EXCHANGE OF SPECIAL ORDER TIME

Ms. HARMAN. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to claim the time of the gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. JACKSON-LEE).

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from California?

There was no objection.

HONORING OUR VETERANS

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

Ms. HARMAN. Madam Speaker, ''let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the Nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan,'' so Abraham Lincoln reminded the Nation at his second inaugural.

Regrettably, Congress is poised to forget those who bore the battle, the widow, the widower and the orphan.

To finance a huge and ill-timed tax cut, the House recently passed a budget resolution that calls for cutting the Veterans Affairs budget by $15 billion in benefits and health care. It also calls for huge cuts to Medicare and Medicaid, two health programs critical to the well-being of many veterans and their spouses.

This is not the appropriate way to honor the men and women who bravely defended our freedom nor is it the way to honor the men and women currently in Operation Iraqi Freedom, nor those like 22-year-old Marine Lance Corporal Jose Gutierrez from the small town of Lomita in my district who was killed in action there.

Madam Speaker, honoring our veterans is a lifelong commitment, beginning with the warm welcome upon their return from war. It continues when we fly the POW-MIA flag, when we care for our veterans and their families and, ultimately, when we lay them to rest with appropriate remembrance and tribute.

Madam Speaker, deeds must match words. Our budget resolution must restore funding for valued veterans programs. To honor these veterans, our deeds must fund their services.

□ 1700

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Ms. GINNY BROWN-WAITE of Florida). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

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

TREATMENT OF VETERANS IN FY 2004 BUDGET RESOLUTION

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

Mr. LANGEVIN. Madam Speaker, I rise today as a proud American and member of the House Committee on Armed Services to strongly condemn the cuts to our veterans health care that were pushed through in the House budget proposal for fiscal year 2004, and that we thankfully restored today when we voted overwhelmingly to instruct conferees to prevent those cuts from being considered by the conference committee.

It is outrageous that upwards of 90 percent of the mandatory spending that would have been cut came directly from programs that provide service-connected disability and education benefits to our Nation's bravest citizens. These programs are the heart of the Veterans Administration, and in fact they are the very reason the VA was created.

The across-the-board cuts did not stop there. Discretionary funding, which includes veterans health care, was also grievously cut by $14.2 billion over the next 10 years. Health care takes up 96 percent of that spending, meaning we were slashing at least $1.63 billion per year in health funding. At a time when this Congress is searching for ways to provide better health programs, like a prescription drug benefit to seniors, how could we have justified cutting into successful programs veterans currently receive? Many of these men and women would have no choice but to turn to Medicare because of our actions; and until the Spratt amendment, which was passed today, and spearheaded by so many of my colleagues on the Democratic side of the aisle, Medicare itself would have been cut as well.

The path this House almost chose to embark upon is even more troubling given the action our military is now engaged in overseas. Our courageous servicemembers are engaged in dangerous combat, and a number of them will inevitably sustain injuries. Madam Speaker, I will not return home and tell the brave men and women and families of those deployed overseas that we are not doing everything in our power to support them when they return. We have promised these benefits again and again as the very least we can do to repay the risk and sacrifice the men and women of our Armed Forces make on a daily basis. We must not break that promise now.

I choose to show our servicemembers that I support them and will continue to support them when they return home from combat. I want them to remain confident that they will be cared for should they be injured. I want the families to know that they will not be abandoned should, God forbid, their loved ones not return home to them.

Madam Speaker, the Republican budget resolution did none of these things and must be improved. We took that step today. Earlier today I voted for the Spratt motion to instruct conferees to eliminate proposed cuts in so many programs vital to veterans to show our Armed Forces and veterans that they are not second-class citizens and that we value their efforts and sacrifice. This motion to instruct passed today, and I will continue to fight for our veterans just as hard as they have fought for us. It is the very least that they deserve.

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

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

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

(Mrs. MALONEY addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

VETERANS

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

Mr. STRICKLAND. Madam Speaker, I rise this evening to talk about our veterans, the way we are treating our veterans; and I would like to give a little history of what has happened in the recent past.

Until about 1 year ago, the veteran that went to one of our VA hospitals or our clinics to get medication was expected to pay $2 in copayment for a prescription. That, unfortunately, was raised; and veterans across this country are aware of the fact that they are now required not to pay $2 per prescription copayment, but they are required to pay $7 per prescription. I thought that was an unwise decision on the part of the VA, and I introduced legislation to repeal that increase and to return it back to the $2 per prescription level.

I was absolutely shocked when the President sent his budget to this House

and in the President's budget he requested that that copayment not be $7 a prescription but increased to $15 per prescription. Think of that. At a time of war, when we are creating more veterans, when we mouth the words in this Chamber about how thankful we are for those who have fought past battles, that we would actually take an action that could increase the cost of medicines for veterans who need those medicines, veterans who have served this country with honor, veterans who may be on fixed incomes.

Now, perhaps if a veteran only has one prescription, a $15 copay would be tolerable. But many of our veterans get 10 or more prescriptions per month. Fifteen times 10 is $150. I am shocked that this administration, that this President, at a time when he and the leadership of the other party are trying to give a $726 billion tax cut that will mostly go to people who are already reasonably wealthy, that we would at the same time want to place an additional burden on our veterans in terms of the cost of their prescription medications. It does not make sense.

But, Madam Speaker, it gets worse. The President, in his budget, also asks that we impose a $250 annual enrollment fee on many of our veterans just to participate in the VA health care system. Think of that, an increase in cost for prescription drugs from $7 to $15 and an imposition of an annual $250 enrollment fee. But it gets worse. The VA also, under the direction of the President and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, has imposed what is, for all practical purposes, a gag order on the VA health care providers. They are no longer able to market VA services to our veterans.

In other words, this Congress has passed legislation guaranteeing certain benefits to our veterans. Some of those veterans may not be aware of what they are legally entitled to receive, but the VA is prohibiting the health care providers from proactively spreading the word informing veterans as to what they are entitled to receive. Very specifically, they have been told they cannot make public service announcements about VA health benefits programs. They cannot send out newsletters describing benefits and encouraging veterans to participate. And, quite frankly, most participation in health fairs has been prohibited.

I think these actions are shameless and shameful. I just simply do not understand. We are a wealthy country. We are so wealthy that we are taking our Federal resources and we have decided to give those resources in the form of tax breaks to some of the richest people in this country. Millionaires and billionaires will get up to a $90,000 per-year tax cut; but at the same time, we are asking our veterans to pay more for medicine, to pay an annual enrollment fee, and we are prohibiting the marketing of veterans services.

This is just shameful. I do not understand it. I simply find it incredulous that we would be pursuing these policies at this time, especially at this time, when we have so many of our young men and women in harm's way. I believe the best way to honor those who are fighting for us today is to show deep respect and to keep our promises to those who have fought our past wars, the people that Tom Brokaw and others have referred to as the Greatest Generation.

I think the American people need to be aware of some of the things that I have talked about this afternoon. I could go on, because the shortchanging of our veterans is something that is a deep problem. It is contradictory to much of what is spoken in this Chamber.

VETERANS

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

Mr. CROWLEY. Madam Speaker, I rise to address the vital needs of America's veterans, both of past wars and of our future veterans from the current war.

I voted to give our President the authorization to use force against Saddam Hussein, recognizing Saddam's threat to both global and international security, his support of global terrorism, and his mad desire to create and undoubtedly use weapons of mass destruction. That said, whether we voted to approve military force against Iraq or not, the time for that discussion has passed. Our troops are abroad, they are fighting as we speak, and we support them there and hope that they will return home quickly and safely.

My Republican colleagues have tried to use this conflict to paint Democrats as unpatriotic, trying to say if we oppose the war, we are against the cause of America. They forget that many of those who oppose this war are veterans themselves, veterans who know the pains of war better than many of those who would malign them. And just as importantly, these people, our veterans, understand what it is like when one returns home from battle. What we have seen from my colleagues on the other side of the aisle and from this White House with respect to veterans, in my opinion, is appalling.

Our President cautions the loyalty of those who do not walk lockstep with him on the issue of war but then turns his back on our military as soon as they return to our shores as veterans. Our President has dismissed centuries-old health care entitlements to veterans with the stroke of a pen, while simultaneously hitting them with increased taxes on their prescription drug benefits.

With respect to the care and treatment of America's veterans, the President's rhetoric does not match reality. It was offensive enough when our Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated that, and I quote, ''The drafted veterans of Vietnam added 'no value,' no advantage, really, to the United States Armed Services,'' a comment to which this President and my Republican colleagues remain silent on, as if to give credence to these ludicrous and untrue remarks. Unfortunately, these comments were less a slip of the tongue and more a precursor of this administration's attitude towards America's veterans.

For example, on January 16 of this year, the VA announced it was cutting health benefits for 174,000 veterans, including 13,000 veterans in my home State of New York, citing the high cost of care. They said this would affect only those 174,000 veterans in the highest income brackets, usually considered between $30,000 and $35,000 annually. Just days later, though, the administration released its budget, promoting an elimination in the tax dividend that would benefit mostly America's richest 5 percent, those making in excess of several hundred thousand dollars a year, well above the threshold for rich veterans of $30,000 to $35,000 a year.

□ 1715

This follows a 350 percent tax increase levied by the Bush administration against the veterans in the 2003 fiscal year budget.

In the President's 2003 budget, our President more than tripled the prescription drug copayment for veterans while also demanding the authority to raise it again if he deems it necessary. But this attack on our veterans hit a crescendo 2 weeks ago with a Republican budget that was to cut $15 billion from veterans disability payments and pensions and almost $900 million from VA hospitals.

The Disabled American Veterans organization stated it best by asking the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. HASTERT), ''Has Congress no shame? Is there no honor left in the hallowed halls of our government that you choose to dishonor the sacrifices our Nation's heroes and rob our programs, health care and disability compensation to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy?''

Again, after much pressure from Democrats and veterans service organizations, the Republicans redrafted their budget to paper over these cuts, waiting for action from the Senate. They did not remedy these cuts to provide new money for veterans; they just said they would wait for the Senate to take action. In fact, this afternoon the Republicans repudiated their own budget by voting on a Democratic motion to strip out all $14.6 million of Republican cuts from veterans programs regardless of what action the Senate may or may not take.

It is my hope that this new-found religion by the Republicans is a serious commitment and not just a cheap April Fool's joke.

But there is little reason to be optimistic about the Republican actions today. America has seen Republicans