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House of Representatives

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. BLUMENAUER) for 5 minutes.

WAIVER FOR VIETNAM

Mr. BLUMENAUER. 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 the nation of Vietnam. This issue is not just of trade and international commerce. It truly is an opportunity for the United States to help get our story straight regarding one of the great tragedies of our time.

The war in Vietnam was truly a tragedy for that nation. Great damage was inflicted upon the people, on a country that had been at war for over a third of the century, from World War II to the conclusion of that effort, but it had serious implications for our country. It divided generations, divided families, polarized our society.

I have great respect for the men who served in Vietnam. It has been a privilege for me to become acquainted with our colleague, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. SAM JOHNSON), and the suffering that he and his family went through. I have been touched by that extraordinary sacrifice.

Yet, at the same time it is clear to me that it is important for us to acknowledge the problems that we faced as a Nation dealing with the war in Vietnam. We were on the wrong side of history. Just this week, we had before the John Quincy Adams Society, Robert McNamara acknowledging that he was well aware, during his tenure, that the war was not winnable and acknowledged the problems with the rationale 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 beauty of the 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

☐ This symbol represents the time of day during the House proceedings, e.g., ☐ 1407 is 2:07 p.m.

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that are old and obsolete. They spend it to operate and maintain these 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. EVERETT), 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 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 I have just talked about. The GAO has made suggestions. They suggested more independent planning by those with no vested interest in geographic locations. They also recommend that the VA consider consolidating services, developing partnerships with other health care providers, and replacing obsolete assets with modern ones that address the health needs of today's and future veterans.

I have a bill, Mr. Speaker, that addresses part of these concerns. It is H.R. 2116. I am hoping that this bill will come to the floor. One of the major components of my bill, called the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act, contains elements targeted at capital asset management issues, in fact, what I like to call enhanced stakeholder involvement for all of the veterans.

My bill offers a blueprint to help position the VA for the future. The point is that VA has the closure authority. The administration can take those facilities 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 cannot simply 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.

I think the bill 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 Maine (Mr. ALLEN) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. ALLEN. Mr. Speaker, yesterday I introduced the Omnibus Mercury Emissions Reduction Act of 1999, a bill to reduce mercury emissions by 95 percent nationwide. I am pleased to be joined by 27 of my colleagues who have agreed to be original cosponsors of this important bipartisan legislation.

Although mercury is a naturally occurring element, it has built up to dangerous levels in the environment. Mercury pollution impairs the reproductive and nervous systems of freshwater fish and wildlife, especially loons. It can be extremely harmful when ingested by humans. It is especially dangerous to pregnant women, children, and developing fetuses. Ingesting mercury can severely damage the central nervous system, causing numbness in extremities, impaired vision, kidney disease, and in some cases even death.

According to EPA's mercury study report to Congress, exposure to mercury poses a significant threat to human health, and concentrations of mercury in the environment are increasing.

The report concludes that mercury pollution in the U.S. comes primarily from a few categories of combustion units and incinerators. Together, these sources emit more than 155 tons of mercury into our environment each year. These emissions can be suspended in the air for up to a year and travel hundreds of miles before settling in bodies of water and soil.

Nearly every State confronts the health risks posed by mercury pollution and the problem is growing. Just 6 years ago, 27 States had issued mercury advisories warning the public about consuming freshwater fish contaminated with mercury. Today, the number of States issuing advisories has risen to 40, and the number of water bodies covered by the warnings has nearly doubled.

In some States, including my home State of Maine, every single river, lake, and stream is under a mercury advisory, and that applies to the States shown in black on this chart.

The growing problem has already prompted action at the State and regional level. Last year, the New England governors and Eastern Canadians premiers enacted a plan to reduce emissions, educate the public, and label products that contain mercury. Maine and Vermont have passed legislation to cut mercury pollution, and Massachusetts and New Jersey have enacted strict mercury emission standards on waste incinerators.

Although there is a clear consensus that mercury pollution poses a significant threat, State and regional initiatives alone are not sufficient to deal with this problem. As Congress recognized when it passed the Clean Air Act nearly 30 years ago, Federal legislation is the only effective way to deal with airborne pollutants that know no State boundaries. That is why I am introducing legislation to reduce the amount of mercury emitted from the largest polluters. This bill sets mercury emission standards for coal-fired utilities, waste combustors, commercial and industrial boilers, chlor-alkali plants, and Portland cement plants. According to the EPA's report to Congress, these sources are responsible for more than 87 percent of all mercury emissions in the U.S.

My bill also phases out the use of mercury in products and ensures that municipalities work with waste incinerators that keep products that contain mercury out of the waste stream. It would also require a recycling program for products that contain mercury as an essential component and increases research into the effects of mercury pollution.

With mercury levels in the environment growing every year, it is long past time to enact a comprehensive strategy for controlling mercury pollution. We have the technology for companies to meet these standards, and this bill will allow them to choose the best approach for their facility.

We have reduced or eliminated other toxins without the catastrophic effects that some industries predicted. Now we should eliminate dangerous levels of mercury. I urge my colleagues to support this legislation and stop mercury from polluting our waters, infecting our fish and wildlife, and threatening the health of our children.