and neglect. I find it ironic that this goal can be included in their agenda and yet they propose to do absolutely nothing about health insurance for children.

Mr. Speaker, I believe the GOP needs to go back to the drawing board. It is incredible that a health plan for children did not make it into their agenda, and I hope, and we will continue to press, that they will change their minds and bring up legislation that addresses the issue of kids' health insurance.

WHY BALANCE THE BUDGET?

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from Florida [Mr. STEARNS] is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to address the most imperative issue facing this Nation, and, that is, the Federal budget.

The last time our Nation, the greatest Nation on Earth, balanced its books, Nixon was President, the first moon landing occurred, and the Mod Squad was a top TV show. It was 1969. And in the 28 years that followed, the Federal Government has spent almost $6 trillion more money than it has taken in. Put simply, this irresponsibility, this addiction to deficit spending, poses the greatest national threat to our future, to the financial security of our Nation, and to the economic well-being of our families. A balanced budget is not simply a desirable ideal. It is absolutely necessary.

And not simply because of our precarious situation as a Nation, but because putting a stop to deficit spending is good for all Americans. It means a lower cost of living, lower interest rates and a financially stable Government.

A study by McGraw Hill projects that a balanced budget would yield a 2-percent drop in interest rates. This means yearly savings of $1,230 on a $50,000 home loan, $200 on an auto loan, and $216 on a student loan. Perhaps even more important is the moral responsibility to stop robbing future generations of their opportunities and a chance to achieve prosperity. A child born today owes nearly $200,000 in taxes over his or her lifetime just to pay the interest on the national debt. Is such a crushing legacy something we want to leave to our children and our grandchildren?

It is important to note that balancing the Federal budget does not require drastic spending cuts or massive tax increases as many would have the American public believe. Instead it requires exercising common sense and leadership. I know that I have to stay within a budget in running my congressional office and caring for my family. This is nothing new. Most of us have to stay within our means. Why can the Federal Government not do the same thing? The truth is it can. Look at what we did in the 104th Congress. Over a 2-year span we reduced Federal spending by $53 billion from the level proposed by the President, not by slashing prudent and necessary Government programs but by eliminating 300 wasteful and duplicative programs, projects, and grants.

I cannot stress the following statement enough: Our national debt does not result from the American people being taxed too little, it is a product of Government that overspends.

Since 1981, there have been 19 separate tax increases, the largest being President Clinton's tax hike in 1993. Yet the debt continues to rise. Today Americans pay more in taxes than ever before in history. In fact the average American family pays 40 percent of its income in taxes. That is more than it spends on housing, food, and clothing combined. Taking more money from the taxpayers has not proven the ability for us to reduce our debt. It has, however, proven to increase the size of the Federal bureaucracy. We in Congress and in the White House have an obligation to serve the public interest, a responsibility to work toward a balanced budget while taking less money from hardworking Americans.

There is a right way and a wrong way to prepare our Nation for the next century. Following the right way, we should reach a balanced budget by the year 2002 and we should keep the budget balanced without tax hikes or gimmicks. We should provide permanent tax relief for families, and we should offer an honest means of extending the life of vital and important programs, like Medicare and Social Security. Earlier this year President Clinton submitted his budget proposal. Despite his claims and promises, his budget fell well short of these criteria.

First of all, the President's budget will not reach balance in 2002, or in any year before or after. Applying the methods used by Congress in making budget projections, Mr. Clinton's budget will be $69 billion in the red in 2002. In fact, he would have us run deficits in the $120-billion range until after he left office. Under his plan, an amazing 98 percent of the proposed spending reduction would occur in the years 2001 and 2002, when he has retired to Little Rock.

Shakespeare said it best over 400 years ago, ''Though it be honest, it is never good to bring bad news.'' True, President Clinton's budget deserves little praise, but this is not a case of partisan carping. Every President since President Nixon, Republican and Democrat, have at least put forth a proposal on paper that would achieve a balanced budget. Yet here we are today with a debt of almost $6 trillion.

Nevertheless, there is something that we can do to bring about economic sanity. Congress can pass the balanced budget amendment to the Constitution.

The fact that for over 20 years the temporary residents of the White House have offered plans to balance the budget underscores the need for this amendment. We must remove the concept from policy papers and the rhetoric of politicians and bureaucrats and instead place it in the Constitution of the United States. Rather than talking about eliminating deficit spending, let's do it. An amendment is the only way to ensure that Washington permanently changes its ways, to make the Government accountable for every one of your tax dollars, and to prevent the next generation from being saddled with the cost of our profligacy.

This is not a partisan issue. We must not be separated by party affiliation. We must come together and share a vision for our Nation's future.

Knowing that facts do not sustain their cause, supporters of the status quo will fall back on their most potent weapon—fear. President Clinton has already brandished this weapon through his partisan charge that the amendment is a threat to Social Security. But remember what the late Paul Tsongas had to say, ''I'm embarrassed as a Democrat to watch a Democratic President raise the scare tactics of Social Security to defeat the balanced budget amendment.''

Although I support taking Social Security off budget, the immutable truth is, the greatest threat to Social Security is the national debt itself. Of the 5.5 trillion dollars of debt, almost $600 billion is owed to the Social Security trust funds. If we do not balance the budget, that debt will double. Do you really think that if the Government goes bankrupt it can pay that $1.2 trillion debt back to the trust funds without hyperinflation or a depression? The future solvency of Social Security depends solely on putting our fiscal house in order—it depends on approving the balanced budget amendment.

This is not a time to stand helplessly to the side. This is one of those moments that will define our country's destiny. First and foremost, Congress and the President should come together to affect real and meaningful fiscal change and to bolster our efforts, we should feel obligated to send to the States the balanced budget amendment. Our future is at risk, and that means everything is at risk.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I earnestly urge Members to consider and vote for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution.

EQUALITY FOR PUERTO RICANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997 the gentleman from Puerto Rico [Mr. ROMERO-BARCELÓ] is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROMERO-BARCELÓ. Mr. Speaker, Wednesday, February 26 was a historic day. It was a historic day for the 3.8 million United States citizens of Puerto Rico and for our Nation as a whole.

On Wednesday, February 26, a group of more than 75 Members of Congress of both parties introduced H.R. 856, the United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act. It marked what I hope will be the beginning of the end of Puerto Rico's long journey toward enfranchisement and full self-government.

It was almost 100 years ago, in 1898, that Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the

United States as a result of the Spanish-American War.

In 1917 Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens, a citizenship that we have cherished and valued ever since and defended with our blood. In 1952 the island became a so-called Commonwealth of the United States, a change that did not affect the island's status as an unincorporated territory of the United States subject to the jurisdiction of Congress.

But if the Chinese proverb that a journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step is true, then the actions to finally decolonize and end the disenfranchisement of the United States citizens of Puerto Rico is merely the first step.

H.R. 856 is undoubtedly the most important step that we have taken in this journey to resolve the issue of political and economic inequality that has infused the people of Puerto Rico for the last 100 years.

I have devoted most of my adult life to this struggle and to leading my people in this long and treacherous journey. As former mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital city, as former Governor and now a Member of Congress, I have heard my people's voices and have shared their dreams and aspirations. These voices, questions, and aspirations resonate loudly in the island, although to most Americans living in the continental United States they may seem as distant echoes reflecting the deep unease and disenchantment with our current relationship.

College students in Puerto Rico ask me if our present status will deny them equal treatment in Federal education programs that they desperately need to succeed in today's competitive world. Young couples ask me why they have to move to the States in order to search for opportunities that are not available in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican veterans who have served the United States gallantly in all of the Nation's wars and conflicts in this century ask me why they cannot vote for the President that as Commander in Chief may also send their sons and daughters to fight and die in times of war. The elderly ask me why their health benefits and other support programs are less than if they resided in New York, Illinois, California, Florida, or any other State of the Union. I have heard the voice of a grandmother wondering why her son who died in Vietnam gave his life for a country that denies her and her grandchildren the right to participate on equal terms. The answer to this question is clear. We are unequals because we are not partners.

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We are unequals because we are submerged in a colonial relationship in which our economic, social, and political affairs are controlled to a large degree by a government in which we have no voting influence and in which we do not participate. We are unequals because we cannot vote for the President of the Nation of which we are citizens of and because we do not have a proportional and voting representation in the Congress that determines our rules of conduct and our future.

Mr. Speaker, this great Nation of ours, the example and inspiration of democracies throughout the world, the inspiration to the Chinese that revolted in Tiananmen, the inspiration of the revolt, the Hasidic Revolt in Poland, the inspiration of the unification of Germany, the inspiration of many other countries throughout the world, the inspiration of the peaceful revolt in Russia, cannot continue to uphold the policy that denies political participation and disenfranchises 3.8 million of its own citizens. We cannot continue to hide our heads in the sand like ostriches and pretend that nothing is happening. We are talking about the lives, the well-being, and the voting rights of 3.8 million U.S. citizens. We are not talking about illegal immigrants or legal residents. We are talking about U.S. citizens.

I am encouraged by the fact that we have been able to gather so much bipartisan support for this legislation in so little time. A similar version of this bill will be introduced in the Senate within the next weeks, and the support there seems to be as strong and as bipartisan as it is here in the House.

We are more than halfway through the 1990's, a decade that the United Nations General Assembly declared to be the international decade for the eradication of colonialism. Next year Puerto Rico will commemorate its 100th year as a United States colony. Should we celebrate or should we mourn? Will we see a silver lining in the sky by 1998 or will we see more of the same?

Our Nation cannot seek to promote and at times enforce democracy elsewhere in the world while it relegates 3.8 million of its own citizens to indefinite second class status, disenfranchised, discriminated against, and unable to exercise the most basic right in a democracy, the right to vote and participate in its government.

Mr. Speaker, to ignore the situation of Puerto Rico is to betray the spirit of our democratic values and traditions.

THE MILITARY VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1997

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997 the gentleman from Texas, [Mr. SAM JOHNSON] is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. SAM JOHNSON of Texas. Mr. Speaker, the voting rights of America's servicemen and servicewomen are being challenged. You know, in 1952, President Harry Truman said,

> Many of those in uniform are serving overseas or in parts of the country distant from their homes. If they are unable to return to their States, they are unable either to register or to vote. Yet these men and women who are serving their country and, in many cases risking their lives, deserve, above all others, the right to vote in an election year. At a time when these young people are defending our country and its free institutions, the least we can do at home is make sure they are able to enjoy the rights that they are being asked to fight to preserve.

Having been in the military, I can personally vouch for the importance of continuing the right of military personnel to vote in Federal, State, and local elections wherever they may be assigned in the world. During my 29 years in the Air Force, I often found myself thousands of miles away from my hometown of Plano, TX, but regardless of whether I was in Asia, Europe, or another far-off place, I was still a citizen of the United States and the State of Texas, and I shared the same interests and concerns as my fellow Texans.

Through my years in the military I saw countless acts of sacrifice by members of our Armed Forces to protect and ensure the rights of others less fortunate than us. I cannot imagine coming to a time in our history when someone would take action to deny the right of our servicemen and servicewomen to vote.

Unfortunately, that point was reached last November in Val Verde County in southern Texas when the votes of 800 military personnel were questioned in a general election. The margin in the sheriff's election was 257 votes, and for county commissioner it was 113. The Texas Rural Legal Aid has alleged that 800 military absentee ballots were improperly counted, and subsequently U.S. District Judge Fred Biery violated, in my view, the opinion and the will of the people and issued a preliminary injunction to prevent the sheriff and county commissioner from taking office. Texas Rural Legal Aid is a taxpayer funded group that is supposed to provide legal services for the poor. They receive about 80 percent of their funding from the Legal Services Corporation, an organization that is fully funded by U.S. taxpayers.

While the Legal Services Corporation's purpose is supposed to provide legal services to the poor, it is frequently embroiled in controversial cases which it works to advance liberal social policies. In fact, in this particular case the Legal Service Corporation efforts have been to the detriment of the poor, who are in need of legal help, but because they are so consumed with the Val Verde case, there is no one to offer legal services for those truly in need.

This raises a question: Does the taxpayer funded legal services agency have a political agenda? The lengths to which they are willing to go to make the case was illustrated in a 23-page questionnaire that was sent to all 800 military personnel whose ballots were rejected. They were instructed to return their notarized answers within 3 days.

The questionnaire is intrusive and totally out of line. It asked for personal information such as ''What is the