We tried to do this last year. The President threatened to veto the bill. He said we cannot simply afford to take care of those veterans. We can afford as much or more per year to exempt people who earn dividends on stock. We can afford as much or more per year to give millionaires an average of $93,000 each in tax relief, but somehow we cannot afford that for our disabled veterans.

In fact, for the lifetime of these veterans, it would cost $40 billion. Now, that is still a lot of money here. That is almost half as much money as the Congress borrowed just the other day to send to Iraq. That is a lot of money. But somehow the President says we cannot afford $40 billion to deliver on our promises to these veterans for their lifetime for their disabilities.

There are, in fact, in the House 373 cosponsors of the bill. Then what is the problem? That is almost the entire House of Representatives on the bill. Well, the Republican leadership is the problem. They will not let the bill come up. And, of course, the President is a problem because he is threatening to veto the bill because we cannot afford to take care of these disabled veterans.

Now, there is a way to bring a bill to the floor when the Republican leaders refuse to bring a bill to do away with the disability tax on veterans. It is called a discharge petition. Need 218 people to sign it. Force the bill to the floor of the House over the objections of the Republican leadership. 203 people have signed it. Only two of those are Republicans. There are 158 Republicans who put their name on this bill, go home and tell their disabled veterans they want to help them, but they will not sign the discharge petition. They will not force the bill to the floor of the House.

Now, that would be a wonderful gift for our veterans for Veterans' Day if just another 15 Republicans who are cosponsors of the bill, claiming credit for it, have the guts to come down here and sign the petition, which is right behind me, to recognize our veterans properly for their service to our Nation. Now that would be a real Veterans' Day celebration.

THE CRISIS OF THE VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

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

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I would like to talk about the trend that we are seeing from this administration when it comes to protecting our troops and caring for our veterans. As more and more Americans are coming to understand, the VA health care system is in a crisis. Veterans are waiting months for appointments, and some are being turned away when they go to enroll in the system.

The bottom line here is funding, obviously. If we want the VA to provide the veterans with quality care, then we need to recognize and address this funding problem.

There are two things that we can do. We can appropriate the money that is needed, or we can refuse to put the needed funds into the system and instead throw the burden on the backs of the veterans themselves.

Sadly, the second option is what this administration has chosen to do over the last 2½ years. I would like to describe a pattern of behavior that is coming from this administration. In February of 2002, this administration, through the VA, increased the veterans prescription drug copayment from $2 to $7 a prescription. Now, for veterans who are living on fixed incomes, many who take 8 or 10 or more prescriptions in a month, this is a tremendous financial burden. That was in February of 2002.

In July of 2002, this administration, through its VA, issued a gag order. The VA deputy secretary issued a memo that instructed all VA network directors to halt outreach activities aimed at encouraging new veterans to come in for services. Instead, providing the resources necessary, the VA says to their doctors, their social workers, their nurses, you can no longer actively inform veterans of what they are entitled to receive. They even went so far as to tell these doctors they could not participate in a community health fair. That was in July of 2002.

Well, in January of 2003, the VA decided they were going to create a new category of veterans. They called them Priority 8 veterans. These are veterans who served honorably. Many of them are combat-decorated veterans.

□ 2000

And the VA is saying to this group, you are out of here. Do not come to us. You can no longer enroll in the VA health care system because you make too much money.

Well, the American people need to know that those of us who serve in this Chamber make about $155,000 a year and a combat-decorated veteran can make as little as $24,000 a year, and the VA is saying to you, you can no longer participate in VA health care. Think about that. We make $155,000, a veteran who served honorably, perhaps even in combat, can make as little as $24,000 a year and this administration says they are high income, so you cannot participate. I think that is shameful, quite frankly. Shameful.

Well, that was in January of 2003. You see the pattern? Episode after episode of the VA doing things that are harmful to the veteran.

Well, then in January 2003, the President sent his budget request to us. And in the President's budget request, he suggested that we not charge a veteran $7 for each prescription but that that be increased to $15 a prescription.

Now, think about that. At a time when we are preparing to send our young men and women into battle, the President rewards our veterans by asking that their prescription drug costs be increased from $7 to $15 a prescription. It gets worse. In that same budget request coming from the President, he asked that there be a new annual enrollment fee imposed upon Category 7 and 8 veterans of $250 a year. I just think this is outrageous. The veterans of this country are coming to understand who their friends are. And how can this administration claim to be a friend of the veteran and at the same time put these increasingly onerous financial burdens upon them.

Well, I want to talk about one other issue this evening with the time I have left. A few months ago, I received a letter from a soldier in Iraq who was concerned that his troops had not been provided basic, modern bulletproof vests, but instead were issued Vietnam-era flak jackets. The flak jackets are designed to protect against slower moving shrapnel and are incapable of stopping high-velocity projectiles such as bullets from assault weapons, and we sent our soldiers into battle in Iraq without this most basic protection. Shame on us.

PERMISSION TO HAVE UNTIL 6 A.M. FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2003 TO FILE CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 1588, NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2004

Mr. BEREUTER. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that the managers on the part of the House may have until 6 a.m. Friday, November 7, 2003, to file a conference report on the bill, (H.R. 1588) to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2004 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe personnel strengths for such fiscal year for the Armed Forces, and for other purposes.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. PEARCE). Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Nebraska?

There was no objection.

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

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

CARING FOR OUR VETERANS

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

Mr. MILLER of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, others have spoken tonight on specific issues before Congress that affect our Nation's veterans. I rise to say how proud I am of the men and women now serving in our Nation's Armed Forces in Iraq.