The House met at 9:00 a.m.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 19, 1999, 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 not to exceed 25 minutes, and each Member except the majority leader, the minority leader, or the minority whip limited to not to exceed 5 minutes, but in no event shall debate continue beyond 9:50 a.m.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENEAU) for 5 minutes.

WAIVER FOR VIETNAM

Mr. BLUMENEAU. Mr. Speaker, it is not often that on the floor of this Chamber we can deal with several major issues simultaneously, but such is the case today as we deal with House Resolution 58, which would deny the waiver of the Jackson-Vanik for Vietnam that was advanced. These were items that were known, frankly, on college campuses around the country at this time but denied at the highest levels of our government.

Last year, on the eve of the Jackson-Vanik waiver vote, I received a call from Vietnam from my daughter who was visiting. She was struck by the kindness of the Vietnamese people, the beautiful landscape, and as a college student she was not really aware, until her experience in Vietnam, of the tragedy of that conflict.

I have in mind today that conversation and her experience as we come forward. We are going to talk about trade and economic opportunity, and that is important. We are on the verge of signing a major trade agreement with Vietnam that will accelerate the economic prospects of that country. We have in the capitol today, Ambassador Pete Peterson, who has performed a tremendous service over the last few years in his work in Vietnam. He is arguably the best qualified person in America to bring about the reconciliation. His political and military experience, his passion and his compassion set him apart and make him uniquely qualified. I continue to be amazed at his efforts.

We have the opportunity to build on his efforts with the rejection of the disallowal, to make progress on human rights, transparency of economic activities. We have the opportunity to help in Southeast Asia, the world’s 12th most populous country, hasten their economic progress, but it goes far beyond that. The defeat of House Resolution 58 will help accelerate the integration of Vietnam into the world economy. It will help open up their society, but more important it will be an opportunity for us here on this floor to acknowledge the United States needs to get beyond this terrible legacy.

It is more than economics. It is an opportunity for America to get things right.

I strongly urge my colleagues to join with us this morning in the Capitol, room H–137. Pete Peterson will be meeting with us individually to talk about his experience, to talk about this opportunity, to give us a chance to not only move Vietnam forward economically but to do what is right by the American people in this conflict.

GAO REPORT CLAIMS VETERANS ADMINISTRATION WASTES MILLIONS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. SIMPSON). Under the Speaker’s announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, all of us know that here on the Republican side we are trying to fight to increase the amount of money we give to the Veterans Administration because the President’s budget was a flat line budget which did not provide enough money and particularly the fact that there are many more cases of hepatitis C. And we hope to increase cost of living for a lot of the employees, but I wanted to call my colleagues’ attention to a GAO audit that was performed on the Veterans Affairs on July 22 that found over the next 5 years as much as $20 billion could be wasted. And I think that is a concern for all of us here in Congress.

The Veterans Health Administration is spending one of every four medical care dollars just caring for buildings that are old and obsolete. They spend it to operate and maintain their major delivery locations, but these locations have very low occupancy and a lot of unused space. So as I mentioned earlier, there is $20 billion that could be saved over the next 5 years.

I think many of my colleagues know that the Veterans Health Administration hospital utilization plan has been dropping because the number of patients has gone down. That is right, it has gone from 49,000 patients a day in 1989 to 21,000 in 1998. Almost half of this decline has occurred over the past 3 years. Not only has the hospital utilization dropped but the number of hospital admissions has decreased from over 1 million in 1989 to about 400,000 in 1998. So that is about a 40 percent drop, Mr. Speaker.

By the VA’s own estimates, the veteran population is now 25 million and will drop to about 16 million in the year 2020. So I am concerned, I think all of us should be concerned, about those facilities that cost so much to operate. More than 40 percent of the VA health care facilities are over 50 years old and we are just not getting a good bang for the buck for the taxpayers. It cost as much as $1 million a day to run these underutilized and unused facilities, according to the GAO; and I do not think we should continue to do that. That is why myself and my colleague, the gentleman from Alabama (Mr. EVERTT), who is chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, have held hearings to discuss this and try to correct this egregious use of taxpayers’ money.

Let us not forget, of course, that veterans pay taxes themselves, so we want...
to make sure that the taxes they pay are effectively used also.

The GAO has found that the Veterans Health Administration has made limited progress over the past 4 months in implementing a realignment process. They also found that the VA contains a diverse group of competing stakeholders who oppose plan changes in the areas that are obsolete and not being used and close them, but it does not seem to want to. I think what we need to do is allow a new process to get this started. So my bill calls for a process to be sure that decisions on closing hospitals can only be made based upon comprehensive planning with veterans’ participation, and that is very important and very appropriate.

The bill sets numerous safeguards in place and would specifically provide that VA must stop operating a hospital and walk away from its responsibilities to veterans. It must, quote, reinvest savings in a new, improved treatment facility or improve services in the area.

The legislation responds to the pressing veterans’ needs. It opens the door to an expansion of long-term care, to greater access to outpatient care and to improved benefits, including emergency care coverage.

So in turn, Mr. Speaker, I think it provides the reforms we need for the next millennium that could advance the goals of the GAO, and I think it is another important feature towards getting better efficient use of the money.

OMNIBUS MERCURY EMISSIONS REDUCTION ACT OF 1999

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker’s announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. GUTKNECHT) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. GUTKNECHT. Mr. Speaker, very soon the Congress will be engaged in a very vicious debate about milk. And that may surprise some people; but when we start talking about milk marketing order reforms, it is amazing how aggressive some Members can become.

Mr. Speaker, in the last couple of days our colleague, the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. GREEN) and myself have introduced the Omnibus Mercury Emissions Reduc