

that they brought suit against the Iraqi Government. And they laid claim on the right to compensation, and it has been reported that our government had some \$1 billion, perhaps even more than \$1 billion which we had frozen. These were Iraqi Government assets which had been frozen, and these American ex-POWs having been tortured at the hands of the Iraqi regime asked the courts to grant them compensation. And lo and behold the courts, my understanding is, made the right decision and said that they were entitled to compensation. And they were hoping to be compensated from these frozen Iraqi funds. And lo and behold, and this is almost shocking, I believe, the Bush administration opposed these ex-POW American veterans from receiving compensation from the Iraqi Government, although we had the funds that could have been used to compensate them.

Those funds, it is reported in the press, those funds have now been sent back to Iraq for the rebuilding of Iraq. Now, the question that I would ask the President is why would this administration support the compensating of Iraqi prisoners who were held in an American prison and were subject to abuse and would oppose compensation for American soldiers who were held in an Iraqi prison and abused? It just seems like a double standard that is difficult to explain. And so I believe the American people should be aware of this. And they should hold this administration accountable.

If the Iraqi prisoners who were abused should be compensated, then certainly the American prisoners who were held by the Iraqi Government and subjected to terrible abuse, they should be compensated as well.

I think this is a stark contradiction, but I do not think it is inconsistent with the way this administration has treated veterans when it comes to other benefits, and we will be talking about that a little later. But I felt like this situation was egregious enough, the contrast was stark enough that the American people should be aware of it.

CARING FOR OUR VETERANS

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

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I rise tonight with my two friends, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN) from Niles in northeast Ohio and the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) from a district that runs from Portsmouth, along south from the Ohio River, up east including parts of Mahoning County near Youngstown. We will talk about the treatment of veterans in this country and the problems that we have seen, and the strength of the veterans administration, the good things it has done but how it really has fallen short, a Fed-

eral agency that has done remarkably good work for so many, but fallen woefully short in the last couple of years.

I want to continue the theme that the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. PALLONE) mentioned, the gentleman from Washington (Mr. MCDERMOTT), others, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. PELOSI) earlier this week, Are you better off today than you were 4 years ago? And I think this theme particularly is reinforced when asking about veterans. Are veterans in this country today better off today than they were 4 years ago?

And I think we will see as the evening goes on in the next 30, 40, 50 minutes or an hour, how the veterans really have been shortchanged by this administration, how the Veterans Administration does not work as well as it did. Our benefits to veterans are not nearly as adequate, never really generous, as they used to be. I want to talk about that, whether veterans are better off today than they were 4 years ago.

As I said, I am joined by the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN) and the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND). Last week Secretary Principi and President Bush announced that they would close three Veterans Administration hospitals in the United States: one in Mississippi; one in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area; and one in Brecksville, Ohio in northeast Ohio. The Ohio facility serves 48,000 veterans in our region of northeast Ohio.

I find it ironic and a little sorrowful that as we head into Memorial Day next week, as we prepare to dedicate the World War II memorial, that the President and Secretary Principi and his administration announce plans to close VA hospitals. Prior to Secretary Principi's announcement, I, along with the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) and the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN) sent a letter to the Secretary asking him not to close the Brecksville hospital.

Our letter echoed the sentiment of more than 5,000 veterans who signed petitions; it echoed the sentiment of several thousand more who came to rallies and meetings and wrote us letters and made phone calls to us saying this VA hospital in Brecksville, one of the best in the country, treating homeless veterans, a model for the country in treating veterans with mental illness, protesting that this hospital be closed.

I met with hundreds of local veterans who voiced their opposition, as has the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) and as has the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN). Instead of listening to the men and women who served this Nation, the administration is foisting upon American veterans a plan that will force them to travel further and wait longer for health services they depend on.

□ 2115

In the case of Brecksville, they are closing a facility with a leading rep-

utation for mental health services, and for the last 43 years Brecksville has pioneered innovative, nationally recognized programs and services for homeless vets and veterans with mental illnesses.

Since 1971, Brecksville has offered inpatient mental health services, including acute substance abuse treatment and acute and long-term psychiatric care, to veterans from all 50 States.

We are creating new veterans. The irony of closing these three hospitals, the irony of cutting veterans benefits, health and education benefits, which has happened in this House of Representatives on this floor and with this President, the irony of doing that, the irony of closing these hospitals that lead up to Memorial Day is every day we are creating more veterans in this country as soldiers return from Iraq, sometimes with scars, emotional scars, physical scars, mental scars, where they really do need treatment.

Approximately one-third of the adult homeless population served their country in the armed services. On any given day, as many as a quarter million male and female veterans are living on the streets or in shelters, and perhaps twice as many experience homelessness at some point during the course of the year.

For many homeless and mentally ill veterans who struggle with local public transportation, closing Brecksville will double, even triple, the number of miles they will be forced to travel.

The administration made big promises to American veterans. George Bush can hardly go anywhere without singing the praises of our men and women in uniform, even though, as the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) has pointed out many times on the floor, they sing their praises but do not provide them with safe drinking water, did not provide our soldiers with body armor, do not outfit our Humvees with metal plate armor underneath the Humvees and on the door of the Humvees, so that they are much more dangerous.

There is hardly a day goes by that the President does not in one of his fund-raising speeches around the country, which are almost daily, that he does not, the President, sing the praises of our veterans.

At the same time, this administration has cut veterans benefits, cut education and health care benefits, raised the price of prescription drugs, and now, strike three, is closing these three hospitals which are serving hundreds of thousands of veterans.

When I think about a veteran in my district who originally was paying a relatively small copayment per drug per month, that copayment has tripled, and now the administration wants to double that copayment again. It is just amazing to me the President of the United States would do that in a time of war.

It is especially amazing when you look at the price of drugs in Canada,

the price of drugs in France, in Germany and around the world, how much less drugs cost in those countries. In fact, every once in a while I have taken, over the last 6 years, busloads of seniors to Canada to buy less expensive drugs, but how can you look a veteran in the eye and say, Hey, you ought to go to Canada and buy your prescription drugs? How can you tell a veteran he or she should go to Canada and buy their prescription drugs because they are cheap?

Under this administration, a third of America's veterans have unprocessed claims, and 130,000 veterans are waiting for appeals decisions.

New enrollment fees and increased costs of prescription drugs will cost veterans \$2 billion over the next 5 years.

This administration is opposed to the renewal of imminent danger pay for families of active duty soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Think of that. The administration and the Secretary of the VA sing the praise of American soldiers, and then oppose giving those soldiers a little extra money when they are in the face of danger in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We are spending \$1.5 billion a week in Iraq turning our young men and women into veterans. We ought to be able to ensure when they come home that they receive the best health care. Our veterans deserve better.

It begs the question earlier, are veterans better off than they were 4 years ago? I think when you look at what this administration has done with soldiers and with veterans, it is a decided no.

I yield to my friend from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND).

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my friend, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN), and I look forward to hearing in a moment from another gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN), but the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) said something that triggered a recollection that I want to share with him.

I had said earlier here on the floor that this administration apparently wants to compensate Iraqi prisoners who were abused in the prison in Baghdad, and I understand why Secretary Rumsfeld has reached that conclusion, but I also pointed out that I was puzzled that the administration, on the other hand, was opposing American POWs who had been held in captivity in Iraq during the first Gulf War getting compensation from the Iraqi Government. So there seems to be a double standard.

On the one hand, the administration is willing to compensate the Iraqi prisoners who were abused and opposes the American prisoners who were abused from getting compensation. But there is a second contradiction, a second example of where this administration seems to favor people in Iraq versus the good old, homegrown American.

An example is the fact that just last week it was reported that, back in De-

ember, Paul Bremer, who is our point man in Iraq, had gone to the Department of Labor and secured \$5 million, and this was \$5 million that the Congress had no awareness of, in order to pay unemployment compensation to former Iraqi soldiers. These were Iraqi soldiers who were no longer working as soldiers.

And so this administration got \$5 million in order to pay them unemployment compensation at the very same time that the administration, for months now, has been fighting extending unemployment compensation to unemployed Americans.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I would add that there are 50,000 Ohioans alone who have seen their unemployment benefits expire in the last 6 months, 1 million Americans. These are people looking for a job, playing by the rules, but cannot find a job.

The President said the economy is growing. We heard our friend from Iowa and the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. PORTMAN) saying things are great, jobs are coming back, the economy is great. Well, 50,000 Ohioans cannot get their unemployment benefits.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, one other point I pointed to throughout was a discrepancy between the administration's wanting to compensate abused Iraqi prisoners and not compensate America's abused prisoners; and then I pointed out that it sought money to pay unemployment compensation to unemployed Iraqis while fighting extending unemployment benefits to Americans.

There is a third example of how the administration is favoring the Iraqis over Americans, and that is the fact that in Iraq we have promised Iraqi citizens health care. We have said that we are going to provide universal health care to the Iraqi citizens, while we have got millions, some 44 million Americans, with no health coverage, and we have got Americans who are losing their health coverage on a daily basis, and yet this administration seems to not care about that at all.

So here are three clear-cut examples of where this administration has a double standard and where this administration is willing to put resources into Iraqis and into Iraq, while refusing to help the people right here at home who are in desperate need of help.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. I thank my friend, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND), for his comments, and I yield to the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN).

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, if people were just watching this and just tuned in and they hear us talk about some of these issues, I mean we go back to our districts every week and we talk to people who are not engaged in the day-to-day debates that we have here.

You would think we are making this up, because it goes on and on and on and on, and you would think that the

Democrats are just playing partisan politics. But if you just clearly look at the facts, you will find that we are not making this up, and you may come to understand as you listen to a lot of the special orders, you listen to the 1-minute speeches, you listen to the debate on the House floor, why some of us are so outraged at what is happening here.

With the veterans' issues that we are talking about and closing down of the facility in Brecksville, Ohio, which many of the veterans in my district go to for service; and they are moving it into downtown Cleveland into Wade Park. We are asked to support this move because the administration has told us that there will be no decline in the service, there will be more services. There will be more services; it will be better for everybody.

I hate to be the guy to spoil the party, but this administration does not have a very good track record on keeping their promises, and whether you go to Iraq, whether you go to their economic policy, the domestic policy, No Child Left Behind, promises to veterans, promises for Pell Grants, whatever it has been, they have not lived up to the promises they have made.

So why should the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN), the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN), the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND), the Congressman down in Mississippi, the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. DOYLE), why should we take this administration at their word that they are going to take care of our veterans? Because they have not; they have not with our soldiers, they have not with our Reservists. And so we are here tonight, I think in part, to hold their feet to the fire and to question the kind of leadership that they are getting.

One or two points that I just want to make: The Secretary of Veterans Affairs has said that the budget that is coming out of this, that the budget, not that the President recommended, is \$1.5 billion short, billion with a "B", short of what is needed. The veterans organizations have said that the President's request is \$3 billion short of what they need.

Now, is the veterans organization too high and the Democrats too high? I do not think so, but at the very least, the administration should at least follow the lead of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, who says \$1.5 billion more to meet the needs.

For this administration to continue its shortsighted approach, along with all of its domestic policies, this one is what kills me, and especially because the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) has spent so much in the health care field in understanding the needs for investment.

There is a \$50 million cut in the award-winning VA medical prosthetic research and development program. Now, here is an award-winning program that is developing prosthetics for amputees, the best around; and we

have soldiers in Iraq right now that are losing arms and legs as we speak, and we are cutting funding for the research and development of better prosthetics.

It continues, it continues, it continues; and it is just the shortsightedness that this administration has. To do it for young kids, to do it for the poor, to do it for the uninsured is shameful, but to do it to the veterans who have given us this system that we have here today, I think it is especially shameful.

I am glad to join you here tonight to continue this conversation.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. The gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN), my friend, was mentioning that people watching this at home just sometimes might think it is almost like we are making this up, this could not be like this. Why would people do these kinds of things?

Why would President Bush talk such a good game about the military? He was in the military, and remember when he landed on the ship and was in his flight suit, and he certainly showed the American people that he was one of the military, but why would he then turn around and make these cuts? But these are political choices.

I mean, we sit in this body, the 435 of us, we come down to the House floor with this little plastic card and we vote "yes" or "no" on issues. This is a question. Government is about making choices. We decide. What do we do about prescription drugs, what do we do about Medicare, and what do we do about the environment?

Well, the Congress has made a series of choices about tax cuts and the budget and expenditure of money, and this Congress and this President who has pushed this Congress, and the Congress pretty much rubber-stamps, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. DELAY) pretty much rubber-stamps what the President wants. This Congress made a choice.

If you make \$1 million a year, you get a \$123,000 tax cut. If you are worth \$100 million and you pass away, rather than \$30 or \$40 million of that going to the government, now, under Republican plans, even though that is only one-half of 1 percent of the public that would pay this tax, that has been eliminated.

So when somebody that makes \$1 million pays a tax of \$123,000 and no longer pays it, then that money has got to come from somewhere. So what happens is Congress makes a choice. Do you give that millionaire, the guy making a million, do you give them the \$123,000 tax cut, and when you do it, it means you have got to cut veterans benefit? Or do you not give him the tax cut and fund these veterans' programs?

Clearly, my Republican friends have made the decision, as has President Bush, to give the millionaire the \$123,000 tax cut and to deny veterans health care benefits, education benefits, raised their prescription drug costs, closed the Brecksville Hospital and Pittsburgh Hospital and Mississippi Hospital.

These are choices that people make. That is why we hold elections. The voters will say, Yeah, we like it that George Bush gives a millionaire a \$123,000 tax cut and cuts veterans benefits; or they will say, We should not give these tax cuts to the super-wealthy. Instead we should meet our commitments on health care and education.

I had a group of people come into my office today, and it is a little off the subject, not much, a group of people with Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS, and this government has refused to fund research the way we have been funding it the last 4 or 5 years.

□ 2130

And the question, again, is: Do you give a millionaire a tax cut of \$123,000 or do you fund programs in research and development that really are going to make wonderful scientific discoveries and save lives?

To me, the answer is pretty clear. To my friends on the other side of the aisle it is equally clear, but they have a different viewpoint. I am not saying they are immoral or sleazy. I am just saying they made the choice that they would rather give a millionaire a tax cut than to fund veterans benefits, than to keep Brecksville open. They would rather give a tax cut to the wealthiest 5 percent. Not somebody making \$50,000 or \$100,000. I am talking about people making \$1 million a year, to give tax cuts to them; and when they do, we end up closing VA hospitals, we end up cutting veterans health care benefits, we end up cutting veterans education programs, and we end up with State university tuitions going up through the roof, at Ohio State, at Kent State, and Akron U and all over.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Ohio.

Mr. STRICKLAND. I thank my friend for yielding, Mr. Speaker, and I think the most important thing we do is to make choices. That is the most important function of a legislator is to make choices, to decide how we are going to use the people's resources, what is going to get supported and what will not get supported.

The gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN) said earlier that folks watching may think we are making this up because it sounds so outlandish, why would an administration favor Iraqi prisoners over American prisoners, and why would some of these terrible decisions be made. And it is almost as if it is so bad it must not be true.

But I want to share a letter here which each Member of this Chamber received from four veteran service organizations. I am talking about the AMVETS, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the National Legislative Director for the Disabled American Veterans, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. They sent to us this letter. Every Member in this Chamber got this letter as we were considering the budget reso-

lution, which laid out how much we were going to be willing to spend for our veterans. I just want to read a passage from that letter, which we all received:

"On behalf of the coauthors of the independent budget," and the independent budget was created by these veteran organizations, so, "On behalf of the coauthors of the independent budget, the AMVETS, the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, we are writing to urge you to oppose and vote against H. Con. Res. 393, the House budget resolution for fiscal year 2005."

And then they continue: "Passage of the budget resolution as presented would be a disservice to those men and women who have served this country and are currently serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the world in our fight against terrorism."

Now, those words did not come from the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN) or the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN), or the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND). Those words came from these veteran service organizations, these organizations whose sole purpose is to look out for what is right for the veterans of this country.

And so this administration has a credibility problem. And it is fine to salute the flag, it is fine to walk around on an aircraft carrier, it is fine to stand and get your picture made with veterans; but what really counts here is how we spend our resources. And the fact is that our veterans are being shortchanged by this President and by this administration. It is as simple as that. They are not putting resources into veterans health care, the resources that are needed even to maintain the current level of services.

I think we should be expanding services. I think we should get rid of this prohibition on priority 8 veterans being excluded from VA health care. But that is not what I am talking about here. I am talking about just having enough money to maintain our current level of services. And even with the President's budget, he was asking in that budget that additional financial burdens be placed upon the backs of our veterans. The President actually sent us a budget that said that veterans should have to pay \$15 a prescription rather than \$7 a prescription.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman will yield on that point, because this is an important point to make.

Mr. STRICKLAND. I certainly will.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Everyone who in some way receives some kind of public assistance, whether it is the veterans, or No Child Left Behind, or people going to school, everyone, Medicare, all the social programs that we have been asked to make some kind of sacrifice. The only people who have not been asked to make any sacrifice at all are the wealthiest people in our society.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Absolutely.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. They have been asked to make no sacrifice at all, and these gentlemen were talking before we got up here, about an hour ago, and they said, quote, and I wrote it down, "Republicans will not raise taxes." And I think there were two words left out of that. Republicans will not raise taxes, well, maybe three words, on the rich.

Mr. STRICKLAND. On the rich, that is right. Excuse me, but they are raising taxes or causing taxes to be raised on the working folks of this country.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Absolutely.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, if you go to Ohio, we now pay more taxes in Ohio in part because of the cuts that have been made at the Federal Government level. And across this country working people are paying more in property taxes, they are paying more in excise taxes, they are just paying more in taxes in general while the folks at the very top, and as my friend, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN), said, we are talking about millionaires, we are not talking about the family that makes a couple hundred thousand dollars a year. We are talking about the millionaires.

Tonight, in Iraq, we have soldiers sacrificing and their families back here at home are sacrificing. And I want to tell you, they are about the only ones sacrificing, because this President is not asking anything from anybody except our soldiers and their families. In wars past, we have paid for those wars. What we are doing is passing the cost of this war on to the next generation. It is a rather shameful set of circumstances that our country faces today.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. If the gentleman will yield, Mr. Speaker, the ultimate irony of this whole deal, and this job provides a lot of opportunities to have some very great moments, very sentimental moments, and one I remember distinctly is when we walked into the Cannon caucus room and we were having a veterans' hearing for their budget. All the veteran organizations were there and filled this huge, beautiful room. They were in wheelchairs, on crutches, bent, amputees, just sacrifice written all over their face. Those are the veterans who have created and protected the system, the democratic and capitalistic system that we have right now and that allows people to create wealth for themselves.

The fundamental aspect of this system is to have a strong economic and democratic system which has been given to us by these veterans. And these people who are benefiting from this system have not been asked to sacrifice. I just wanted to make that point.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Reclaiming my time, Mr. Speaker, I think we have established pretty well tonight why Republican leaders and George Bush do this, why they have made these cuts in veterans benefits, why they made cuts

to close the Brecksville Hospital. It is a question of choices they have made between giving a \$123,000 tax cut to a millionaire or funding these programs.

The second question to ask, as we examine the whole question of are we better off, are veterans better off today or the American people better off today than they were 4 years ago, is to the look at how all this happened.

The three of us, joined by 400 of our colleagues, sat in this Chamber in the middle of the night, month after month after month, passing some of the worst legislation, legislation that my friends in the Republican leadership do not want people to see, so we passed these bills literally in the middle of the night, after midnight; and I want to talk about a couple of them.

Starting a year ago, starting literally 14 months ago, at 2:54 a.m. on a Friday in March, the House cut veterans benefits by three votes. At 2:39 a.m. on a Friday in April the House slashed education and welfare by five votes. At 1:56 a.m. on a Friday in May, the House passed the leave-no-millionaire-behind tax cut by a handful of votes. At 2:33 on a Friday in June, Republicans boarded the midnight express and passed the Medicare privatization prescription drug bill by one vote. At 12:57 a.m. on a Friday in July, the Republicans again boarded the midnight express and eviscerated Head Start by one vote. Then, after returning from summer recess, after the August recess, at 12:12 a.m. on a Friday in October, the GOP again boarded the midnight express and voted \$87 billion for Iraq. Two months later, again in the middle of the night, the Medicare bill passed. The debate started at midnight, the vote started at 3 a.m. Normally, the vote takes 20 or 30 minutes. The roll call stayed open until 6 a.m. It was a 3-hour vote.

In every single case, these bills were passed after the press had gone home and people had turned their television sets off, those watching C-SPAN, and the country had gone to bed. So not only are they passing legislation that cuts veterans benefits, legislation that discriminates against veterans, proposals that shut down hospitals and cut back drug benefits and reduce education benefits for veterans, they are doing it, and again this is not made up, it is documented in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, they are doing this in the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness, as they board the midnight express.

So the public does not see this. By the time it gets in the paper on Saturday, it is old news. It is a couple of days later. It is never on the front page, and the public only learns about it when they realize their veterans' benefits have been cut again by the Bush administration.

Mr. STRICKLAND. If my friend will yield, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. I yield to my friend from Ohio.

Mr. STRICKLAND. The gentleman is absolutely correct that much of this is

being done in this Chamber well after midnight, when most Americans are asleep and the press is not here, with the hope that the American people will not really fully understand what has been done.

But I am encouraged, because as I go back to my district and I talk to my veterans, as I travel across Ohio and I talk to veterans, I think the veterans get it. They understand. They understand their efforts to raise the cost of their prescription drugs; they understand that the President wants to impose a user fee, an annual user fee of \$250 on many of our veterans; they understand that if they are a priority 8 veteran, they may even be a combat-decorated veteran, but if they are a priority 8 veteran and this administration thinks they receive a high income, of course that could be about \$24,000. You know, we make about \$155,000 in this Chamber and the American people need to know that, when this administration is trying to imply that if you make about \$24,000 or \$25,000 and you are a veteran, you are high income and so you are no longer able to participate in the VA health care. I want to tell you that is quite shameful, and the veterans know it.

They also know that this disabled veterans tax, which basically says that if you retire from the military and you have earned your pension and you are disabled as a result of your military service and you are entitled to disability compensation, you cannot get both. For every dollar of disability pay you get, \$1 is deducted from your military pension. We have been trying to get rid of that discrimination against veterans. And, guess what? The President has said if we do it, he will veto the bill. He will veto the bill.

Here is a letter from Secretary Rumsfeld to the gentleman from California (Mr. HUNTER) indicating that if the bill authorizes concurrent receipt of military retirement pay and veterans disability compensation benefits, then he would advise the President to veto the bill. So what did we do? We half fixed it. We took a baby step, and there are veterans in this country tonight who deserve their pensions and they deserve their disability compensation, and we are nickel and diming them, depriving them, discriminating against them. It is absolutely wrong, and I believe the veterans are coming to understand what is being done to them.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to my friend.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Well, I just wanted to say that that is a letter sent from the head of the Department of Defense, the Republican-controlled administration sent to this Congress saying that if you pass a benefit for the veterans, we will veto the bill. It is that clear. It is black and white.

Mr. STRICKLAND. If my friend would yield.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. I would be happy to yield.

Mr. STRICKLAND. It is not really passing a benefit. It is a bill to try to

keep this government from taking something away from the veterans that they have earned. If they have served their time in the military and they are entitled to receive a pension, they should get it. And if they have been disabled and qualify for disability benefits, they should get the disability benefits, and there should be no offset.

If you worked in any other part of the Federal Government, you would not be subjected to this discrimination. It is only the veteran that is being subjected to this kind of discrimination.

□ 2145

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) filed a lawsuit some time ago.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Yes.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. The lawsuit was basically to force the VA to do what it is charged by this Congress to do, and he will explain. But it was not just a question of policy decisions that the Congress and the President have made to cut benefits, to fail to take care of the soldiers with body armor; it was not just bad decisions by Congress and the President. It also was incompetence by the VA and underfunding by the VA to take care of many of the people who were in their charge. I would ask the gentleman from Ohio to explain that.

Mr. STRICKLAND. It is quite simple. I was shocked many months ago when the VA put out a memo, and I am paraphrasing, but I am true to the spirit of the memo, which basically said, too many veterans are coming in for services and it is costing us too much money. We do not have enough money to provide those services. So henceforth, all of you who are health care providers are forbidden to market VA services to veterans. And it got quite specific.

These health care providers were told they could not participate in community health fairs in their local communities. They were told they could not send out newsletters.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, so President Bush and the Secretary of the VA have decided the VA should offer services to American veterans, but they are not allowed to tell anybody that they are offering these services?

Mr. STRICKLAND. I call it the "If they do not ask, we will not tell policy." If the veteran does not ask what they are entitled to receive, the VA will not proactively provide that information.

I tried to work this out. I went to Secretary Principi, a man that I know and admire, as a matter of fact, and we tried to work this out. I tried to get them to rescind this gag order, because it is a gag order. It is a gag order placed upon the health care providers. We just could not get them to budge.

Finally, I decided to initiate legal action and I got the Vietnam Veterans of America to join me. We filed a suit. That suit is currently before the court.

It is my hope that the court will decide that this policy of the VA is, in fact, contrary to the law and will require them to rescind this terrible policy.

It is a terrible policy because there are veterans out there, for example, if I can just give an example, veterans out there who may have been exposed to Agent Orange while serving in Vietnam. We now know that exposure to Agent Orange, even all of these years later, can lead to serious health consequences. For example, certain cancers are more likely to be found in those soldiers who were exposed to Agent Orange, such as prostate cancer, for example.

There may be veterans out there who have been so exposed and are not aware that they are at risk, that they should come into the VA facilities for an examination, and if they are found to have one of these illnesses, that they are entitled to receive medical care from the VA.

That is just an example of why this outreach to veterans is so important and why it is so really quite pathetic that an administration that says it cares about veterans would take this action to limit the information that is disseminated to veterans who are in need of this kind of information.

This is a matter of health, and it can be a matter of life and death. That is why I think it is so shameful that we would have a policy, and as the gentleman says, at the same time we are giving tax cuts to millionaires, to millionaires, we are taking steps to limit the dissemination of information to our veterans because if they come in, it may cost too much money to provide them the care they need.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, just before I wrap up, this is all very puzzling. I understand why President Bush is hostile to good environmental policy, because environmentalists do not vote for him. He does not seem to care.

I understand that President Bush pushes legislation that kind of restricts the rights of minorities because minorities do not vote for him. I understand why he is hostile to organized labor because he does not get many labor union votes from steelworkers or auto workers or food and commercial workers.

But I do not understand why he is so hostile to veterans. That really puzzles me because a lot of veterans voted for President Bush. They liked the fact that his father was a decorated veteran. They liked the fact that he served this country through the National Guard honorably and fully, at least before the news broke they thought he did, and they voted for him because they thought he was sort of a stand-up tough guy and would stand up for American interests.

It astounds me that this President would change our policy and military doctrine, would attack Afghanistan, attack Iraq, make noises about Iran and other places such as North Korea,

but when the veterans come home, not treat them any better than he treats them.

The only answer I can figure is, he is so wedded and focused on his tax policy, on cutting taxes for the very wealthy, saving literally over a trillion dollars in taxes for the richest 1 percent, that everybody else suffers, veterans suffer, school kids get shortchanged, seniors through the Medicare program get shortchanged, environmental enforcement gets shortchanged, food safety enforcement, research for the NIH get shortchanged; and that is the only explanation I can come up with.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Ohio.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I think it is appropriate for us to talk about what the Democrats' plan is and what we would do. I think it is important not just to criticize, although there is plenty of room for criticism in this administration.

The Democratic budget that we want for veterans would increase the tax for those who make more than a million dollars a year, not all of it. As the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) said, they get \$123,000 back from the Bush tax plan. We would say they would only get \$100,000 back. They would have to give around \$20,000 of their tax cut back.

Part of that money we would use, \$2 billion of it, to restore the full survivor benefits to families of military retirees. \$2.5 billion we would put in veterans health care. We would improve military housing for 50,000 military families.

So if anyone is at home asking, what is the Democratic plan, this is our plan: \$2.5 billion for health care, 50,000 families for military housing, \$2 billion to restore full survivor benefits. And our legislation, if we were controlling this Chamber, the other Chamber and possibly the White House, would permanently permit Reservists to buy military health care through the TRICARE program.

Many of the Reservists, almost 2,000 of them, and I hear often about the health care issues, our plan would allow them to buy permanently into the TRICARE program. We would give them pay raises, things the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) talked about, the combat pay, et cetera; our future veterans would be taken care of.

So the Democrats have a plan. Let the millionaire keep \$100,000, we are going to take a few thousand away and invest it into our veterans and into the research and development for our amputees that will be coming back, so they have the best possible health care that the United States of America, the wealthiest superpower ever in the history of world, can at the very least take care of its veterans.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) and the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN), and I look forward to

the comments of the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. SMITH).

PAYING FUTURE BENEFITS

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

Mr. SMITH of Michigan. Mr. Speaker, the challenge is unending, and one thing I am nervous about in terms of Washington sometime in the future is paying the Social Security benefits, the Medicare and Medicaid benefits that we have promised, because what we have done over the last 30 years is promise more than we have money to pay for in those promises for Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid.

In the next 2 days, we are going to take up the budget. There has been a compromise reached between the House and the Senate for a budget resolution, and that is how we plan to spend our appropriations and money for the 2005 fiscal year which starts the end of September 2004 and goes through 2005.

We spend most of the year or a lot of the year dealing with the appropriations bills that are discretionary, so-called discretionary. A little less than half of the appropriations total spending of the Federal Government is discretionary spending, a little more than half of the total government spending is entitlement spending.

I started out with a pie chart showing how we are spending money in the 2004 year, this year, about \$2.2 trillion dollars; and as Members see by this pie chart, the largest piece of this pie of Federal spending is Social Security. The Federal Government will spend about \$500 billion on Social Security this year in 2004.

Interest, as we go around the pie chart, interest is at 14 percent of total spending. That is about \$300 billion that we are paying in interest.

As we have heard over the last several days, interest rates are going up. I suspect Mr. Greenspan and the Federal Reserve are going to decide to increase the discount rate, increase the interest rate, and so we can expect to see interest rates go up. At the same time, we are increasing the total debt that we have to pay interest on, and that means that this 14 percent over the next 15 to 20 years can go to 25 percent, instead of 25 percent of the total budget paid in interest on the debt. So it should concern us.

Actually, what we are doing, and I am a farmer from Michigan, and on the farm we try to pay down the mortgage of the farm so our kids will have a little better chance and a little better success in their living standards maybe than their parents, but in this Chamber and in the Senate and in the White House over the last 30-40 years, what we are doing is increasing the debt that we are passing on to our kids.

Defense spending, 19 percent last year and now 20 percent; domestic discretionary spending, 16 percent; other entitlement spending, 10 percent; Medicaid, 6 percent, growing very quickly; Medicare, 12 percent. Medicare is projected to overtake the size of the total pie in the next 20 years.

Medicare will overtake Social Security in the next 15-20 years. So what that means in terms of entitlement spending, if you reach a certain age, you are entitled to Medicare benefits; if you are at a certain level of poverty, you can get food stamps. If you are at a certain age, also you get Social Security, if you are at a certain poverty level, you can get Medicaid.

Medicaid is the medical coverage for low income; Medicare is the government's health care program for seniors.

This chart, a very colorful chart, shows what is happening to the increase in spending of entitlement programs, increasing at about 5.5 percent a year. So total Federal Government is growing two and three and, in 1 year, almost four times the rate of inflation.

A lot of that problem is the increased cost of entitlement spending. Of course, the question is, will this Chamber have the intestinal fortitude, along with the Senate and the White House, will this Chamber have the intestinal fortitude to control spending? Will we have the willingness to cut down on some of the increase in discretionary spending?

Today in my office, like I suspect in other Members' offices, there were people suggesting there was a need for more government spending. We heard in the previous hour that government should spend more, and it was unfair for the government not to spend more on different programs. The situation that this country is facing is an increased demand for Federal spending matched with a situation where 50 percent of the adult population in this country paid less than 1 percent of the income tax. Think about it.

We have now divided the wealth through government programs and taxation to the extent where 50 percent of the adult population in this country pay 1 percent of the income tax.

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So we can understand why some people are saying give us more government, it does not cost us much.

Look at this next chart on what we have done in what I call unfunded liabilities, the promises that we have made in excess of what money we have to pay for them. On the top line we have got Medicare part A as an unfunded liability of \$21.8 trillion.

Let me stop here and give my definition of unfunded liability. Unfunded liability is today's dollars that we would have to put in a savings account that is going to earn the rate of inflation plus the time value of money. This is the money we would have to put in an account today to accommodate the needs of these programs over the next 75

years: Medicare part A, \$21.8 trillion; Medicare part B, \$23.2 trillion; Medicare part D, the drug program that we just passed recently. Will we have the willingness to reduce these other programs? We did not have the willingness not to increase the prescription drug program. So what we are borrowing from our kids is \$16.6 trillion of unfunded liabilities, that we have, in effect, decided that our problems are so great today that it justifies taking that money away from our kids, suggesting that maybe they are not going to have their own problems to deal with, but we are leaving them this unfunded liability in addition to a huge debt. It totals up to \$73.5 trillion, unimaginable in terms of what we are leaving as far as a legacy to our kids and our grandkids.

This is another chart that says it in a different way. If we are going to accommodate Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security and take the money out of the general fund to pay for the money that is going to be needed for these programs over and above what is coming in from the FICA tax, what is coming in from the taxes to pay for these programs, by 2020, in 16 years, it is going to be 28 percent of the budget that is required to make up the difference between the money coming in for Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid and the additional money that is going to be needed. Simply, by 2030 it is going to take 52 percent of the general fund budget to accommodate these programs.

We know we cannot do that. Is that going to mean a drastic reduction of some of these programs? Is it going to mean a drastic increase in what we are going to have to borrow in future years? The challenge now before us is we are increasing debt at the same time that interest rates are going up. So as the Members recall, the pie chart today, spending \$300 billion a year, 14 percent of the total Federal spending on interest costs, that could double in the next 20 years.

This is a quick snapshot of the red and the green, if you will, of what is happening in Social Security. In 1983 the Greenspan Commission dramatically increased Social Security taxes and at the same time dramatically reduced benefits. But even so, the short-time surplus coming in is going to run out in 2017, and then we are looking at a future of huge deficits that somehow is going to have to be made up if we are going to continue this program.

As I go around my southern district of Michigan, a lot of people wonder more exactly how Social Security works. This is just a very brief way of how this highly progressive program started. We started it in 1934; and at that time, the provisions were that once people reached 65, they were entitled to benefits and they would have to pay in all those years. But in a pay-as-you-go program, we found out that the money coming in from Social Security was very ample and that most people