and democracy?

Remember that we enjoy today the freedoms because of the sacrifices that many of our veterans made who have served this country, our country before. Is this the best way that we can do for the families of those who have died for this country?

Just recently, Corporal Jorge Gonzalez, a U.S. Marine from my district in Rialto that I happened to visit the

parents this week was killed in Iraq. His heroism is found in the battle field and at home. This occurs daily through this land and the homes of families of American men and women who are serving us, like those of my legislative field representative's husband who is now serving in Iraq. Our men and women in uniform should not have to come back and learn that the government they fought for refused to take care of them, and I state, refused to take care of them.

During the time of war, we all say to our troops, we support you, our thoughts and prayers are with you. And we do, and we do. We display the American flag on our cars, in our homes, and clothing with pride. While this display of patriotism is important, I say we have to do more than that.

We have a moral obligation to provide veterans with benefits and services that they have earned, and I state that they have earned through their honorable service to this country. We have a moral obligation to provide them with prescription drugs and access to care. Is that too much to ask? I ask, is that too much to ask?

I am here to tell the administration and my fellow Members of Congress not to forget those men and women who have served this country. Remember, the freedoms we have today are because the men and women were willing to step up and fight for those freedoms, the freedoms we enjoy every day. Let us not forget them. Let us restore the benefits to our veterans. Let them know we will take care of them today and tomorrow, and I state today and tomorrow. I say God bless America. Let us restore our veterans. God bless our veterans.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. ANDREWS).

(Mr. ANDREWS asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. ANDREWS. Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend from California for yielding and for organizing this chance for us to come to the floor and speak tonight.

Once a year in my district a group of people gather in the middle of a dusty field and they line up trucks and tents on either side of the field, and over the course of a weekend veterans from all over our area come to this field to receive counseling, health care services, clean clothes, a shower, a meal. This is called a Veterans Stand Down. Most of the veterans who come to the stand down are homeless or living on the street, battered by a mental illness.

Once a month in my district and in districts across the country, veterans look at the calendar as it heads toward the end of the month, and they look at their checkbook and they see nothing left in their checking account because the meager pensions and benefits that we pay veterans have run out before the end of the month.

Once a day in my district and in districts around this country, veterans

call health clinics and health care facilities and hear that the waiting list for an appointment is a month, 3 months, 6 months, 7 months to see a doctor that they were promised they would be able to see when they agreed to serve their country.

A few months ago, this Congress debated the use of force in Iraq. I am one who as a matter of deep personal conviction feels that the use of force in Iraq was justified and I voted "yes." I feel equal conviction tonight of a sense of shame that my country is disregarding the needs of men and women who served our country in the past and who serve it today.

Governing is choosing. And this body has already made a choice, which it is not too late to reverse, about honoring the men and women who have worn the uniform of this country. Veterans benefits and services are already insufficient to meet the needs of the veterans of this country. They are not good enough today to do what needs to be done. But just to restore this level of services for the next 10 years, we would need \$28 billion more than the majority has provided in the budget that it rammed through this Chamber just a few days ago. So we are going to do \$28 billion less in health care, in education, in disability benefits, in counseling, in housing, in burial benefits; \$28 billion dollars less than we are doing right now over the course of the next 10 years.

Now, there are only four ways that we can deal with this problem. The first way we can say is, that is just too bad. That is the way it is going to be. And despite all of the ceremonies they will attend at home, despite all of the speeches they will make this Memorial Day, that is the position that a majority of this House took when it voted to cut veterans benefits by \$28 billion.

The second choice we could take is to find the \$28 billion somewhere else, cut waste, fraud and abuse and come up with the money. Well, it was the majority's budget resolution that could have found that \$28 billion in waste, fraud and abuse. I remember the Committee on the Budget chairman came to the floor and stacked up reports from the General Accounting Office that purported to show waste, fraud and abuse and expressed his frustration that we were not cutting that. With all due respect, he was expressing frustration with himself because they wrote the resolution and they wrote the budget that could have cut \$28 billion from somewhere else in the budget other than in veterans benefits, and they chose not to do.

The third way to restore these cuts is to borrow the money from our children, which is what the majority chooses to do when it has a higher priority. That is the way they propose to pay for the war in Iraq. I support the effort in Iraq. I voted for it. I certainly support paying for it, but I do not think we should borrow the money from our children to pay for it. I do not

think that is a very justifiable response; but when it comes to higher priorities for the majority, that is what they do.

And the fourth way to pay for restoring these benefits is to choose veterans benefits over tax cuts. We are here tonight to say no vets cuts for tax cuts. No cuts in veterans services that are used to finance yet another drain on the Federal Treasury so the favored supporters of the majority can enjoy yet another tax break at the expense of the rest of the budget.

President Kennedy said, governing is choosing. Every Member of this House has a choice to make when it comes to veterans services. You can choose to let this \$28 billion in cuts stay in the budget and explain to your constituents why the American Legion, why the Disabled American Veterans, why veterans groups around this country oppose that budget. My colleagues can make that choice. Or my colleagues can choose to identify some other area in the budget that could be cut to pay for this. But it is a little late for that because the budget has already been passed. The third choice is to advocate borrowing more money to cover these benefits, which I think is an irresponsible fiscal position. Or just a few more on the majority side could join the 215 of us who voted to choose veterans benefits over tax cuts, who resolved to say we do not want veterans cuts to pay for tax cuts; and we believe that is the right choice.

So when we all go home, Mr. Speaker, to the American Legion and the VFW for the Memorial Day services this year and tell the veterans how much we appreciate what they have done, I would say to you that with all due respect talk is cheap. And the \$28 billion in cuts that are in the majority's budget are an affront and an insult to the people who have worn the uniform of this country. It is not too late to reverse this mistake.

The right thing to do is to repeal a part of the President's tax cut, to choose veterans benefits over this endless stream of worship at the idolatrous altar of tax cuts the majority seems to be engaged in.

So the next time there is a Veterans Stand Down in my district, I want to see doctors and nurses and counselors and therapists there to help the vets. And I want to see the pensions increased and broadened and enriched so veterans can make it to the end of the month and pay their bills. And I want to see the 90-day waiting list cut back to 9 days or 9 hours by hiring more nurses and clinicians and doctors at VA health care facilities across this country.

Governing is choosing. We choose not simply to honor the veterans of this country with our hollow words, a false honor indeed. We choose to honor the veterans of this country with our actions and our votes and to fulfill the promises we have made to them.

□ 1845

I would urge the majority, redress this wrong that you have committed in your budget. Fix this budget. Restore these veterans cuts and take it out of the tax cut you so unwisely passed.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I now yield to the gentlewoman from Illinois (Ms. SCHAKOWSKY).

Ms. SCHAKOWSKY. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman, not only for yielding to me, but for organizing this opportunity for us to come to the floor.

Last Friday, I spoke to a group of veterans in my district. They were mostly World War II and Korean War veterans, and of course, I thanked them profusely for their service to our country. And they appreciated it, but what they wanted to know and where most of the questions were was, what is happening to our benefits? I told them about the President's budget proposal, and they did not appreciate that.

We have all been making a lot of speeches lately and offering resolutions, and they are eloquent and they are flowery, and yes, they are heartfelt speeches and resolutions, expressing support for our troops; and I am not denying the sincerity or even the importance of making those supportive gestures. Speeches and resolutions do not provide health care, and they do not provide education, and they do not provide pensions, and they do not provide burial benefits.

Budgets are a statement of values and priorities, and what the veterans are finding out is that they are not a priority in the President's budget and they are not a priority of the Republican leadership. And not only that, despite all the sacrifices that they have made and, as we speak, the sacrifices that are being made, they are being asked to sacrifice yet again in the form of a \$28 billion cut in benefits and in health care.

What we know when it comes to dollars and cents is that veterans across Illinois are going to suffer from President Bush's proposed budget. A report that was released by the Democratic staff of the Committee on Government Reform concluded that the changes, that is, the \$28 billion in cuts, would cause over 65,000 Illinois veterans, including an estimated 36,000 veterans enrolled at VA facilities in the Chicago area, to be denied VA health care or to drop out of the VA system while increasing costs for thousands more.

First, President Bush would halt enrollment to Priority 8 veterans, denying them access to VA care. The report found that as a result of this proposed suspension, 173,000 veterans nationwide would be denied care, including 7,160 in Illinois, of which 4,000 are in the Chicago area.

Second, President Bush would require the VA to charge all Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans currently in the system a \$250 annual enrollment fee in order to receive service. As a result of the fee, the VA estimates that 55 percent of enrolled Priority 7 and 8

veterans would be forced to drop out of the VA system nationwide, including 32,000 veterans in the Chicago area.

Finally, a third set of provisions would increase copayments for Priority 7 and 8 veterans who do stay enrolled in the VA program. The copayments for primary care payments would increase by 33 percent from \$15 per visit to \$20 per visit. The copayments for prescription drugs would more than double, increasing from \$7 to \$15 for 30-day prescriptions. On average, the report concluded, veterans would have to pay a \$97 a year increase in copayments, plus the new enrollment fee of \$250. However, many veterans can see an increase of almost \$600 a year.

I did not support the Republican budget resolution and instead supported the Democratic substitute which would have restored funding for mandatory veterans benefits, including compensation for service-connected disabilities, burial benefits, pensions for permanently disabled, low-income veterans, education benefits, rehabilitation benefits and housing loan programs. Unfortunately, for our veterans and our soldiers currently in the U.S. Armed Forces, the Democratic substitute was voted down.

While our veterans suffer, the administration continues to cut taxes that only favor the rich. While our veterans endure hardship, the administration continues to send our men and women into battle with no guarantees of a safe and healthy life for them and their families when they return home.

Speeches and resolutions are fine, but they are woefully insufficient. Our veterans, those who have served in the past and the veterans of the future, who are risking their lives right now, as we speak, deserve better. It is time for the Republican leadership to put its money where its mouth is.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from California (Ms. WATSON).

Ms. WATSON. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the gentlewoman from California for organizing this time.

Mr. Speaker, our Armed Forces have now been at war for almost 2 weeks. Over 40 members of the coalition have paid the ultimate sacrifice. Scores of others have been injured. Sadly, there is no doubt in our minds that U.S. casualties of war will rise, even as we all pray for their swift and safe return.

Later this week, each of us will be asked to support a \$75 billion supplemental appropriation. In part, it will pay for the war effort. A few weeks ago, we were asked to support a budget, minus money for the war effort, that drastically reduced funding for the veterans health care and other benefit programs, a cut of \$28.8 billion over 10 years; and today, we have been asked to support a motion to send to conference the same flawed Republican budget that slashes veterans benefits in order to preserve President Bush's tax cuts for wealthy Americans.

In effect, we have been asked by President Bush and the Republican

leadership to support funding for the war, support tax cuts for the wealthy and, at the same time, to drastically cut back our soldiers' benefits once they return from the battlefield in Iraq. And even more cruel, we have been asked by the President and Republican leadership to reduce survivor benefits, those that go to the spouses and the children of our service people who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Mr. Speaker, as others have said, there is no honor in this approach. It is shameful at a time when our dedicated men and women of the Armed Forces are in the field fighting, perhaps to be subjected to attack with chemical or biological weapons, that the President and the Republican leadership have made the choice to underfund our veterans programs.

How can this Congress even consider cutting benefits to our veterans during a time of war? What kind of message are we sending to American men and women in uniform overseas? When they come home, what do we tell them, Thanks for your service to our Nation, but now you are on your own, no thanks?

Mr. Speaker, our veterans deserve better than this. They deserve better than to come home and find that their health care coverage has been reduced, but their enrollment fees and copayments have been increased. They deserve better than to come home to discover that the President and the Republican leadership have decreased spending for Montgomery GI educational benefits and subsidies for VA home loans.

Mr. Speaker, the Republican budget simply disregards the needs of our veterans. It is so shameful in its disregard of their needs that the Disabled American Veterans asked the following question, and we have heard it quoted this evening: "Is there no honor left in the hallowed halls of our government that you choose to dishonor the sacrifices of our Nation's heroes and rob our programs, health care and disability compensation, to pay," to pay for what, to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy, those who lie back and say send them while I enjoy my luxury here at home?

That is reprehensible, Mr. Speaker, and I ask that we preserve the honor of this hallowed institution by restoring cuts to the veterans programs and do it now.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from California for her comments, and I yield to the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND), who has been spending every waking moment trying to get these cuts restored to veterans of his district. And the State of Ohio can be very proud of him; he helped to organize this time on the floor last week and tonight.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my friend from California for yielding to me.

Mr. Speaker, we are here tonight talking about something that is close

to all of our hearts. I happen to be the youngest son in a family of nine children. My oldest brother was a World War II veteran. My brother-in-law, who is now deceased, lost his leg by stepping on a land mine in Germany during World War II, worked his final years in a Wal-Mart, walking around on an artificial limb; much of the time it was sore. And I just stand here tonight, and I think that we are able to enjoy the kind of freedoms that we all enjoy because of the sacrifices of those who have gone before us, who have suffered immensely.

I think of the mothers who grieved. I think of my own mother. Some of my earliest memories as a child were of my mother weeping as she worried about whether or not my brother was safe as he participated in that great war. We ought to honor those who went before us, who have fought for us, who have sacrificed their time and have lost their health, and that is not what we are doing.

It is almost beyond belief to me that we, at this time when we have young Americans engaged in a battle, even now risking their lives, that we would be so callous, so callous in our decision-making here in this Chamber that we would pass a budget, and I used the word "we." It certainly did not include most of my Democratic colleagues, but a budget was passed in this House by the majority party, supported by the administration, that cuts benefits, health care benefits and other benefits, to our Nation's veterans by \$28 billion. Think of that, \$28 billion at the same time that the President and majority party is pushing to pass a \$726 billion tax cut, and most of that money is going to go to the richest people in this country.

□ 1900

The President has a choice to make. He can either fully fund veterans health care and veterans benefits, or he can ask for his complete \$726 billion tax cut. It is a fairly clear choice. We have a unified budget. There is only so much money. If we use the resources we have for this big tax cut, there is going to be an insufficient amount of resources to take care of our other needs, including the needs of our veterans.

I have talked on this House floor before about the outrageous things that are being done: increasing the cost of prescription drugs. It went from \$2 to \$7 a prescription. Now the President is saying we want to charge veterans, many of them, \$15 a prescription. Many veterans in my district get 10 or more prescriptions a month. If we take 10 times 15, that is \$150 a month. A lot of these veterans are living on fixed incomes. This is simply outrageous.

And then they created an entirely new priority group of veterans. They call them priority group 8. These are high-income veterans. Of course, you can be one of those priority group 8 veterans and make as little as \$24,000 a

year. Now, maybe a lot of my colleagues do not want people watching to know that those of us in this Chamber make about \$150,000 or so a year. So maybe a \$15 copay would not hurt us. It would not hurt me. I could pay \$15 if I was going to have to take medication. I can do that. I make \$150,000 a year. But what about the veteran who makes \$24,000 a year? And we have the gall to suggest that they are high income and so they just can no longer enroll in the VA health care system. They are priority group 8.

And then others who may make a little more than that are priority group 7. Those veterans, those men and women who have honorably served our country, are being told, well, you are in priority group 7 so you can enroll in the VA health care system and continue to participate, but in order to do so you have to pay an annual enrollment fee of \$250. And then if you go for a doctor visit, we will increase the cost of that.

It is as if we are singling out our veterans for a disproportionate share of the burden for caring for this country. I just find it amazing, amazing that at a time when nearly all of us in here find that we want to associate with the military, we want to show our support for our fighting men and women, that we would take these actions that would be so harmful to our veterans.

I have talked before about the gag order. I mean, it is unbelievable that the VA decides that too many veterans are coming in for health care. We just do not have the resources to provide that health care, with having long waiting lists and many veterans waiting 6 months or more just to see a doctor. In order to correct that, we should just say we need more money. We need more resources. But the VA has a different approach. They say, well, in order to correct that problem, we will just limit information that is being given to veterans so that fewer veterans will understand what they are entitled to and fewer will come in for services. That is how we are going to solve this problem.

It is almost unbelievable. When is it going to stop? When are we going to have our actions match our words? A couple of Fridays ago, about 3 a.m. in the morning, 3 a.m. in the morning, when most of the country was asleep, we were here in this Chamber and we voted a resolution of thankfulness and support for our fighting men and women who are currently risking their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world. Within minutes of casting that vote, we cast another vote for the budget. And in that budget we voted to cut veterans benefits and health care by \$28 billion.

With one hand we saluted the veterans and said thanks, thanks to our servicemen and women. And with the other hand we took our voting card, and we put it in this little gizmo on the back of our chairs here and cast a vote to cut veterans benefits by \$28 billion. In my judgment that is sheer hypocr-

isy. How can we justify those two actions? How can we say on the one hand we honor and appreciate the service of our military men and women and on the other hand cast a vote that cuts benefits to those who have already served?

I think the veterans in this country are coming to understand what is going on. I think they are coming to realize that they have to listen not only to the words but they have to watch the actions of those of us who serve in this Chamber.

Mr. Speaker, I will finish by telling my colleagues this. Talk is cheap. And we do a lot of talking in this Chamber. Talk is cheap, but health care for veterans costs money. And unless we are willing to spend the money, our words are empty.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the gentleman from Ohio for all of the work he is doing on this issue, and I now yield to the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER).

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for yielding to me, and I speak this evening from the Republican side of the aisle in the hope that my words, and the words of all my colleagues here tonight, will nestle in the empty seats that are here this evening and, by osmosis, maybe change the hearts and the minds of those who, as the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) just said, just last week in one minute voted to support the troops in Iraq, and in the very next vote voting to cut veterans benefits by the \$28 billion he mentioned. What sheer hypocrisy, my colleague said; and I think the American people must understand this.

We say they have cut this \$28 billion over 10 years. That means \$2 billion or \$3 billion every year from the budget from what it should have been. Now, \$2 billion or \$3 billion around here sounds like a little bit of money, but \$2 billion or \$3 billion out in the countryside sounds like some unimaginable figure. And it really is.

What could we do with that \$2 billion or \$3 billion every year for our veterans? What should we do with that which is going to be cut by the Republican budget? Here is what we could do with that. Right now there are a quarter million veterans waiting for their first appointment, their first appointment with the VA. They have been waiting for over 6 months. Some of these veterans will die before they have their first appointment the way our system works right now.

There are almost a half million veterans who have made claims for disability to the Veterans Administration that are pending. They may be pending for 2, 3, 4, some even 5 years; 125,000 appeals are pending for years. Why is that the case? Because the VA does not have enough resources to solve those cases within the 30, 60, or 90 days, the way they should be solved. Why is a veteran kept waiting for years? There are veterans in my district who have

died while waiting for their appeals to be adjudicated, as we said. That is what the \$2 billion will buy. It will get the veterans the service they need, get them the disability justice that they deserve. That is what the \$2 billion will buy.

It will buy full funding of the Montgomery GI bill. For many young people that bill is the only entrance into the economy of today, to get an education. We have the Montgomery GI bill to do it, except we do not fund it. We fund it at a few hundred bucks a month. We need to have the full funding of that so our veterans can get funding.

I could go on with what this \$2 billion will buy, and we will be doing that for the next few weeks. We will have colloquies on this. But I will just end by saying that our veterans are being mistreated by this Nation. The folks in Iraq will come home as veterans. What do my colleagues think their morale will be when they know they have to wait years before they can ever get their claim adjudicated? It is time for veterans around the Nation to watch what we do, not what we say. I believe they should be here when the appropriations process occurs. I have suggested they should surround the Capitol while we do that bill until we do the right thing. They should set up tents, bivouacs. Be here so their representatives do the right thing. Let us support our veterans the way we should.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman very much. I now yield to the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON-LEE).

(Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas asked and was given permission to revise and extend her remarks.)

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, let me first of all thank the gentlewoman from California. I know that many of my colleagues are aware of her long years of work on the issue of veterans, and I am delighted to be able to join my colleagues. With the sound of my voice, I will be hopefully as potent and as brief as I possibly can be, but one cannot look into the midst of this storm of water and not come to the floor to speak about those who are actually putting their lives on the line and sacrificing so that I might be here today to acknowledge the truth of their predicament.

Mr. Speaker, I come from a State that is noted as one of the States with the largest number of veterans in the Nation. I happen to come from Harris County, which has the largest number of veterans in the State of Texas. In the State of Texas we have almost 2 million veterans. Those that are 65 and older number about 65,000. We have about 100,000 women veterans. In Harris County, where I live, we have about 250,000 veterans. As I speak today, the hospital which is in my district, the Veterans Hospital, is de-enrolling, or closing the door to veterans who are seeking health care.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this is that there are reports that se-

verely disabled veterans have to wait months, and in some cases more than a year, for basic health care and specialized services. A few weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, we passed a budget resolution of shame. And the reason why it was a budget resolution of shame is because it required the Department of Veterans Affairs to cut \$14 million from the lives of our veterans. We did that, Mr. Speaker, in light of the fact that young men and women are now on the front lines of Iraq.

It is very clear, Mr. Speaker, that many of us did not vote for the war resolution in October, and we have persisted to press the case of peace; but at the same time we have acknowledged those who fight for us, fight for us because they believe in freedom. And so, Mr. Speaker, I have joined my colleagues today to say that the motion to instruct was not enough. Even though today we have added back the \$14 million, what we must do as colleagues is to insist that we never come to this floor to commit an act of shame again.

I know it will happen again, because my colleagues on the other side of the aisle keep asking over and over again for these cuts, in light of or in support of a \$726 billion tax cut. But as I close, Mr. Speaker, let me make a personal commitment. As I join my colleagues today, with this voice that is broken but a spirit that is strong, we will not allow a vote of shame to continue unexposed. We will continue to reinforce the values of this Nation; we will continue to support those young men and women, as we have through the years, my relatives and uncles in World War II, those in the Korean War, and Vietnam War and others. We will continue to stand on their side. There will be not one veteran who will have the dishonor to be dishonored if any of us are able to stand. We stand with the veterans and stand with the reinforcement of their resources, and we stand with those who fight for us in Iraq.

Mr. Speaker, as we debate the emergency supplemental request from the President to fund the war, the fiscal year 2004 budget resolution, and the appropriations' bills, and as Iraq war escalates and casualties mount, it is only fitting that we honor our nation's veterans. Their sacrifices on behalf of our civil liberties have too often been overlooked and forgotten.

It is astonishing that as we ask for even more sacrifices from our men and women in the Armed Forces, that this Congress would seek to cut veterans' benefits. America owes our nation's veterans so much.

There are more than 25.3 million veterans in our nation; family members and survivors of veterans total about 41 million. One-third of veterans live in 1 of 5 states: California, Florida, Texas, New York, and Pennsylvania.

The increasing average age of veterans means additional demands for medical services. As we know, the Department of Veterans Affairs operates the nation's largest health care system, with 172 hospitals, 137 nursing homes, 43 domiciliaries, 206 readjustment counseling centers, home health-care programs, and nearly 900 outpatient clinics.

So, as the need for services for our veterans increases it is disturbing that this Congress would consider cutting veterans benefits.

We must be committed to investing resources to improve the efficiency, quality and breadth of the VA medical care system, and to ensure that care is accessible to more veterans. I am particularly concerned about our nation's African-American veterans—African-Americans comprise a substantial percentage of our enlisted men and women. African-Americans comprise 20% of the enlisted in the Armed Forces.

They should be provided with the highest standard of care. African-Americans have served in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam Conflict, the Persian Gulf War, and now many African-Americans are on the frontlines in Iraq.

I have met with many veterans from Texas and what they want is so reasonable: They want our nation to honor the promises we made to our veterans to provide them with decent livelihoods for their sacrifices to our nation. We should not cut benefits to veterans, in order to provide tax cuts to the wealthy.

Many veterans who served in the Gulf War suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse. Our nation owes an obligation to veterans who incur injury, disease, or aggravating existing conditions while in service to the country. Not only must we provide health care to our nation's veterans but we must ensure that veterans have adequate access to education, housing, and other benefits.

Access to priority health care for our nation's service-connected disabled veterans have been seriously eroded over the years due to insufficient health care funding. The veterans health care system is in crisis.

Continued budget shortfalls, combined with rising costs for medical care and increased demand for VA health care, have resulted in unprecedented waiting times for routine and specialty care nationwide.

According to the VA, in December 2002, nearly 236,000 veterans are either waiting for their first appointment or waiting at least six months for care. Additionally, the VA reports that many of its facilities have reached capacity with closed enrollment at some hospitals and clinics.

But most disturbing are reports of severely disabled veterans having to wait months, and, in some cases, more than a year, for basic health care and specialized services.

I was honored to be joined by many veterans' groups, who supported legislation that I introduced, H. Con. Res. 2, to re-examine the issue of sending our troops to Iraq in a preemptive strike. Veterans who have served in foreign wars know the risks, the hazards, and the dangers of combat.

African-Americans have a rich history of serving in the Armed Forces. Today, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the University of Michigan affirmative action case. I have to note that the Armed Forces are a model of integration—the Armed Forces were one of the first areas of our society to be integrated.

In Houston, Texas, Dr. Michael Ellis DeBaKey is an internationally recognized pioneer of modern medicine. He is an ingenious medical inventor and innovator, a gifted and dedicated teacher, a premier surgeon, and an international medical statesman. I have introduced legislation supported by veterans to re-

name the Department of Veterans' Affairs, the Michael E. DeBakey Department of Veterans Medical Center.

Last week, I received disturbing news. Corporal Brian Kennedy, a Houston native, lost his life on the battlefields. I want to pay a special tribute to this young man and his family. He bravely put his life on the line for the liberties we enjoy in this country. I salute Brian for the service and the sacrifice he made to our country. Our prayers go out to Brian, his family, and the troops stationed in Iraq.

The Origins of Veterans' Day:

In 1921, an unknown World War I American soldier was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. This site, on a hillside overlooking the Potomac River and the city of Washington, became the focal point of reverence for America's veterans.

Our troops embody the ideals of our country: Courage, valor and a sense of pride in country.

Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "There ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." Our men and women on the frontlines in Iraq truly deserve our support.

Our veterans and our active duty troops deserve our highest respect and our commitment as a nation to providing them the best in care and services—they have given us so much as a nation, that it is our moral obligation to return to them the benefits they have given to us. We call on our armed forces to protect us both here and abroad.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from Texas, and I now yield to the gentleman from the District of Columbia (Ms. NORTON).

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Ms. NORTON. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman from California (Ms. WATERS) and the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) for their leadership in bringing this important matter to the floor.

The last thing I thought there would be a bipartisan split on would be veterans benefits. We talk about unity around the troops. What about unity around the veterans? Members want to wave the flag. Let us begin with those who have already served.

Instead, we are talking about the great differences between the Democratic budget and the Republican budget. The Democratic budget was more than \$30 billion over a 10-year period than the Republican budget. That tells Members something about the different priorities of the two parties in this Chamber, particularly today when what we are talking about is a volunteer Army. We should be going out of our way to make sure that every "t" is crossed and every "i" is dotted.

We have used all kinds of inducements to attract these men and women into the Army, and we have a class- and race-based Army. A lot of folks are going in there because there are not a lot of opportunities in society, and they are depending on those education and health benefits.

What have we done? We have spared no cost when it comes to the equip-

ment that they have to go to war, but we are pinching pennies on the health consequences of their going to war. Shame on us. We enticed them into service. We make no sacrifice ourselves, and we ask them to sacrifice when they come home.

Who has made a sacrifice during this war? The only folks I can think about who has made a sacrifice since 9/11 are the people who died in the Twin Towers and at the Pentagon. None of us has been asked to make a sacrifice. Instead, we have been offered a big, fat tax cut.

In this way, we separate ourselves from our ancestors and our forefathers. When they went to war, they said, we are going to pay for war and our veterans, and they raised taxes. These were not folks that liked to raise taxes. Indeed, we had our first Federal income tax during World War I, and nobody had even heard of taxes; but they said, if we are going to war, we are in for a dime, we are in for a dollar. We have raised taxes; and during every war, including the Persian Gulf War, we have never cut taxes in time of war.

We have not asked the other side of the aisle to raise taxes, but we have asked them not to sacrifice veterans benefits in order to offer tax cuts to the wealthy. The veterans who are most offended are veterans who live in the District of Columbia, who have gone to war since our first war, without having full representation in this House.

In their name, I ask that these cuts be restored.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from New York (Mr. OWENS) to close.

Mr. OWENS. Mr. Speaker, we have heard a lot of statistics which show how grave the problem is. Last fall, I had a town meeting of veterans in my district, and those were some of the angriest people I have ever seen. These are members of our society who have been betrayed, and who are continuously betrayed. Those who are fortunate enough to come back, there are 58,000 who died in Vietnam, 300,000 were wounded, and some of the wounded were in that audience, and on and on it goes with the insults they have to endure, like the long waiting lists.

It is important for us to note that those of us who are against war are not against soldiers or veterans. Anybody who places his life at risk, whether as a volunteer or drafted, deserves to have the medal of greatness placed upon them. Out of the nearly 300 million people in our population, those few people become great people. There is no such thing as a greatest generation just because they fought World War II. All veterans, Vietnam, Korea, whoever was able to come back, deserves the maximum that we can do in terms of housing, education and certainly medical benefits.

It is a commentary, which I think has been pointed to several times here, on the heartlessness of this administra-

tion that at a time like this they would dare have a \$28 billion cut in the benefits for veterans over a 10-year period. Veterans deserve all we can give them. They are all part of a great generation no matter which war they have fought in.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I include for the RECORD a communication from New Directions, signed by Mr. JOHN Keaveney, who is head of this New Directions organization, a fine organization rehabilitating veterans in the greater Los Angeles area; a communication from Mr. Dwight Radcliff from United States Veterans Initiative, another organization providing drug rehabilitation services, providing job training services for our veterans from the Vietnam era and from the Persian Gulf; and a communication from the National Veterans Foundation that is signed by Shad Meshad.

UNITED STATES

VETERANS INITIATIVE, INC.,

Inglewood, CA, March 27, 2003.

MAXINE WATERS,

Member of Congress, 35th Congressional District, California.

DEAR CONGRESSWOMAN WATERS: I have reviewed the findings of Congressman Lane Evans, ranking Democratic member of the House Veterans' Affairs committee regarding the budget adopted by the house budget committee which results in drastic reductions in funding for veterans benefits and services. As the director of the largest veterans-specific program in the country, I am appalled that this administration would consider decreasing the amount of funding available to the Department of Veterans Affairs and the special programs and services provided by community based organizations such as ours.

United States Veterans Initiative provides outreach, housing, employment assistance, case management, counseling, legal assistance, and food services to over 2500 homeless veterans per year at our Inglewood site. At our other sites across the country, we provide services to an additional 3000 veterans annually. The majority of the veterans that we serve are Vietnam Veterans. Today, over thirty years after the war in Vietnam, the men and women who fought for this country are still struggling to obtain the benefits and services to which they are entitled. In being proactive, it is imperative that during this time of war, we begin to prepare to address the needs of those who are currently in service as well as the forgotten heroes who still sleep in the streets of this country each night. It is extremely unfair to tell those who have waited so long and also those who will return shortly that their effort for this country was unappreciated. This is our time to fight for them.

As our congressional representative I am requesting that you strongly oppose any effort to cut funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Without this crucial funding, those veterans that are in desperate need of benefits and assistance will not be able to access the needed resources such as medical, psychiatric, housing, and employment.

Sincerely,

DWIGHT RADCLIFF,
Los Angeles Services Director,
United States Veterans Initiative.

NEW DIRECTIONS, INC.,

Los Angeles, CA, March 26, 2003.

To: Representative Maxine Waters.

From: John Keaveney.

Subject: Department of Veterans Affairs Funding Cuts.

DEAR CONGRESSWOMAN WATERS: I am writing for your help Congresswoman Waters because you have always been a strong advocate for veterans, protecting veterans' benefits and defending veterans from special interests in Congress and here locally. I am pleading with you once again to help our Nation's veterans. It has come to our attention that the House Budget Committee chaired by Congressman Jim Nussle (R-IA) pushed through a bill to cut \$25 billion from the Veterans' Administration over the next 10 years. I know you agree that if the government can consider funding tax breaks for the rich and businesses, then they certainly can make it a priority to help our Nation's veterans and homeless by not allowing a major cut in benefits to veterans.

The shame of this is that this was done on March 13, as America was asking hundreds of thousands of servicemen and women to lay their lives on the line as our country was making final preparations to go to war with Iraq. I find it difficult to describe my feelings about this development especially considering that this Nation is now engaged in a war and simultaneously enacting legislation making huge cuts in funding for veterans' services. To propose cuts in V.A. nurses, doctors, hospitals and other important services to veterans at a time of war feels to many veterans like an act of treason. I do not believe that the American public is informed properly about this issue. Just imagine, how would our troops in the Middle East feel about this? It seems inexcusable at a time like this to virtually tear up the agreement America has had with veterans for more than 100 years which is to care for those who have borne the brunt of battle.

Veterans expect the promises made to them to be honored as this should be considered a sacred agreement. Thank you for your time and devotion to serving our country in honor of our nation's servicemen and women.

God bless you.

JOHN KEAVENEY.

NATIONAL VETERANS FOUNDATION,

Los Angeles, CA, March 27, 2003.

Congresswoman MAXINE WATERS,

Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC.

DEAR CONGRESSWOMAN WATERS: As author and founder of the National Vet Center program (Public Law 96-22), and founder and president of the National Veterans Foundation which has been operating since 1987, I want to express my extreme shock and dismay over the recent announcement concerning the House Veterans Affairs Committee decision to drastically cut Veterans' health-care benefits.

We have seen many disturbing things with past administrations concerning veterans support, but this present attempt to slash budgets supporting our nation's veterans is the most shameful. A \$25 billion cut from the Veterans Administration over the next 10 years is a staggering amount to an already severely reduced and diminished program. Veterans comprise 30% of the nation's homeless, many of them are in desperate need of services . . . many more are at the brink of homelessness and what is probably worse, a crisis of hopelessness.

Where is the logic of cutting these programs precisely when we are sending our young men and women into the field to secure the peace and safety not just of our nation, but of the world?

Cuts in VA hospitals, in doctors and nurses, in rehabilitation and retraining, and

in counseling to heal wounded psyches, seems cruel and treasonous. What kind of country asks its citizens to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, and then penalizes those who rise to the challenge?

Lincoln's Address at Gettysburg dictates our responsibility to these brave men and women: to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.

We are barely doing that now. How is it possible for our existing system to undergo these savings cuts and still offer services to the hundreds of thousands of troops now engaged in Iraq? Then there's Afghanistan, not to mention the countless thousands of military personnel in support positions all over the world. We are looking at a vast increase in the number of those we must serve. To cut funding for veterans services in a time of war while simultaneously offering a tax break that would have its greatest impact on the affluent and on business seems indefensible.

You have always been a strong advocate for veterans. You have protected veterans' benefits from special interests locally and in our Congress. Please help us now. We need your strong, clear voice.

Sincerely,

SHAD MESHAD,

President and Founder.

Mr. TOWNS. Mr. Speaker, today I rise to express my deep concern and stringent opposition to the proposed cuts in veterans health care contained in the President's 2004 Budget. While a tax cut may require us to discuss reductions in many vital programs, there are few cuts that are as unkind as the cuts the President wishes to visit upon those brave men and women who were willing to serve and if necessary die for this country.

Mr. Speaker, this House recently voted on a 2004 budget from the President which will cut funding for veterans health care and benefit programs by nearly \$25 billion over the next ten years. These cuts would require the Veterans' Administration for the first time in its history to require monetary payment from those who have already paid with their service to this nation. According to the Veterans' Administration, approximately one out of every two veterans could lose their only source of medical care under the President's budget plan. What should the VA say to a veteran who needs treatment but cannot afford to pay? I cannot believe that we would honor their service by turning them away. And yet, under the President's plan, rejection may be the only response that a fiscally-strapped health care system can give.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the veterans who served this country responded affirmatively to this nation's call to service. We cannot now respond negatively to their call for help.

Mr. ETHERIDGE. Mr. Speaker, as we stand here today in Washington, DC, thousands of our men and women in uniform are in harm's way, fighting for the freedom and the values that we hold dear.

They are in our thoughts and our prayers. They do not know what fate awaits them, but they know they are fulfilling their duty and serving their country.

When these brave Americans return home, they will join the ranks of over 26 million American veterans.

In my state of North Carolina, we are home to more than 150,000 veterans.

I served in the United States Army for two years. I never fought in combat or served overseas. And I'm certainly no hero, but I understand the sacrifices that our veterans have made.

Our troops fighting overseas today should know that when they come home the country that they have served will not turn its back on them.

Once the fighting is over, veterans should know that the government will fulfill its promises to take care of those injured in battle and to provide for health care and education assistance.

It is absolutely outrageous that the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives wants to push through a budget that severely cuts funding for our nation's veterans.

They passed this budget under the cover of darkness because they knew it could not stand the light of day.

That budget breaks the solemn promise made to the very men and women who fight for our freedom.

You've heard my colleagues tell you how the budget cuts would affect veterans' programs nationwide, but I want to tell you about one specific proposal that would significantly impact North Carolina's veterans.

The budget cuts mean that many North Carolina veterans won't be able to continue receiving VA health care because of new \$250 enrollment fees.

The VA estimates that 1.25 million veterans who are already a part of the health care system will be forced out because of these steep new fees.

In North Carolina this could translate into over 27,000 veterans cut out of health care.

For those who can afford to stay in the VA health care system, many will be forced to pay significant new costs.

An estimated 22,000 North Carolina veterans, referred to as Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans, will pay a new \$250 enrollment fee, increased copays for physician benefits and prescription drug fees.

All in all, this will mean a total average increase of \$347 each year. Others could be forced to pay even more, as much as \$600 annually.

The budget passed by the House means that 4,100 veterans in North Carolina will not even have the opportunity to enroll in VA health system.

These so-called Priority 8 veterans, who were not injured in service and who make above a level between \$24,450 and \$38,100 depending on location and situation, will be denied care.

Our country made a promise to the men and women in our armed forces. Our troops and our veterans have fulfilled their duty to their country. Now it is our turn to make good on our promises.

Congress should reject the Republican budget and honor our commitments to our veterans.

GENERAL LEAVE

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on the subject of my special order.

THE SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MARIO DIAZ-BALART). Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from Texas?

There was no objection.