names, but a former Speaker is getting $123,804 per year; that a former minority leader of this body is getting $110,538 per year; and another gentleman who served as the Chair of one of the more powerful committees, who will soon become a constituent of mine, will receive a pension of $96,462 per year.

The public is saying enough is enough. They did not get term limits. There is one way that we can perhaps kill two birds with one stone. That is by passing a bill that would limit pension accrual for Members to 12 years. If we cannot force Members to retire after 12 years, at least we can take some of the money out of it.

To that end, I have introduced H.R. 1618, and we have a companion bill which is much easier to remember in the Senate. It is Senate bill 1776. So Members watching on TV and those on C–SPAN, if they remember Senate bill 1776, they can remember the bill.

What this bill says is that Members would limit their pensions accrual. After they had served for 12 years, their pensions would stop adding up. What that would mean is that at the current level of salary for a Member of Congress, the maximum level of pension that a Member of Congress could get would be $27,254.

Now, under this plan, if this bill were in law today, the total savings to the taxpayer per year would be $7,892,140. But, more importantly, we would take some of the incentive away for Members staying years and years and literally beginning to grow roots here in Washington.

I think the American people are speaking loudly and clearly that they support this basic notion. There was some polling done recently by the Luntz Research Company, and what it demonstrates is this: Would you be more or less likely to vote for a Member who voted to reduce the growth in congressional pension? Sixty-five percent of the people in the United States said they would be more likely to vote for those candidates.

I think the American people are speaking loudly and clearly. They would like to see term limits and they would like to see limits on the amount of pensions that Members of Congress can collect.

I think the bill that we have introduced, and my sponsor over in the Senate is Senator JIM INHOFE from Oklahoma, I think we have introduced a bill that makes sense. It is fair. It is reasonable. It is responsible, and it is long overdue.

Madam Speaker, everywhere I go, and as I say, I have had 75 town meetings, people ask me, ''GIL, why are you not doing more in terms of reform of Washington?'' And they ask me, ''GIL, are you going to pass term limits? When are you going to pass congressional pension limits, so that we do not see Members retiring with six-figure parachutes?''

We did not get term limits through, but saying ''Sorry, we tried'' is not good enough. Working families in America want us to change the way Washington does business. They want Congressional reform. I hope we can get it in the next several weeks.

VETERANS ARE AT A CROSSROADS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Ms. GREENE of Utah). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from West Virginia [Mr. WISE] is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. WISE. Madam Speaker, there are two issues I wish to talk about today. First of all is veterans.

Madam Speaker, I think it is important that we recognize that veterans are at a crossroads right now and this Congress is at a crossroads, and it is important to reestablish that commitment and to reaffirm commitment to our veterans.

The budget plan that was proposed in this House just last year would have cut veterans' programs, VA programs, by $6.4 billion to the year 2002, and yet at the same time there would have been over $2 billion in tax cuts, many of which went to the wealthiest individuals.

This proposal, had it gone through, would have meant the VA medical system would have had to reduce employment by 9,500 employees, denying care to 165,000 veterans that it was planning to take care of. This also means that they would have had to have reduced their workforce by the year 2002 by 61,000 workers or about 30 percent of their work force.

I am happy to say that we beat this back, Madam Speaker, but yet even under the appropriation bills veterans were going to be asked to increase prescription copayments, to double the copayment that veterans pay for prescription drugs, and to deny 150,000 veterans Medicaid coverage in 2002, most of whom could not afford private insurance and would have been ineligible for VA medical care.

We were able to beat that back, as well, and I am happy to say that I supported on the floor recently the Stump amendment, a bipartisan amendment to increase VA medical care by $40 million over both the President's request and the committee bill. Indeed, there was almost $1 billion of increased funding for veterans health care in that bill. I also supported permitting Medicare to reimburse for veterans' care, particularly in military hospitals. I am sorry that that was defeated, but we will be back again.

CAMPAIGN REFORM

Madam Speaker, I also want to talk about campaign reform, because next week is billed as reform week by the Republican leadership in this House. What kind of reform are we looking at for campaign reform? It is interesting. My constituents tell me, ''BOB, the problem is there in too much money in politics, and you ought to get it out.''

What does this campaign reform bill that the Speaker is bringing to the floor do? It does not take money out. It puts more money into campaigns. In fact, the Speaker himself said in November, and I quote, ''One of the greatest myths of modern politics is that campaigns are too expensive. The political process in fact is underfunded. It is not overfunded.'' That is not what my constituents are telling me.

First of all, this bill would reduce political action committees, what they can contribute, by one-half, perhaps worthwhile. But it would permit individual contributions to go up from $1,000 to $2,500, what an individual can give to a candidate. That does not sound like reform to me.

Whereas the bill that has been talked about for the Democratic side would limit political action committee contributions to one-third of what a candidate could receive, this would increase and take the limits off what PAC's could contribute. There would be no limitation in the Speaker's bill on soft money, which is one of the most egregious offenses that either party can commit, funneling large amounts of money into State parties without any accounting.

Also, this bill does nothing to take on the recent Supreme Court decision that in effect says a political party, Republican or Democrat, can make an unlimited independent expenditure in behalf of a candidate, one of the greatest loopholes going.

So what this bill does that they are going to bring to the floor does not begin to cut down to the flow of money going into campaigns. It only takes the limits off and makes the situation far worse than it is.

What we need, in order to deal with the Supreme Court decisions as well as other actions, we are going to have a constitutional amendment that says that free speech and expenditure of money are not the same thing; that simply because we can spend more money, that is not equated to free speech.

I am greatly concerned because I see the cost of campaigns going up, I see outside groups coming in, I see independent expenditures steadily rising, all of which is taking control farther and farther away from the everyday voter and constituent. Yet this bill, branded as reform, only takes us further in that direction. It does not take money out of the electoral system, it puts more money in, and it makes candidates more responsive to large individual contributors.

The interesting thing is, a family of four could contribute up to $2.4 million. If they have got it, folks could contribute up to $2.4 million under this bill. That is not campaign reform, and I do not think anybody in my district thinks that it is.

Another interesting provision in this bill is that it was suggested no money could be raised within 50 miles of Washington. I ought to be happy with that provision because the eastern Panhandle, which is just 50 to 60 miles

from West Virginia, could become the mecca. This could become a boon to the hotel and catering industries. But the reality is that this bill is not good for West Virginia and it is not good for voters across the country. This is not reform.

VACATION OF SPECIAL ORDER AND GRANTING OF SPECIAL ORDER

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to claim the time of the gentleman from Virginia [Mr. WOLF].

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

There was no objection.

ATTACK ON THE AMERICAN PATENT SYSTEM

The SPEAKER pro tempre. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California [Mr. ROHRABACHER] is recognize for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROHRABACHER. Madam Speaker, during election years we hear a lot of people who are steamed on this issue or that issue. They are very upset about it. The fact is that many times it is just because it is an election year, and we have to remember that.

For example, the other party did control both Houses of Congress and the Presidency for 2 years just prior to when Republicans took control of both Houses of Congress. During that 2-year time period, if indeed it had been important for the Democratic Party to pass an increase in the minimum wage, they would have passed that increase in the minimum wage because they had control of both Houses of Congress and the Presidency, but they did not.

If, indeed, there is something where Republicans in the Senate are holding back on an increase in minimum wage in order to get something else that they want, I think we have to remember that if we call that holding it hostage, the liberal Democrats who controlled both Houses of Congress and the Presidency must have held the minimum wage hostage for 2 years because they had all the power in the world to do what they wanted to do.

Also, when we hear about other apsects that seem to be important now to the people on the other side of the aisle, campaign reform, for example, it should not be any surprise to anyone who is really paying attention that they could have also passed any type of campaign reform they wanted. After all, they did control both Houses of Congress and the Presidency. But they did not do that. Maybe they are upset now because they are suggesting that they want to do something that they did not do when they had the power to do it. That is sort of confusion.

Well, I would like to talk about something that I talked about long before it was a political year, something that really does cross political boundaries, because on this particular issue there is widespread bipartisan support from people who are sincerely concerned about an attack on a fundamental building block of American prosperity.

Both Democrats and Republicans have signed on to a bill that I have to restore the guaranteed patent term to Americans. I know this sounds like a yawner of an issue. I mean, patent law, after all. But what is happening right now, and most Americans do not understand it, is that there is an absolutely despicable underhanded attack on the American patent system. We have multinational corporations that are engaged in an effort to change the fundamental law that has permitted America to be the No. 1 technological power in the world.

Yes, patent law is such a yawn. Who is concerned about patent law? Well, long ago our economic adversaries and, yes, our military adversaries figured out what America's greatest strength is. It is not that our people work so hard, because our people do work hard, but people all over the world work hard.

But our people when they work, or our defenders when they defend our country, have superior technology. That gives us our edge. It always has. We have the technological edge. That is what has secured our country's security and has secured us a standard of living that has been admired and envied all over the world.

Is it any surprise, then, that our economic adversaries and countries that do not like the United States would look for our Achilles heel? What is it that gives us that power? What gave Samson that strength but his long locks? Our secret is the fact that we have had the best technology, and we have had the best technology because we have had the strongest patent system in the world.

Now, there is an underhanded effort, an effort that has been going on for about 2 years to try to change the fundamental patent law of this country so that it will undermine America's ability 10 years down the road to outcompete our economic adversaries.

Some people, of course, who are supporting the patent changes are doing so perfectly well-intentioned, and perhaps they bought into this or that argument. The fact is, what is the driving force behind those who want to change our patent law? The driving force is an idea that we should globalize all patent law, so all of the laws should be the same, and Americans who have had the strongest guaranteed patent rights of any people in the world will just have to live with fewer rights because we need a global harmonization of law.

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Well, that concept may appeal to some people. It certainly appeals to multinational corporations and big businessmen. But that is a threat to the American well-being. H.R. 3460 is about to be put to this floor, and it would steal America's technology. It should be defeated and the Rohrabacher amendment put in its place.

THE MINIMUM WAGE AND HEALTH CARE REFORM

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Ms. GREENE of Utah). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New Jersey [Mr. PALLONE] is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PALLONE. Madam Speaker, I am here today to talk for 5 minutes about 2 issues that I think are really crucial to the American people and that have a real chance of passing in this House and in the Senate and be signed into law by the President, if only the Republican leadership would allow the legislation to be voted on in, to be brought to the floor and voted on in a fashion that most Members agree on, whether they happen to be Republican or Democrat.

One is the minimum wage increase and the other is health care reform legislation that was originally sponsored in the Senate by Senator KASSEBAUM and Senator KENNEDY, again on a bipartisan basis.

The minimum wage hike is long overdue. I know that my colleague from California on the other side said, well, why did not the Democrats do it 2 years ago or why did not such-and-such do it whenever. I am not really concerned about the past.

The reality is that we know there are an overwhelming majority in the House and in the Senate, both Democrats and Republicans, that would vote for this very simple minimum wage hike if they were given an opportunity to do so. And once again, this week in the other body, in fact, there was a vote, and efforts by the Republican leadership over there to try to put in what I would call poison-pill amendments that would have delayed implementation of the minimum wage hike or would have excluded small businesses so that half the people who now benefit from the minimum wage would not have gotten the increase. Those amendments were defeated overwhelmingly, again, on a bipartisan basis.

The only thing that is holding up this bill right now is because the Republican leadership in the other body has decided that they will not appoint conferees and links the appointment of conferees to conferees being appointed on the health care reform bill, the other bill I mentioned today.

Well, some of you may, my colleagues certainly know but I am not sure that the public knows what we mean when we talk about appointing conferees. This is when there is basically a meeting or negotiation between the two Houses on different bills. If you do not appoint the conferees and you do not bring the bill to the floor, the bill does not pass.