

The question was taken.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. In the opinion of the Chair, two-thirds of those present have voted in the affirmative.

Mr. BUYER. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX and the Chair's prior announcement, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

#### GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. BUYER. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous materials on H.R. 3200.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Indiana?

There was no objection.

#### REMOVAL OF NAME OF MEMBER AS COSPONSOR OF H.R. 515

Mr. EVANS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to have the name of the gentleman from Florida (Mr. BOYD) removed as a cosponsor of H.R. 515, as it was inadvertently added.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Illinois?

There was no objection.

#### APPOINTMENT OF CONFEREES ON H.R. 2361, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2006

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to take from the Speaker's table the bill (H.R. 2361) making appropriations for the Department of the Interior, environment, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2006, and for other purposes, with a Senate amendment thereto, disagree to the Senate amendment, and agree to the conference asked by the Senate.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from North Carolina?

There was no objection.

#### MOTION TO INSTRUCT CONFEREES ON H.R. 2361, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2006

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I offer a motion to instruct.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Clerk will report the motion.

The Clerk read as follows:

Mr. Obey moves that the managers on the part of the House at the conference on the disagreeing votes of the two Houses on the Senate amendment to the bill H.R. 2361 be instructed to agree to section 439 of the Senate amendment, providing \$1,500,000,000 for fiscal year 2005 for the Department of Veterans Affairs for medical services provided

by the Veterans Health Administration and designating that amount as an emergency requirement pursuant to section 402 of H. Con. Res. 95 (109th Congress).

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 7 of rule XXII, the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY) and the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. TAYLOR) each will control 30 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY).

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself 5 minutes.

Mr. Speaker, for the past 3 years, a number of us on this side of the aisle, including the gentleman from Texas (Mr. EDWARDS), myself and several others, have tried to bring the administration to the realization that we needed many more dollars in the veterans health care funds than, in fact, they requested each year. And each year we have been able to drag them a little bit towards that goal, but we have not been able to drag them far enough.

As a result, we have heard many, many horror stories. We have heard that thousands of patients have had to wait more than 3 months for appointments in California. We have heard that in States like Arkansas and Oklahoma and Mississippi and Louisiana, the VA has stopped scheduling appointments for many veterans who are eligible for care. We have heard of 6-month delays in emergency surgery in Oregon. We have heard that facilities have had to erect scaffolding to protect patients and staff from falling bricks in Maine. We have heard that a medical center in Vermont has major shortfalls in their prosthetics budget. We have been told that doctors have had to pilfer supplies from neighboring hospitals to carry out routine procedures in Illinois. And we have been told that life safety improvements like replacing fire alarm systems have been postponed as the funds are used to cover operating expenses in States like California.

Yet, in the face of stories like that, in April VA Secretary Nicholson told the Congress that no additional funds would be needed for fiscal year 2005. But by the end of June he had to admit that there was a big problem, and he then testified that an additional \$975 million was needed. Two weeks later, the problem in their eyes got even bigger. OMB asked for yet another \$300 million for fiscal year 2005, so they are admitting a \$1.3 billion shortfall right now; and the numbers look worse for the coming fiscal year.

The VA has already amended their \$20 billion medical care budget request for an additional \$1.7 billion, and that does not count the additional \$500 million they are going to need, because I doubt that many Members want to go along with the administration's proposal to raise the veterans health care fees and co-op pays as has been suggested by the administration.

I would hope that by now every Member realizes that we have a VA health care crisis and we have to deal with it

right now. The other body did the right thing in the interior bill. They provided \$1.5 billion of emergency money for the VA. That would cover the immediate \$975 million shortfall and provide an additional \$525 million that could be distributed among the VA regions to take care of the source of problems that each of us has been hearing about.

I would point out also that in my view some Members of this House have paid a very high price for speaking out on behalf of our veterans. We saw earlier this year news stories which reported the fact that the majority caucus not only removed from his chairmanship but removed from the committee itself the Member on the other side of the aisle who chaired the committee in charge of veterans funding because he had been too insistent in agreeing with those of us on this side of the aisle who kept insisting that we needed more funding for veterans health care.

I would hope that it would be recognized that he was right, that we were right, not just about yesterday's problems but about today's and tomorrow's with respect to this account.

So I would simply urge each and every Member of this House to vote for this motion. This money is going to be provided. It is just a question of how many times we have to hit the House along side the head before, like a stubborn donkey, they finally recognize that something needs to be done.

□ 1215

Reality is here. It would be nice if we faced up to it. I would hope this would receive the unanimous support of the Members of the House.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, we will soon, I think, hear from our chairman of the Subcommittee on Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies, who will be speaking on this. I know that the error that was made is being taken care of in this legislation, in 2005 with \$1.5 billion, and in 2006 with another \$1.5 billion to make the entire \$3 billion.

Every year, Mr. Speaker, we have raised benefits for American veterans, and rightly so. Some 68 percent of our veterans are from World War II and Korea, and we know when we go out on the plaza and see the monument to the World War II veterans the sacrifices paid. We all have relatives who served in World War II, and we know they saved this world with their dedication. We know also how much our other veterans give to this country, those who fought in subsequent wars right up through the current time with our own children fighting in Iraq.

So all of us want to provide the materials and the health care benefits for our veterans, and this amendment will be one of the steps in providing that.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the distinguished ranking member of the subcommittee, the gentleman from Washington (Mr. DICKS).

Mr. DICKS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding me this time, and I want to compliment the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY), the gentleman from Texas (Mr. EDWARDS), and all the Members who deeply care about our veterans in this body.

I am always surprised that this issue takes on a partisan tone, because I really believe each Member cares about veterans. It is just that there seems to be an unwillingness on the part of this administration to face up to the reality of how much money is needed to take care of the veterans. And with the war raging in Iraq, and with the seriousness of the injuries, any of us who have been out to Walter Reed or to Bethesda to see these heroic young men and women who have come back with these very severe wounds, I think all of us want to see the best care given to our veterans.

We have been reading about post-traumatic stress syndrome and the consequences and the effect on the lives of these soldiers and sailors and marines when they come home after having been involved in the kind of violent combat that is being seen in Iraq. I had a chance to visit the VA Hospital in Seattle recently, and I was told by the people there that they still have a backlog, a waiting list of 2,500 people waiting to get their appointments at the Seattle VA. Now, that is just unacceptable. I hope that that has been reduced.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say that I believe the other body was correct in adding this money, but this is not something that normally would be part of the Interior appropriations bill. This is not within our jurisdiction. This is just something that happened—we were the first bill moving through, and it became a convenient vehicle in the other body to put this \$1.5 billion onto.

There was an effort here to put some money, I think it was, what, \$975 million—or thereabouts, which the House adopted, I believe, overwhelmingly, maybe unanimously, but it is simply not enough. I think Mr. Nicholson has not been as forthright as he should have been in telling the various committees on the Hill what was needed. But in my mind there is absolutely no excuse for not approving this \$1.5 billion.

I hope that it will be unanimous that every Member of the House will vote for this because I think we should do as much as we can to take care of the legitimate needs of these people. As I said, this should not be a partisan issue. I just regret that the administration continues to underfund this important priority.

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the distinguished gen-

tleman from Texas (Mr. EDWARDS), who has been a key leader on this issue as the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies.

Mr. EDWARDS. Mr. Speaker, for 2 years, our Nation's respected veterans' organizations, along with Democrats in Congress, have been predicting cuts in veterans' health care services due to inadequate VA health care budgets. In February, in fact, of 2004, nearly a year and a half ago, Republican chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH), and his Democratic ranking member, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS), in a bipartisan letter predicted the administration request for VA health care for this year would be \$2.5 billion short.

Now, Mr. Speaker, what was the reaction of the House Republican leadership? Did they stand up for veterans' health care needs in funding? No. They fired the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) from his job as chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and even took him completely off the committee. That may be hard to believe, but it is true. The House Republican leadership punished a Member of Congress, a member of its own party, for putting loyalty to veterans above loyalty to the House leadership during a time of war. It is not only true, it is sad.

To make matters worse, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH), House Democrats, and veterans' organizations were right in saying veterans' health care services were underfunded and the House leadership was wrong. At every step of the way over the past 2 years, in the Committee on the Budget, in amendments there; in the Committee on Appropriations, in amendments there; in the 302(b) allocation, the amount of money for veterans' care in the Committee on Appropriations, in all of these places and on this House floor repeatedly the House leadership has fought against the money needed to adequately support our veterans' health care needs during a time of our war on terrorism.

Even after it became public that the VA has a \$1 billion shortfall, a \$1 billion-plus shortfall this year, even after that, the House leadership dragged its feet. They are still dragging their feet in trying to adequately fund veterans' health care needs.

It is time for Republicans and Democrats alike, today, to do the right thing and to instruct the conferees on the Interior appropriations bill to support the same \$1.5 billion emergency veterans' health care funding that was approved by a bipartisan vote of 96 to 0 weeks ago in the Senate.

It is morally wrong for our Nation to ask young troops to go into combat and then shortchange their health care when they return home as veterans. Supporting veterans' health care may be costly, but it is the right thing to

do. Standing up for veterans may have cost the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) his job as chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, but it was the right thing to do.

The right thing to do now is to send a message to this House leadership, that has opposed adequate funding for veterans' health care for 2 years now, that supporting veterans is more important than misplaced partisan loyalty.

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I continue to reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, how much time do we have remaining on each side?

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. ISSA). The gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY) has 19 minutes remaining, and the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. TAYLOR) has 28½ minutes remaining.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield 3 minutes to the distinguished gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER).

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Wisconsin for yielding me this time and for his leadership on behalf of our Nation's veterans, leadership which has sorely been lacking in this House.

This administration and this Congress has insulted our veterans community repeatedly in the last few months, insults which I hope we will remedy with today's motion. The head of the Office of Management and Budget actually had the nerve to testify before the Committee on the Budget that over the last 3 years the Veterans Administration had received \$.5 billion more than it actually needed, more than it actually needed, when we have waiting lists which the gentleman outlined, when we have nursing and medical vacancies, when we have maintenance backlogs, when we have people waiting a year for an appointment for a dentist, and months and months for surgeries that are needed. OMB told the veterans that we have more than what was needed!

Then the Secretary of our Veterans Administration testified before committees of this Congress that we got it wrong because we had a bad mathematical model. We had a mathematical model that did not take into account the fact that there was a war going on and thousands of troops were coming back with significant injuries and with post-traumatic stress disorder. We did not know a war was going on, so we underfunded the VA. That is an insult to our Nation's veterans, that we did not know a war was going on, and we did not provide the money. Many are suffering today as a result of that decision.

And, Mr. Speaker, when we had a chance to help the veterans before our last recess, the chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs said, we can only give \$975 million, that that was the right number, while the Senate did \$1.5 billion, which we are now instructing our House to accept today.

We could have had this money flowing to our veterans' centers weeks ago. This could have been signed by the President several weeks ago, yet in my hometown of San Diego, we have 1,000 people on a waiting list just to have their first appointment. We have maintenance backlogs and nursing shortages, and we cannot get them the money because we did not have the right numbers, said the veterans chairman.

Well, we had the right number all along, my colleagues. The Independent Budget, a professional document prepared by our veterans' service organizations, had the numbers exactly right. The mathematical model could have been tested against this, and we could have had the proper support for our Nation's veterans. So everybody who talked about our Nation's veterans when we had Memorial Day, when we had our July 4th celebrations, and we will hear it on November 11th as we have heard today, that we all support our veterans. Well, let us show it by the proper votes!

The Democrats in this Congress have tried at every level, on the Committee on the Budget, on the Committee on Appropriations, in the Senate, in the House, and we tried on the floor of this House to give the Independent Budget numbers the force of law, but we were voted down on pure party-line votes. So I hear that everybody supports our veterans, but when the votes come, the majority party is not supporting our Nation's veterans.

Let us pass this instruction motion. Let us honor our veterans and give the veterans the support they need, especially when they come home from war.

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from New York (Mr. WALSH), chairman of the Subcommittee on Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies, a member of the party which, as we all know, has supported our veterans with increases every year.

Mr. WALSH. Mr. Speaker, I thank the chairman of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies of the Committee on Appropriations for calling for this motion to instruct conferees, and I rise in support of that motion, and I thank him for his hard work and support on this issue.

Mr. Speaker, we have come to this point through a fairly long circuitous route this year. There has been a number of different estimates as to what the actual needs of the Veterans' Health Administration are. We conducted lengthy, extensive hearings, as did the authorizing committee, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and we have been receiving different information all the way along.

It is our best determination that the \$1.5 billion figure will provide us the funds that we need to complete this fiscal year, the 2005 fiscal year, and the funds that are not utilized in 2005 will be available in 2006. We are also work-

ing with our Senate counterparts to make sure that the 2006 figure is correct.

□ 1230

This has all been done with the very best intention of providing the Veterans Administration and our veterans with the resources they need to meet the demands of the patients of the hospitals of the Veterans Administration.

I think the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Nicholson, has an opportunity here as the new Secretary. And he did not develop the budget; the budget was developed by his predecessor with the advice and counsel of the Office of Management and Budget.

Mr. Nicholson now has an opportunity to make his impression on the Veterans Administration, and the key here is accountability. Making sure that the people who provide Congress with the cost estimates to tell us how we can best serve our veterans and keep our promises, those individuals need to be accountable to the Secretary of the Veterans Administration. I know he is setting about doing that, and hopefully this difficult process that we have had this year will not be repeated.

I might add we have had estimates from the veterans service organizations in each of the 6 years that I have been chairman responsible for the appropriations for Veterans Affairs. We have been right, and I think they have been wrong; and this year their estimate was higher than ours. Who is closer, we will see at the end of the process. But to cite the estimates this year, we need to reflect those against all of the preceding years, and I think by and large we have been on the money.

By the way, we have increased this Veterans Administration budget each year in the neighborhood of double digits. No other budget within the Federal Government other than perhaps defense health has had those kinds of increases.

The House has the power of the purse. We establish our priorities with that purse, and clearly the Veterans Administration is the priority of the House of Representatives. I stand on that record.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentlewoman from Florida (Ms. CORRINE BROWN).

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to express my support for the Senate-passed amendment to include \$1.5 billion to the veterans budget. After the budget shortfall was announced, both sides of the aisle in the Senate came together to take immediate action to address the issue. They passed a \$1.5 billion emergency funding amendment to immediately get the funds to the people who need it, our veterans.

The Republican leadership of the House decided to sit on their hands and wait for President Bush to pull out of the air a number. That number was \$975 million. This House passed that

funding level and left for the July 4 recess. However, it turned out that the Bush level was \$300 million short of funding veterans health. We know that budget is underfunded by more than \$3 billion, that is B, billion. All Members need to do is read the independent budget. Every year they release their priorities, and every year the VA is short of funding to complete its mission.

While we were sitting on our hands, the three surgical operating rooms at the White River Junction in VAMC was closed on June 27 because the heating and air conditioning system was broken.

The community-based outpatient clinics needed to meet veterans' increased demand for care in the North Florida and South Georgia VA health care system was delayed due to fiscal restraint. As of April in Gainesville, Florida, there were nearly 700 service-connected veterans waiting for more than 30 days for an appointment.

Let us get past the \$1.5 billion for veterans health care; let us just stop all of the talking and put our talk into action. Pass this motion to instruct and get veterans the health care that they need and deserve today.

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. WAMP).

Mr. WAMP. Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to come to the floor and say the gentleman from Washington is correct, all Members of this body that I know, Republicans and Democrats, totally stand behind our veterans in giving them resources; and that is the spirit with which we should approach this debate.

But I have to tell Members, one thing we forget around here, money is one piece of it, and accountability is another. I have to tell Members that now that this is added to the interior bill, and that is where I serve, this is when I speak, that the VA is still not accountable enough.

Yes, we need this money; but do not think for a minute that more money is the answer. Some of these needs are not being met because they are not accountable. They are not efficient enough. The VA in my area is still not accountable enough, but we need this money.

To allege or assert in any way that the House Republican leadership removed the gentleman from New Jersey, let me tell Members, I was there. While I am not going to say what was said in the meeting of the steering committee, we hired the gentleman from Indiana. For all of the right reasons, we hired the gentleman from Indiana as the chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs because of what he is doing and we need to do in terms of reforms and accountability at the VA. It needs to be done.

On issues like homeland security and veterans, Members can always say it is not enough money to try to appeal to people. But we have to give them the

money that they need when they need it for the purpose they need it and hold them accountable for better management. This body does not exert enough oversight on how the money is being spent. That is the truth, and it is especially true with the Veterans Affairs operation nationwide.

So, yes, let us give them the money; but let us not just throw them the money and say, There, that is more money. Let us follow through with a much more scrutinized process of accountability at the VA.

The VA should have been moving money around 10 years ago to reform, to close the facilities they do not need, open new facilities, even contract so people can go to the best health care provider in their community to receive health care.

We have got to reform the VA and give them more money, and I come to the floor today to say that the appropriations process can do that. The chairman, the gentleman from New York (Mr. WALSH), has done an outstanding job here, but surely the general public knows that Members of Congress support our veterans. All Members of Congress that I know support our veterans with the necessary funds.

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. BUYER).

Mr. BUYER. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the motion to instruct conferees on H.R. 2361, Department of Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2006.

This bill will provide the Department of Veterans Affairs with supplemental funding of approximately \$1.5 billion for fiscal year 2005. Several weeks ago, the House of Representatives unanimously passed H.R. 3130 which provided \$975 million in health care funding for the fiscal year. We did that in response to revelations at the time to a line of questioning that I had with Dr. Perlin of VHA at a full committee hearing on health care modeling and forecasting.

We learned that since the spring of this year VA hospitals and clinics were shifting significant amounts of funds into medical services from maintenance and capital equipment accounts. This shifting was driven by underestimates of long-term care requirements and increased use of VA facilities by returning Operations Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans to also include a surge of veterans in categories 1 through 6 and category 7 for health care.

I directed Secretary Nicholson to tell us what additional funds he needed for 2005. I also then immediately informed the Speaker of the House and the majority leader of this issue.

The Secretary returned from meetings with his staff on June 30, bringing to us a number of \$975 million. This House acted the very same day in which the Secretary made his request

through the President of the United States approving to the penny the VA's request. Yet the number was not even dry on the paper when, in fact, days later we were then informed that number was really \$1.275 billion, and they needed an additional \$300 million.

The \$300 million is for a carryover account which we in Congress permit the VA to utilize. So you will hear this number. What is really important is the \$975 million number; and as a matter of fact, just last week the VA said they hold to the number. The additional \$300 million is for the carryover account.

The Republican Senate leadership offered a number of \$1.5 billion. Now the challenge we have is they passed a number on the Senate interior appropriations bill of emergency supplemental. The House passed a \$975 million number that was paid for out of the 2005 budget. As Members go to the interior conference, we have a challenge. We have got moneys which were paid for, the Senate asks for emergency. Now I suppose we are asking for an instruction that is saying make it an emergency supplemental.

So what we are doing is rolling one on top of another. We have \$975 million which was paid for out of the 2005 budget. Now we are going to vote for an instruction to the conferees on \$1.5 billion on emergency supplemental. So these are issues that conferees are going to have to work out at conference.

But when we look at VHA's forecasting performance which has been the focus at some of our animated hearings in the House, 3 over the last several weeks, in April they provide notice to the Committee on Appropriations that they are going to reprogram \$600 million. Then in the latter part of June when we hold our hearing, they testify they are short \$975 million, but they have "work-around solutions."

Then a few days later while we are on our July break, we learn that the number was short \$300 million. They are going to spend down the \$975, and the \$300 million is the carryover account. We either take care of that in 2005, or we have to include it in the 2006 budget amendment.

If Members watch this, we go from \$600 million to \$975 million to \$1.275 billion. What is it going to be in August? I think that is what the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY) and the gentleman from New York (Mr. WALSH) are indicating. So that is why I am going to support the motion to instruct, because there is a loss of confidence here in the House with regard to the number that has been given to us. Patience with the VHA bureaucracy has run out.

Mr. DICKS. Mr. Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. BUYER. I yield to the gentleman from Washington.

Mr. DICKS. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the gentleman's efforts and he is sincere in everything he says.

Has the committee held any hearings on why they are having all of these financial difficulties? What is driving this increase?

Mr. BUYER. We have. We have held three hearings. Part of the reason dealt with their modeling and their forecasting. For the 2005 budget, they used 2002 data, and they also had false assumptions. So we have informed them that they have every opportunity to get right the 2007 budget because now they tell us about the use of old data and poor measuring criteria. So they have every reason now to get it right. So what are they changing with regard to their assumptions and how are they improving the data with regard to the 2007, because that is what they are doing right now.

So what has occurred is we get the 2005 right. They come with a 2006 budget amendment. We just held a hearing on the 2006 budget amendment, which is just under \$2 billion; and then we told them that we are going to do some handholding as they prepare the 2007 budget.

Mr. DICKS. Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman will continue to yield, are you able to get OMB to cooperate, because sometimes the agencies try their best to do the right thing, but then they are told by OMB they cannot do that because we are trying to fight the deficit. Is OMB being helpful here or not?

Mr. BUYER. Mr. Speaker, I would say everyone wants the modeling to be correct and for us to reestablish trust and confidence on our predictability of a budget number. When we do that, we bring purity to the process and OMB also brings trust and confidence. I think there is lack of trust and confidence under the budget number, and OMB has proven they are not as good of a caretaker here as they think they are. We will work cooperatively with OMB because they also are part of this process of the pain.

Mr. DICKS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for that explanation.

Mr. BUYER. Mr. Speaker, the issue is accountability. The gentleman from New York (Mr. WALSH) touched on it and so did the gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. WAMP). The credibility must be rebuilt, and OMB is integral to this process.

I have asked Secretary Nicholson to review the leadership of the VHA bureaucracy to ensure that the right people are running it, and also its finances and some within the health network.

In particular, I am greatly disappointed and have lost confidence in the leadership and management of the Deputy Under Secretary for Health, for Operations and for Management. In the meantime, Congress will ensure that veterans health care is funded. We will hold VA accountable for its use of these dollars in the performance of its mission.

Over the recess, other Committee on Veterans' Affairs members, staff, and I will personally visit VA health care facilities because there is no substitute for boots-on-the-ground examination.

□ 1245

I will specifically visit a polytrauma center in Minneapolis.

One of the harshest realities of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan is the number of servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with loss of limbs and other severe and lasting injuries. With the body armor which we are providing to our soldiers, they can turn that up, and what is happening is it protects the torso, and they are having now loss of limbs and traumatic brain injuries.

VA has four regional traumatic brain injury rehabilitation centers. One of them is in Minneapolis, one is in Palo Alto, another one is in Richmond, and one is in Tampa. These are very important regional referral centers for individuals who have sustained these serious disabling conditions due to combat. VSOs and others are saying that these individual veterans are not being seen because of cuts in the VA. I find that challenging. I want to make sure these allegations are correct, so I am going to go on the ground to see if it is true.

I have also asked the GAO to review the VA's budget process, and I think that will be very important for some other eyes on this issue.

Mr. Speaker, America's veterans will receive the health care they have earned. \$1.5 billion is a significant number for an important constituency, and I anticipate that we will act quickly to provide it. We can all see that only 2 months remain in the fiscal year. Unspent funds from this appropriation will be available for their use as down payments on the 2006 budget supplemental so that all funds will be put to good use.

I would like to thank the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) for his work. I would like to thank the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY) for this motion. I also commend my colleagues in the Senate for their willingness to act quickly to Secretary Nicholson's request and to resolve this matter. I also want to thank the President, because when this was alerted to everyone's attention, the President acted and sent over a number. He also did the 2006 budget amendment.

In the end, those of us who exercise great care to raise and support the military know that our obligation does not end upon one's discharge. We care for the wounds and the injuries. We care for those who are left behind. We care for them to make as whole as possible and to create a climate so that one may take advantage of economic opportunities to live beyond a disability paycheck so that the defenders of liberty may also enjoy the bounties of the liberty for which they fight. I urge my colleagues to support the motion to instruct conferees in order to ensure that the veterans' funding can be done as quickly as possible.

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, let me conclude on this side by making four sim-

ple points. First of all, one of the previous speakers tried to suggest that, in fact, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) had not been fired by the majority party caucus because he had been too willing to speak his own mind about the needs that he saw for veterans' health care. I would simply say that I am perfectly happy to believe that if the House is ready to believe that my grandmother is an astronaut and that the Cubs are going to win the pennant this year. The fact is that we know what the facts are, or were, I should say, with respect to the removal of the gentleman from New Jersey from office. He simply did not follow the party line and paid a price. So did the veterans. And now this bill is trying to help meet those costs.

Secondly, the gentleman from New York indicated that there had been a variety of estimates about what would be needed for veterans health care funding this year. The fact is that the Democratic estimates that we offered were consistent, and the bipartisan estimates that were offered by the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) were consistently that we needed \$2.5 billion in this account over the budget request. The House earlier enacted a \$1 billion increase. This \$1.5 billion in this motion now brings us to the \$2.5 billion that we have been saying all along was needed and that the gentleman from New Jersey and the gentleman from Illinois were saying all along was needed.

Thirdly, I would simply say that the administration's denial of the truth on this matter follows a pattern. We saw earlier over the past year and a half when the Veterans' Administration was discouraging outreach, because if veterans knew what they were entitled to, it would cost more money, and that would impact the budget. So we have already seen that effort to not fully explain to the American veterans what they were entitled to. In that sense, it is very similar to the action of the administration in threatening to fire the government official who tried to tell Congress what the true cost of the prescription drugs under Medicare proposal was that the administration proposed last year.

Lastly, I would simply say one of the previous speakers raised the question as to why we were providing this money as an emergency. It is very simple: because it is an emergency for each and every veteran who otherwise will not be adequately served. We have a war going on. It would be nice if during that war we had a sense of shared sacrifice that was conveyed to each and every citizen of this country. But we really do not. We have a narrow band of people, those in the uniformed services of the United States, who are being asked to sacrifice virtually everything while 90 percent of American society is making no sacrifice about the war. They are getting tax cuts. They are able to be comfortable in

their homes. It is only a precious few military families who are bearing the entire burden of that war.

It is human nature, I guess, for Americans, when our soldiers go off to war, to cheer and to have the bands playing, but it would be nice if we had that same enthusiasm for veterans when Johnny comes marching home again. Unfortunately, we have not demonstrated that because of the shortfalls that we have seen in the veterans' health care budget.

I would hope that we would adopt an understanding that if we ask someone to put his very life at risk, to put his family's future at risk and go to war to defend an action of the President of the United States, I would hope that we would recognize that we have a concurrent and permanent obligation to each and every one of those soldiers to meet the full cost of meeting their health care needs, their education needs, and their economic readjustment needs when they return to this country. That is the very least that we ought to do. This amendment tries to measure up to that standard. I would urge a unanimous "yes" vote.

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the Motion to Instruct Conferees to accept the Senate position to provide an additional \$1.5 billion for Veteran's Medical care under H.R. 2361 the Interior Appropriations Bill. This motion to instruct will remedy the shortfall in veterans' health care for this year. Clearly, we have an obligation to our veterans that is not being met and can not go another day allowing this deficiency in Veteran's Medical care to continue.

The sad fact is that it has been 33 days since the Bush Administration acknowledged a \$1 billion shortfall in Veteran's Medical care for FY 2005. Every day we see more and more veterans turned away and health care rationed across the country because the VA lacks the resources it needs to care for veterans. Every day we don't act, is another day that a veteran who bravely served our Nation is shortchanged.

To remedy this situation more than three weeks ago, the Senate unanimously passed a \$1.5 billion bill. But the amount offered by House Republicans did not match that passed in the Senate, meaning money has not gotten to VA medical facilities and veterans will continue to wait in lines for health care. It has been nearly one month since this shortfall was first acknowledged, and yet Republicans continue to fail our veterans. Veterans and this Nation as a whole can not wait another day for this shortfall to be addressed; waiting any longer would be a travesty.

The truly sad facts demonstrate that the shortfall in veterans health care funding has resulted in some VA medical facilities no longer scheduling appointments for veterans, others not filling vacancies of medical and nursing staff, and others having to close operating rooms or not replacing basic medical equipment, such as hospital beds. Right now, there are more than 50,000 waiting in line for medical appointments, with more than 100,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan seeking health care. But instead of remedying this situation as quickly as possible, Republicans continue to reject proposals that would give veterans the resources they so desperately need.

This spring, Democrats attempted to add \$1.2 billion for veterans' health care on the \$82 billion Iraqi supplemental. And last September, Democrats sought to provide a \$2.5 billion increase over the Bush budget for veterans' health care. Over the last month, House Republicans have voted four times to block consideration of amendments offered by Democrats to add the needed funds for VA health care. It is time that we as a body unite to defend those brave Americans who risked their lives to defend our great nation. I urge all Members to support the Motion to Instruct.

Ms. BORDALLO. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the gentleman from Wisconsin's (Mr. OBEY's) Motion to Instruct Conferees on Veterans Health Care on H.R. 2361, the Interior Appropriations Bill. Our servicemen and women are making daily sacrifices for our Nation in far off lands. Many will return home scarred by combat wounds, many others scarred by the face of war. Having completed their service to our Nation overseas, these servicemen and women have earned more than a debt of gratitude from their Nation but a debt of care. In order to do this, we must properly fund the organization dedicated to their care, the Veterans Administration.

I am pleased that the gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. OBEY, has offered a motion to highlight the inadequacy of the House passed appropriations measures for our Veterans. This motion instructs conferees to accept the Senate position on Veterans' medical care by adding a desperately needed \$1.5 billion to the Veterans Administration budget.

Guam recently welcomed home a company of the Guam Army National Guard following the unit's combat tour in Djibouti, Africa. Many other sons and daughters of Guam have served on active duty in units across the Armed Services. I have an obligation to do everything possible for these heroes in ensuring that Congress has made a commitment to their care equivalent to the commitment they made to the care of our Nation.

It is time for the rhetoric of supporting our Soldiers and our Veterans to be met by our actions. I urge my colleagues to support the motion to instruct.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. LINDER). Without objection, the previous question is ordered on the motion to instruct.

There was no objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion to instruct offered by the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. OBEY).

The question was taken; and the Speaker pro tempore announced that the yeas appeared to have it.

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX and the Chair's prior announcement, further proceedings on this question will be postponed.

#### APPOINTMENT OF CONFEREES ON H.R. 2985, LEGISLATIVE BRANCH APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2006

Mr. TAYLOR of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to

take from the Speaker's table the bill (H.R. 2985) making appropriations for the Legislative Branch for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2006, and for other purposes, with Senate amendments thereto, disagree to the Senate amendments, and agree to the conference asked by the Senate.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from North Carolina?

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the right to object.

Mr. Speaker, I express this reservation in order to take a couple of moments to again express my disquiet about this legislative appropriation bill. I had originally intended to offer a motion to instruct conferees, but in the interest of time and comity, I will not do that. But I, under my reservation, want to make a number of points about funding contained in this bill.

This bill contains another large amount of taxpayers' dollars to pay for what is euphemistically referred to as the Capitol Visitors Center now being constructed on this end of the Capitol. In my view, that project has become a story of spectacular mismanagement and colossal government waste, and I feel obligated, as often as I have the opportunity, to object to the way this project has been handled and to object to what it is going to produce.

The cost of the Capitol Visitors Center, which was first estimated at \$95 million, has now ballooned to well over \$500 million, and there is no end in sight to the escalation in cost.

My second objection is that, for this money, we are getting a pitiful allocation of space to the major needs of the Congress and an outrageous, wasteful allocation of space to areas that I think represent far lower-grade needs. The current design of that Capitol Visitors Center, the House space under that project, provides for approximately 87,000 square feet of space, of which only 3,200 square feet is for hearing rooms where public business can be conducted. The major need of this Congress, if we are going to expand the size of this building, is to have rooms that are sufficiently large so that we can have conferences with the Senate and do our legislative business. Instead, the primary usable space in the House portion of this project is for, in essence, a media center or a propaganda center. It is to make the Congress comfortable with television. So we are going to have this elaborate, two-floor, ornate, state-of-the-art media center, communication center, propaganda center, whatever you want to call it, but we will have tiny rooms for conference committees and very little additional usable space. In short, what I think we will have in the end is an opulent Taj Mahal, abundance of show space, but we will have a shortage of usable working space. I think that is regrettable given what the taxpayer is going to be asked to spend.

I would also say again that I find it incredible to hear the changing jus-

tifications for the new theater which is going to be in the visitors center. There is a huge 450-seat theater which is being built at a cost of many millions of dollars. When I asked why we need another room of that size, I was told, well, because it is a place where Members of Congress can bring large constituency groups. I do not know how many Members of Congress bring 450 people into a room in the Capitol, but if there is a Member who has ever tried to do that, I have never met him.

Secondly, we were then told, well, actually this will be good space for the House of Representatives to meet in when its existing House Chamber, the room that we are in now, is refurbished and reengineered and redecorated. The only problem with that, Mr. Speaker, is that we already have a room, the Ways and Means Committee room in the Longworth Building, which was built for that purpose, to serve as a backup House Chamber, and which was just redecorated at a cost of many, many dollars. It is beautiful. It ought to be sufficient. In addition to that, there is yet another Chamber being built for the House off-campus, which I cannot talk about because it is classified. So we are going to have two backup Chambers at a cost of an enormous amount.

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And when we really dig into what this room is really supposed to be for, we discover that in the original budget justifications, what it was designated as, is being an additional theater for the Library of Congress.

So those are some of my objections to this bill, and I believe that this is the last chance that we have to get the leadership of this House and the Architect of the Capitol to at least change the way the space is being designed so that it is more usable, more efficient, and more useful to produce legislative products rather than propaganda press releases out of a media center.

Mr. Speaker, I withdraw my reservation of objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. LINDER). Is there objection the request of the gentleman from North Carolina?

There was no objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Without objection, the Chair appoints the following conferees: Mr. LEWIS of California, Mr. KINGSTON, Ms. GRANGER, and Messrs. DOOLITTLE, LAHOOD, OBEY, HOYER, and MORAN of Virginia.

There was no objection.

#### ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX, proceedings will resume on three motions to suspend the rules and on a motion to instruct conferees previously postponed.

Votes will be taken in the following order:

H.R. 3200, a motion to suspend, by the yeas and nays;