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House of Representatives

The House met at 12:30 p.m. and was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. FORTENBERRY).

DESIGNATION OF SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
April 19, 2005.

I hereby appoint the Honorable JEFF FORTENBERRY to act as Speaker pro tempore on this day.

J. DENNIS HASTERT,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 4, 2005, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to not to exceed 30 minutes, and each Member, except the majority leader, the minority leader, or the minority whip, limited to not to exceed 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from South Carolina (Mr. SPRATT) for 5 minutes.

KEEPING PROMISES TO OUR SERVICE MEMBERS

Mr. SPRATT. Mr. Speaker, all of us who go out into the field to see our troops, and particularly overseas, bring back many conclusions and various impressions; but to a person, we all come back impressed, inspired, and thankful for the men and women who serve in the Armed Forces of the United States. In hard, dirty, and dangerous circumstances and often thankless deployments like Iraq and Afghanistan, they not only serve but they have had to adapt and improvise and tackle tasks they were never trained to handle. They have risen to the occasion, they have risen to the challenge, and at significant cost, in terms of those who have been wounded or injured or killed in action. These troops are the finest that any country has ever fielded, and they deserve not only our admiration but our support, and not just for them and their roles, which are vitally important, but for their families back home, for they sacrifice dearly.

There are three levels in which our support should come: first, to those on active duty, and their families, and particularly those who are deployed for long tours of duty in harsh environments and under hazardous conditions; second, to the Guard and Reserve who leave their civilian occupations and are now serving in numbers and percentages we have never seen since the all-volunteer force was created some 30 years ago. Almost half of those in Iraq come from the reserve components. More than 300,000 have been called up over the last 2½ years; 45,000 have had their tours extended. Many are on their second tour, some on their third. They are answering the call, they are doing their duty, and they are proving that the total force works and works well. But they have families back home and jobs and businesses and obligations and debts to pay and health care needs, and they need our unstinting support as never before. They not only need it, they deserve it. Next come the veterans and the retirees, those who have put, in many cases, much of their adult lives into serving their country. They have served and they now look to their country to keep the promises that were made to them at the time they were serving and when they reupped and when they joined again and when they stayed in for 20 and 25 years, promises about retirement benefits, about veterans benefits, about health care and education and many other things.

When the needs of these three groups are put together, all together, they make up a long bill of particulars, more than we can do, in all candor, in 1 year or even 2 years; but every time we take up a supplemental appropriation bill or a defense authorization bill or a defense appropriation bill, we should frankly, candidly, and honestly, searchingly, ask ourselves, what are we doing in this bill, on this occasion, to meet the needs of our service men and women who are serving gallantly in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and what are we doing in particular for their families?

What are we doing to help them out in their combat circumstances, with flak vests and personal protective gear and up-armored vehicles? But what are we also doing for their children back home for their health care needs? Have we provided adequately, I do not think we have, for family separation centers, the one place dedicated to helping them resolve their problems while family members are overseas? And for Tricare, health care, critically important in our society, particularly for Reservists and their families, Reservists leaving their job, what have we done to provide and see to it that they do not have to sacrifice in terms of health care for themselves and their families not only while they are on duty but in the months after they are deactivated and come back home?

And how about servicemen's life insurance? For years it had been inadequately funded. Many troops because of the premium, modest though it seems, have not elected to take it. What are we doing to see to it that every American soldier who goes into combat, hazardous duty has at least several hundred thousand dollars of servicemen's group life insurance? And what are we doing about our veterans, our category 7 and 8 veterans for over 2 years now, if they have not previously registered and are not able to

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get admitted to veterans health care facilities? There are 50,000 veterans waiting in line as we speak for an appointment to a veterans health care facility. The President's budget for this year provided $106 million, not much over last year which itself was inadequate to meet their needs. Over the next 5 years, this budget request is $18 billion below what is needed for current services. We can do better than that.

We have got promises to keep to our veterans and these promises, above all, should be kept. Given the sporadic, unpredictable violence and the harsh, hard circumstances, it is not surprising that many of our troops come back, some have said as many as 17 percent, from places like Afghanistan and Iraq with difficult mental problems. This, too, is something we could do.

Mr. Speaker, we have to follow up the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. DAVIS) who not only is a member of the Committee on Armed Services but also formerly a military spouse and speaks knowledgeably about this subject.

THE HIGH PRICE OF GASOLINE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 4, 2005, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, as the summer driving season is set to begin, gasoline prices are at a record high. While some continue to blame the Bush administration and the Republicans in Congress, the truth is that neither is responsible for the record highs. The reason for the high gas prices includes the cost of crude oil due to a worldwide explosion in demand, the lack of refinery processing capacity, and the overregulation here in Washington.

The House will get the opportunity to address this problem this week with the House bringing to the floor the Energy Policy Act of 2005, H.R. 6. The long-awaited legislation contains a number of provisions that would lower gas prices. H.R. 6 encourages more domestic production of oil with incentives such as a streamlined permit process, promotes a greater refining capacity to bring more oil to market, and increases the gasoline supply by stopping the proliferation of expensive regional boutique fuels.

The Department of Energy predicts by 2025 U.S. oil and natural gas demand will rise by 46 percent, with energy demand increasing 1 percent for every 2 percent in GDP growth. Critics of H.R. 6 claim that it would do little to curb consumption or drive down prices. In fact, this legislation includes provisions to do just that. In order to scale back demand for oil, the proposal encourages vehicles powered by hydrogen fuel cells and increases funding for the Department of Transportation to work to improve fuel efficiency standards. Furthermore, it authorizes $200 million for the clean cities program which will provide grants to State and local governments to acquire alternative-fueled vehicles.

Curbing demand is necessary, but it is not nearly enough to lower the price of gas. We also need to increase domestic production of oil. Ending our dependence on foreign oil is not only important to the economy but also doubly important to national security. Currently, the U.S. imports about 60 percent of its oil. The Department of Energy projects this number will increase to 73 percent by 2025. In order to ensure reliable and secure supplies of oil, we have no choice but simply to increase our domestic supply.

Domestic energy production must be increased without compromising a clean environment. There have been giant leaps in technology that would produce oil and natural gas in an environmentally safe manner. We need a comprehensive energy policy that recognizes that sophisticated new technology greatly reduces adverse impacts on the environment by exploration and production. Along with the incredible advances in technology, transportation, and medicine that improve our lives comes the increased need for energy.

In addition, overregulation by the government also contributes to regional and seasonal price fluctuations that increase costs and, of course, reduce flexibility to meet consumer demand. According to the Energy Information Agency, last year refining costs represented about 20 percent of the retail cost of gasoline. By simply scaling back the excessive and cumbersome Federal regulations on refiners, we could significantly reduce these costs. For example, the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments mandate the sale of cleaner burning reformulated gasoline in order to reduce summer smog in nine major metropolitan areas. The law also requires that RFG contain at least 2 percent oxygen by weight.

To comply with these regulations, refiners must switch from winter grade fuel to costlier summer blend gasoline. According to the Federal Trade Commission, this adds 4 cents to 8 cents per gallon to the price of gasoline. Likewise, complying with a national low sulfur gasoline regulation for passenger cars not only represents scientific challenges for refiners but also could adversely affect gasoline supply and, of course, availability. The industry will need to invest more than $8 billion over the next 3 years to meet this requirement, which will result in higher prices at the pump.

This hodgepodge of customized fuel requirements increases production costs which are ultimately reflected in the price of gasoline that we pay today. These varied gasoline specifications also restrict the ability of refiners and distributors to move supplies around the country in response to local and, of course, regional shortages.

High gas prices affect every sector of the American economy and especially hit families the hardest. Congress has been debating and debating this issue for too long. We now have the chance to enact this week comprehensive energy legislation that will go a long way to lower the cost of gasoline. We need to fully embrace this opportunity before it is too late.

RECOGNIZING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF OUR MILITARY FAMILIES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 4, 2005, the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. DAVIS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mrs. DAVIS of California. Mr. Speaker, I am honored to join the gentleman from South Carolina (Mr. SPRATT). I have long admired and respected his efforts since I was elected to Congress and began serving with him on the Committee on Armed Services.

I want to take a moment now to specifically mention our military families. By now, every American should be familiar with the daily contributions and sacrifices made by our service members, but we have to remember that their families serve, too. Many spouses remind me all the time that when the military prepares for deployment, well, so do their families. As a former military spouse myself, I am incredibly grateful and humbled by their unique sacrifices. With so much of our attention on other things, their contributions often go unnoticed and underappreciated. I want our military families to know that we are working to improve the family-support infrastructure that exists for them. Access to family support services should be consistent without regard to where the families reside. Use of technology can certainly enhance their access to family support, but it sure cannot take the place of a support network.

Democrats are seeking more innovative ways to fund child care for military families, to provide a fully resourced, comprehensive and portable health care benefit, and to increase the value of the commissary and exchange benefit.

We have also made progress with addressing the demand for family housing. This has included privatization initiatives, military construction, and adequate funding for the basic allowance for housing. Democrats are also exploring ways in which we can work together with DOD to enhance educational and employment opportunities for military spouses.

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And I can tell the Members firsthand how difficult this is when faced with the challenges of the military lifestyle. By recognizing the contributions of our military families, we have identified a critical part of addressing future recruiting and retention needs of the military. We must continue to recognize their sacrifices as well as those