

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to be here with my distinguished colleagues, including the gentleman from Texas (Mr. GONZALEZ), who led us in this endeavor this evening. Our Hispanic community appreciates the work of our leader, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. Gonzales), the chairman of the Hispanic Civil Rights Task Force.

Mr. RODRIQUEZ. Mr. Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank the gentleman from Texas (Mr. GONZALEZ) and the gentlewoman from California (Ms. SOLIS) for being here tonight and just indicate that we will not support anyone blindly and we expect them to move forward on answering the questions.

#### SHAMEFUL TREATMENT FOR OUR VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BARRETT of South Carolina). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) is recognized for 6 minutes, which is the balance of the leadership hour, as the further designee of the minority leader.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I come to this Chamber tonight, and I enjoyed listening to my colleagues talk about this important court nominee. But I wanted to talk about another issue that is important to the American people, and that is the way this government and especially this administration is treating our veterans. I bring this chart to this Chamber as I did last night to illustrate the fact that if a veteran goes to a veterans hospital today and looks upon a bulletin board, they are likely to see this notice. It says: Did you know the medication copayment has changed from \$2 to \$7. Just about a year ago, the VA decided that they were going to increase the copayment that a veteran must pay for their medicine from \$2 a prescription to \$7 a prescription.

And at that time, I thought it was an outrageous act, that we would impose this additional financial burden upon our veterans.

But looking at the President's budget which he just released for 2004, he just released it a few days ago, they do not want to charge \$7 a prescription as a copay, but they are actually suggesting that this be increased to \$15 a prescription.

Now, think about that. At a time when we are preparing to send America's young men and women into a war, we are treating our veterans, those who have fought past wars, those who have served our country with honor, we are charging them more for the medicines they need to stay healthy or to simply maintain their lives. From \$2 a prescription to \$7 a prescription, and now, in the President's budget, \$15 a prescription. Many veterans take 10 or more prescriptions a month. That is a lot of money, and many of our veterans are on fixed incomes.

Now, in the President's budget for 2004, he is also calling for an elimination of the taxation on dividends. About \$674 billion, if that plan is enacted, about \$674 billion will go to the richest people in this country, millionaires, multimillionaires. Why would we charge veterans more for their medicines while, at the same time, we are proposing to give \$674 billion to the richest people in this country? Not only has the VA decided to raise the cost of medicine, but they have also decided in the President's budget to raise the cost of going to an outpatient clinic for care to see a doctor, from \$15 to \$20. Why would we raise the cost that a veteran must pay simply to go to see a doctor when, at the same time, we are giving \$674 billion to the richest people in this country?

About a year ago, the VA put out a memo, and this memo went out to all other health care providers across this Nation. And it basically said, too many veterans are coming to our facilities for services. It is costing us too much money, so you are no longer able to market the services that veterans are entitled to receive. It is a gag order. They are actually telling the health care providers across this country that you cannot tell veterans what they are entitled to receive under the law. They were quite specific in their memo. They told these health care providers that they could no longer participate in community health fairs. They could no longer send out newsletters describing their services. They could no longer go to an American Legion post and sign up veterans for the services that they, under the law, are entitled to receive. I call it the "if they don't ask, we won't tell" policy. If the veteran does not ask what they are entitled to receive, the VA will not tell them what they are entitled to receive.

Then, a few weeks ago, the VA decided that they would do something else to save money. They decided to create a new priority group called Priority Group 8, and if you are a veteran and you make about \$26,000 or \$27,000 a year, you are no longer going to be permitted to enroll in the VA health care system. And under the President's budget, they are really suggesting that there be an annual enrollment fee imposed upon veterans, a brand-new enrollment fee. If you make \$24,000 a year and you are a veteran, they are asking that you pay \$250 a year just to enroll in the VA health care system.

Now, I do not think \$24,000 is a lot, and people out there in the rest of the world need to know that those of us who serve here in this Chamber make about \$150,000 or so a year. Mr. Speaker, \$24,000 is not a lot. But in the President's budget, if a veteran makes \$24,000 a year, they will be required to pay a \$250 annual enrollment fee just to participate in the VA health care system.

Why are we doing this? Why do we not take part of that \$674 billion that we are giving to the richest people in

this country and use it to provide health care for our veterans? It is simply the right thing to do.

#### THE UNITED NATIONS, NATO, IRAQ, AND MIGUEL ESTRADA

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

Mr. MCINNIS. Mr. Speaker, this evening I want to address a couple of areas. The primary focus of my comments this evening will be on the United Nations, on NATO, and Iraq. But I cannot allow some of the comments that I have just heard in the last 45 minutes to go un rebutted, so I intend to take a few minutes here at the very beginning to rebut some of the remarks that were made.

I was a witness to a very aggressive personal attack on an individual called Mr. Estrada, and I can tell my colleagues that had Mr. Estrada been a Member of the United States Congress, the Speaker behind me would have ruled those kinds of comments out of order by the time they got to the second sentence, because they were so vicious and such a personal attack. It was not even a fair fight. Speaker after speaker after speaker stood up in front of all of us, just a few minutes ago, and while attacking Mr. Estrada, said, this is not a partisan issue, but yet it was Democrat after Democrat after Democrat after Democrat. They did not invite anybody else in to speak on the other side of the issue. Not at all. In fact, the statement was made by the gentlewoman from the State of California that, in fact, they had been very aggressive just to prove that they were not being partisan, just to prove that they were not attacking Mr. Estrada because he happens to be a Republican and a conservative Republican.

Just to prove that, the gentlewoman from California said we aggressively stood up in support of a Hispanic who was recently named to the bench, apparently in the State of California. I would just tell the gentlewoman from California, I have been here almost every night during Special Orders, and I have never seen, never seen her or any of her other colleagues who spoke this evening take that podium and speak in favor of this Hispanic judge or this Hispanic in California who happened to be a Republican and that they say adamantly and bravely stood up and spoke for.

I tell you what else I find a particular interest from the gentlewoman from California who, by the way, I consider a professional. In fact, I am surprised by the comments that I heard coming out of my colleagues this evening because I happen to have watched my colleagues over the time that I have worked with them, and I think they are pretty sharp people. I think they are very capable. I was surprised tonight at these remarks.