

bloody reprisals. Last week's optimism has yielded to this week's despair.

I urge President Bush to make it clear to both sides that the United States will continue to insist on the terms agreed to at the Aqaba summit, an end to the violence, the dismantling of the illegal outposts and the resumption of security cooperation. Clearly, Abu Mazen must do much more to stop terrorism. But it is obvious that he cannot stop the murderous Palestinian extremists without help from Israel. And Israel will never succeed in vanquishing terrorism through military force and continued occupation. A political solution is the only answer.

The road map to peace has hit a tremendous obstacle. But we have no choice but to persevere. If this initiative is destroyed, Israelis and Palestinians may be doomed to a life of violence and suffering forever. Such a fate is not what these two peoples deserve, and it is surely not what America can afford.

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

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

□ 1800

#### RUBBER-STAMPING TAX LEGISLATION

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

Mr. McDERMOTT. Mr. Speaker, tomorrow we are going to have another session of the rubber stamp Congress. There is an old song by Tennessee Ernie Ford that goes, "You load 16 tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt."

This Congress at a Committee on Rules meeting tonight, the Committee on Ways and Means chairman did not even show up. The bill was all greased. We are going to pass \$80 billion more of debt out of here tomorrow.

Now, the Democrats offered a bill that would have cost \$3.5 billion to take care of those people earning between \$10,500 and \$26,500.

When the Republicans got this bill, they said, Oh, boy; Let's go, and so they have crammed everything in it that President Bush wants. They are going to come down here, and we will have about an hour's debate, half an hour on the Democratic side, half an hour on the Republican side; and they will stamp that baby and out she goes. That is how this Congress is operating. Not one single hearing will have occurred on this bill, not one single hearing. \$80 billion in a half-hour.

Think about it. That is why my colleague, the gentleman from Mississippi (Mr. TAYLOR), came out here, to show the almost—\$1 trillion in debt that has been accumulated over the last 2 years

under this administration. Well, tomorrow we are going to add another layer of frosting on the cake, and everybody will come with their stamp in their hand and do it.

Now, we also had a discussion here with one of the gentlemen from Georgia who said next week we are going to deal with the issue of Medicare. There has been no bill put in the Congress for the single largest program in the Congress that the government runs, and that is the Medicare program. The Committee on Ways and Means that I sit on has had not a single hearing on the proposal that is being brought in here. It is being greased somewhere to take up to the Committee on Rules and run down here on the floor, and, in a couple of hours, everybody will bring their stamp out and go, Boom, I approve of everything George Bush does.

That is what this Congress is about, approving whatever George Bush does. Nothing else. There is no thinking going on in here. They just wait for their orders from the White House, go up to the Committee on Rules, slap the bill together, bring it to the floor, and stamp it "approved."

Now, that is no way for the United States Congress to operate. We were made in the first section of the Constitution because the founders of this country believed that the Congress was where the basis of our government should derive, that there should be discussion among the 535 Members of both bodies as to what is going to happen in this country.

But this time we are in a one-party government. It is a parliament with a fixed-end, and this party is President Bush, the Senate and the House; and they run them down here and run them through and stamp them, and that is the end of it.

Now, there is a serious problem in that kind of government, because it makes it very partisan. I was told that the Medicare bill is written, but that you have to ask the chairman to go up to a room and sit there and read it in the room. You cannot take it out; you cannot take it to your office. I am a Member of Congress. I was elected by 690,000 people, and so was every other Member. But I am not allowed to read the bill until the day they drop it up here in the committee and ram it through the House in 24 hours.

People I go home to, they say, What is in the bill, Jim? What does this do, what does that do?

I do not know. And it is not because I will not read or I am not smart or I will not work or I will not do what has to be done, but this is the way this place is being run. People are not being given a chance to discuss this.

We have got an even bigger issue, and that is the whole issue of how we got into war. Everywhere in Great Britain right now the belief is that Tony Blair is toast. The liberals are calling for an inquiry. And this House will not do it, because the Republicans have rubber-stamped what we did. "I approve of Mr. Bush."

#### SHORTCHANGING VETERANS

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

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I am a new Member of this body, I was just sworn in in January, and as a new Member there is a certain awe to this Chamber, a certain awe to the legislative process and the idea of priorities. You come into this body with the notion of certain priorities that are not Democratic, they are not Republican but they are priorities of the American people.

Unfortunately, it did not take very long for me to recognize that we all do not share the same priorities. We can talk about tax cuts, and we can talk about deficits, and we can talk about our debt; but you just do not have tax cuts without some reaction somewhere down the line in the budget, and I wanted to speak tonight to share with the American people and share with my colleagues my own personal experience that I had over the last few weeks, really since Memorial Day, back in my district, which is northeastern Ohio, Youngstown and Akron, Ohio, and everywhere in between, the cities of Niles and Warren, where there is a strong concentration of veterans.

The reason I rise tonight is to share for the record the feelings, the emotions of the people back in my district. Let me just say, quite frankly, that they are tired of the public relations gimmicks, they are tired of the press conferences, they are tired of the salutations to the veterans. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, their budgets are being cut for the veterans, we are not able to service all the veterans that are beginning to move into the VA system, and we are spending our tax money, and borrowing more money, to give back, when we are cutting short what the veterans deserve.

About 3 months ago or so we passed a resolution out of this body saying that we have unequivocal support and appreciation for our troops. Unequivocal. But for the veterans, we are going to cut your budget.

We just had a Committee on Veterans Affairs meeting. I have been fortunate to serve on the Committee on Veterans Affairs. Here are the President's recommendations to save money at the VA: first, annual fees for some Category 7 veterans; annual fees for all Category 8 veterans; the co-pay went from just a couple of dollars to \$7 for prescription drugs, and now it is going to go, I believe the proposal is, from \$7 to \$15.

Mr. Speaker, I think in this country we are beginning to recognize that the leadership down here is not addressing the problems of our veterans. We are not taking care of those people who we sent to hell, where they lost limbs, had their health damaged for the rest of their lives. And now one proposal is to say if your disability is service-related under 30 percent, that we are no longer going to cover you.

Where are the priorities in this Chamber, where are the priorities in this country, when we stop respecting our veterans? That is the question that we have, that is the question that the American people want answered, and that is what the veterans in the 17th Congressional District want answered. When did we stop respecting our soldiers?

We pass resolutions, we thank, we do press conferences, we turn the PR machines on; but meanwhile, we have veterans that we have not taken care of. The ones I can speak of in northeast Ohio are extremely upset. We talk about tax cuts; but as Tom Friedman talked about today in *The New York Times*, the reality is, it is service cuts, and, unfortunately, in America we have shown that the priorities are not the veterans.

I had an old law school professor that said follow the money and you will follow the priorities. The money is being cut from the veterans, and that shows us that the priorities here in this body and in this country are not for the veterans, but they are for those people who are going to be getting the big tax cuts. It is not a Democrat or Republican thing, and we are all for tax cuts, we all want to give money back, but not at the expense of the veterans who have fought to give us the freedoms that we enjoy today.

#### BEING FAIR TO VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I was hoping that my colleague would remain in the Chamber for the next hour while we talk a little bit about exactly what the Committee on Veterans Affairs has done and the discussion of the cuts that are being made to the veterans budget. We will get into that a little bit later. But tonight I want to talk about something called SBP, and we will discuss it in great length. But I want to introduce you to somebody first. Her name is Dottie Welch.

Dottie's story goes something like this: When Lt. Colonel Roger Welch of the United States Army retired and signed up for the military survivor benefit plan, better known now as SBP, years ago, he was told that in the event of his death, SBP would pay his wife, Dottie, 55 percent of his retirement pay for the rest of her life.

When he signed an irrevocable agreement to pay annually-increasing SBP premiums for the rest of his life, he did not know that his wife's future SBP benefit actually would be one-third less than what they were led to believe.

When Roger died in June of 2002, Dottie was dismayed to learn that there would be an offset, an offset based on her husband's Social Security-

covered military earnings, that would reduce her benefits. With Social Security survivor benefits and the reduced SBP annuity, her total income is \$384 a month less than she and Roger thought she would have to live on.

Dottie thinks the Social Security offset is just plain wrong. No one will tell her why it is there and why it is so large. Her husband, Roger, only had 5 years of military service covered by Social Security.

Dottie Welch's case highlights one significant inequity of the military SBP and the reason why so many retirees and survivors are upset about its current situation.

Unfortunately, this is only the first of several ways that Uniform Service Survivor Benefits relative to premiums being paid fall far short of what retirees and survivors were promised and what is afforded survivors of other Federal retirees.

There are three major SBP inequities. But before I go into those inequities tonight, I would like to pause for a moment and recognize my good friend from South Carolina (Mr. WILSON), who has been a stalwart supporter of the veterans of this country.

I yield to the gentleman.

Mr. WILSON of South Carolina. Mr. Speaker, it is an honor to be here tonight to join my friend, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MILLER), who has authored H.R. 548, the Military Survivors Benefit Improvement Act of 2003. The gentleman is a champion of veterans and veterans' spouses because his Pensacola community has some of the highest concentrations of veterans in America. I am particularly happy to see his efforts, because I am a veteran myself.

Under the current plan, thousands of retirees and spouses who enrolled in the original survivors benefit plan have come to receive approximately 23 percent less coverage than they had initially anticipated. Since its inception, the government's cost share has steadily dwindled from 40 percent to 17 percent. It is our intention to revise the plan in order to reinstate the original coverage offered by the 1972 version of the survivor benefits plan.

□ 1815

I believe there is no better way to convey the importance of this legislative revision than to examine the hardships felt by a South Carolina family who put their trust and their money in the original version of the 1972 survivors benefit plan.

Donna Fleming of Mt. Pleasant in Charleston County, South Carolina, became a widow in 1998. Her husband had served in the United States Army and upon retirement had sought the benefits of SBP. Like many Americans enrolled in the plan, the couple was unaware of the age 62 offset benefit reduction provision, and were subsequently confronted with the news of the offset years later.

Donna's husband has since passed, and she has managed to meet her daily

expenses through SBP, occasionally dipping into her savings for major bills. However, Donna will soon be 62, and still has not received notification as to the exact amount of the offset. She expects that it may be more than \$6,000 a year, \$500 a month. She then will be forced to draw from her savings more and more.

Mr. Speaker, this is not the intent of the original legislation. It is every family's fear that their loved ones may face financial hardship following their death, and in Donna's case, that fear has become reality. In her words, "This country owes military families, for which they have dedicated their entire lives."

Please join us in supporting H.R. 548, the Military Survivors Benefit Improvement Act of 2003. Join us in restoring justice for those enrolled in this plan for our Nation's military personnel, their devoted spouses, and their loving families.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I thank my good friend, the gentleman from South Carolina (Mr. WILSON), for his comments and his support of veterans' issues. I also wish to add my congratulations and best wishes to him as he very soon becomes one of those retirees after serving many years in the Army Guard in his home State.

Mr. Speaker, there are three major SBP inequities. One is that thousands of people who bought SBP coverage were not briefed that most survivors' SBP annuities would be reduced substantially after age 62; two, the 40 percent government subsidy envisioned by Congress and touted by the services to encourage retirees' participation has plunged to 17 percent; three, the government provides Federal civilian survivors a substantially higher share of retired pay for life with no benefit reduction at any age.

The impact of these inequities is, as Members can imagine, devastating to many survivors, because SBP is not exactly a king's ransom at 55 percent of retired pay. At 35 percent, SBP provides only a poverty level or lower annuity for most survivors, even those of relatively senior officers.

So I am here tonight to provide more specifics on how the military SBP program is not providing, is not providing the level of protection military survivors need and deserve and were expecting; and why my bill, H.R. 548, the Military Survivors Benefit Improvement Act of 2003, is what is needed now to fix the current problem.

The first issue that we need to discuss tonight is something that I call the benefit reduction shock. It is incredulous to many that such an important feature of SBP, the reduced age 62 annuity that applies to the vast majority of military survivors, was never explained to retirees being asked to sign up for the program in the seventies and in the early eighties, but it is true.

I have in my hand a copy of the actual SBP Election Form 5002 signed by a retired member in 1982 in two different places. It specifies that SBP will