

The good thing is, thank God in a democracy we have alternatives, and the majority of this House went along with the President's alternative. Cut taxes on the American people, cut taxes on small business, cut taxes on the hard-working taxpayer of the country. The results, alas, no big surprise, economy is rebounding. It is rebounding strongly.

So I am very grateful for the President's leadership.

INADEQUATE TREATMENT OUR
TROOPS AND VETERANS ARE
RECEIVING FROM THE ADMINIS-
TRATION

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. PEARCE). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 7, 2003, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. WATERS) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I rise tonight to highlight the inadequate treatment our troops and our veterans are receiving from this administration.

In all there are 1.4 million men and women serving in the United States Armed Forces. Tens of thousands of these soldiers are serving overseas, 130,000 troops in Iraq, 8,500 troops in Afghanistan, 37,000 in South Korea and the list goes on and on.

Throughout their deployment, the men and women who serve in the United States Armed Forces have done so with honor and distinction. However, the Republican Congress and this administration often have not lived up to their part of the bargain.

While the Congress has approved massive increases in funding for the Department of Defense, our soldiers are deployed to Iraq without life-saving protective body armor, and many humvees were also poorly equipped, leaving our soldiers vulnerable to rocket-propelled grenades and other explosive devices. It was not until our soldiers began writing home asking their families to send them ceramic tiles so that they could make their own protective armor that the Pentagon finally woke up and said they would provide each soldier with Kevlar bulletproof vests.

It should never have come to this. If we are going to send our troops into battle, we must ensure that they have all the equipment they need. Unfortunately, the Republicans' record is grossly inadequate when it comes to helping our soldiers when they return from the battlefield.

While they have taken the long overdue step of providing funding in the emergency supplemental appropriations bill to cover the costs our soldiers have traveling home on rest and recuperation, they still leave many military families vulnerable by only extending the higher rates of imminent danger pay and family separation allowance for 1 year, no matter how long they serve. While the Republicans heeded the demands of Democrats and

ended the shameful practice of requiring wounded soldiers to pay subsistence charges for each day they were in the hospital recovering from a combat injury, they continued to refuse to provide other essential relief to our veterans.

The Republicans still refuse to end the disabled veterans tax which prevents thousands of disabled veterans from receiving full retirement and disabled benefits.

In short, the Republicans believe that by waving the United States flag and making a few cosmetic changes, they can dress up a second rate record on issues that are important to our veterans and our troops.

Mr. Speaker, we have to acknowledge the existence of a problem before we can fix it. One news organization reported earlier this week that soldiers are being housed in outdated barracks, some even without indoor toilets, and forced to wait days, weeks or even months for treatment of medical problems, including injuries suffered in Iraq. Yet this administration seems unable to acknowledge the existence of the problem.

Mr. Speaker, the clearest illustration of the Republicans' poor record on veterans issue is when we examine the inadequate funding the Republicans have provided for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Every veteran has earned the health care, educational, disability and other benefits he or she was promised when they signed up for military service. However, they are rarely receiving these benefits in a timely manner.

The statistics are dreadful. There are approximately 60,000 veterans waiting 6 months or more to see a doctor. Some veterans die from their conditions before they are able to see a doctor, and for the past 2 years, an average of 14,000 disabled veterans have been waiting more than 15 months for their so-called expedited disability claims to be finalized.

This log jam will only get worse as those troops currently serving overseas return home. Yet instead of providing the necessary funding to alleviate these backlogs and help those who need it most, the Republicans are passing massive tax cuts to benefit those who need it least.

Mr. Speaker, the Republican record on veterans issues is not one that I would be happy to call my own. I am certainly grateful that I do not have to defend it.

During the fiscal year 2004 budget debate, the Republicans attempted to cut funding over the next 10 years for medical care and other appropriated veterans programs by \$14.2 billion below current service levels and cut funding for mandatory veterans programs by \$14.2 billion over 10 years. Later, despite publicity promising to include \$3.2 billion for veterans health care, Republicans have only appropriated \$1.4 billion for veterans health care, leaving a shortfall of \$1.8 billion and

thousands of veterans without necessary health care.

The Republicans have prevented Members from voting their conscience on the disabled veterans tax which unfairly taxes disabled veterans, \$1 in retirement benefits for every \$1 they receive in disability benefits. The Republicans even propose to increase prescription drug copayments and impose enrollment fees on veterans seeking to access health care, and despite there being an estimated 299,321 veterans who are homeless on any given night, funding which helps provide housing and job training for veterans is woefully short.

This record is in no way to repay the sacrifice our veterans have made on behalf of us.

Mr. Speaker, the Democrats have another way. We have crafted a bill that will not only honor the men and women serving in the Armed Forces today but also provide the benefits that veterans have earned and deserve.

H.R. 2569, the Democratic bill, would increase funding for VA health care by \$10 billion over the next 10 years, expand access to health care for the National Guard and Reserves. It would completely and immediately end the disabled veterans tax. It would pay our veterans \$500 a month when his or her disability claim has been left pending for longer than 6 months. For our troops currently fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, our bill would give a \$1,000 bonus for those soldiers returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Lastly, the Democrats would extend the child tax credit to the hundreds of thousands of military families left behind by the Bush tax cut.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 2569 is a comprehensive bill that not only acknowledges the sacrifice our men and women in uniform make but also ensures that they are properly taken care of after they stop wearing the uniform.

□ 2215

This recognition is long overdue. Democrats are committed to doing all that we can to pass H.R. 2569. We will continue to put a spotlight on the enormous gap between Republican words and deeds on veterans and troop-support issues. Our troops and our veterans deserve no less.

Mr. Speaker, I know that it is not popular with this administration to talk about these issues. As a matter of fact, I am fully aware that the President of the United States basically tried to intimidate the news media by saying to them you are not reporting enough good news. And to prove that he was prepared to deal with them if they do not do it his way, he started to exclude the national media and go around them and deal with the regional media in order to teach them a lesson.

Well, Mr. Speaker, this President and this administration may not like the fact that some of us talk about what is really happening in Iraq and Afghanistan. He may not like the fact that the

news media is reporting the deaths of our soldiers, not only those deaths that are taking place in Iraq, but those deaths that are taking place in Afghanistan. And while there are those who do not want to have us talk about the fact that 15 of our soldiers were killed this past weekend, and in excess of 20 of them were wounded, and each day we continue to lose soldiers, one, two, three a day, they are being attacked and they are being picked off. Of course we are raising a lot of questions about the postwar planning, or lack thereof. We are asking this administration what were you thinking about.

Our soldiers are now in a situation that they have not been trained for. They do not know anything about Shiites and Sunnis. They do not understand the ethnic warfare between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. They do not know the language; they do not understand the cultures. They were not trained to be involved in guerrilla warfare. We have to continue to talk about this because we have to force the protection that is needed.

I am not going to talk about Afghanistan; they just killed two of our CIA agents there. The poppy fields are flowing; the warlords are in control. Mr. Karzai, who we hand picked and sat down in Kabul, is not running anything. It is a joke, and we are paying a terrible price for the way we have not done our homework and done our planning in these two places alone.

Hopefully, even those wounded will return home. Hopefully, this administration will get its act together and they will provide the protection and do the strategic planning; they will do what they did not do, even when the President posted the sign "Mission Accomplished."

It is time for the untruths and the distortions to stop. I was shocked when the President, whom we saw under the banner of mission impossible when asked by the press denied that the White House had anything to do with it. Certainly the White House planned the entire event, but that is typical of the kind of untruths and misinformation coming out of this administration.

What is going to happen to those soldiers returning home, those soldiers who are wounded, those soldiers who have been separated from their families, those soldiers and reservists who will return without employment? Some will not even have homes to live in. We are talking about not only what is going on in Afghanistan and Iraq at this time, but we want to let you know, and hopefully they will be veterans returning to their respective towns and their cities, what will be there for them? Will they, too, have to wait in long lines to get the health care that they need? Many of them will need follow-up health care as a result of the wounds that they are receiving now in Iraq. What is going to happen to them when they discover that they will not get the retirement benefits they thought were coming to them because

of the way this administration refused to fund it?

Well, we raise these questions no matter how unpopular they are. It is our duty and our responsibility as representatives elected to represent all of the people to be in the forefront of the issues for our veterans. If we cannot stand up for our veterans, we cannot stand up for anybody or anything.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Georgia (Ms. MAJETTE) as she continues our discussion in support of our veterans.

Ms. MAJETTE. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for yielding.

As we approach Veterans' Day, we pause to recall the noble service and the high sacrifices of those who have worn the uniform of our Nation. On this day of remembrance, we will rededicate ourselves to those who have dedicated themselves to us. I thank each and every man and woman who has served in every branch of our military. I thank you soldiers for your courage, your character, your strength, and the enduring power of your example.

Threatened by terrorists who seek to destroy our way of life, Americans are appreciating anew the blessings of liberty we cherish as well as the heroes who fight, and often die, so we can live in freedom.

None have paid a higher price and sacrifice more for our freedom than have our veterans. It is time for us in Congress to learn from them. We must now stand in solidarity like our brave protectors and act to end the lamentable neglect that is our crisis in veterans health care. Every American owes them a debt of gratitude that words cannot repay. And yet our veterans have received more good words than good deeds from this administration.

In January, our President stated that the medical care received by our troops is comforting to him. He stated that our troops deserve only the best care, and yet that same day the administration announced that it was cutting off health care access for approximately 164,000 veterans.

The President has said that he wants only the best housing for our military families, yet this administration's 2004 budget proposes a \$1.5 billion reduction in funds for military housing, a 14 percent cut that affects family housing, barracks, child care centers, schools, hangars, and office buildings.

The President vowed to pass fair, balanced historic tax relief for the American people. Instead, the administration's tax cut denies child tax credits for 1 million children in military and veteran families. According to the Children's Defense Fund, more than 260,000 of these children have parents on active military duty.

House Republicans promised increased veterans funding for 2004. We have now passed all 13 appropriations bills in the House, and the actual funding provided for veterans programs in

the House-passed appropriations bills is \$28.1 billion, the same level contained in the President's budget. So far the House Republicans have not delivered one dime of the \$1.8 billion increase above the President's budget that they called for in their budget resolution.

In a time of war, as we take care of those who defend our country today, we must fulfill our debt to those who have defended us in the past. In my State of Georgia alone, we have over 752,000 veterans who have sacrificed for our State and country. I refuse to merely say I appreciate their sacrifice. Congress must back up our words with deeds. It is our obligation.

The politicians will be eager on Veterans' Day to stand on podiums with decorated soldiers, veterans who have given of themselves for our Nation, and they will give honor to those soldiers. These public figures will declare solidarity with them and speak of the great appreciation for their willingness to sacrifice for the freedom of others. But on those other days, on those days that are not Veterans' Day, what will happen then?

As a Nation, we have a sacred pact with all of those who served in uniform. Veterans and their families have taken care of us. In return, we must take care of them.

They understand that freedom is not free. And so, Mr. Speaker, must we.

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for taking time from her schedule and being here at this hour to talk about her commitment for our veterans and the way that all Americans should feel about our veterans. Certainly the manner in which she has spoken really should give those on the opposite side of the aisle cause to revisit the way in which they can represent our veterans.

I would like to take a moment and reiterate, H.R. 2569, the Democratic bill, would increase funding for VA health care by \$10 billion over the next 10 years, expand access to health care for the National Guard and Reserves. It would completely and immediately end the disabled veterans tax; it would pay a veteran \$500 a month when his or her disability claim has been left pending for longer than 6 months. For our troops currently fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, our bill would give a \$1,000 bonus for those soldiers returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Lastly, the Democrats would extend the child tax credit to the hundreds of thousands of military families left behind by the Bush tax cut. I repeat that because I think it is important for the American people to know there is an alternative. No one can say that they did not have something that they could vote for to correct the inadequacies of the funding for our veterans.

Mr. Speaker, this past weekend when 15 soldiers were killed and over 20 were wounded, I watched as Mr. Rumsfeld and others attempted to respond to the press's questions about what had happened and what did they plan to do. I

sat in horror as I watched Mr. Rumsfeld say, I am sorry about what happened; I think this is a critical time for our American families who have soldiers who have been killed, but this is war and we should expect that people are going to lose their lives in war. We are going to be in Iraq for a long time, and I am paraphrasing what he said, and we are not going to cut and run. These are the words that Mr. Rumsfeld and the President of the United States were using: we are not going to cut and run.

Mr. Speaker, it is easy to talk about making sacrifices when it is somebody else's child. I guess it is pretty easy to talk about we should expect that people are going to die. I am never comfortable with that kind of talk. I am never comfortable with the fact that any leader would try and sanitize the trauma of the death of our soldiers and speak about it in such a way.

Mr. Speaker, we are aware that we do not see our soldiers' bodies being brought home. There are those who are saying that we do not see the bodies coming in because there is a plot and a plan by this administration to keep it out of public view, to not have the body bags returning in a way that Americans will focus on it.

□ 2230

Mr. Speaker, I am here to say that this administration can attempt to hide or to deny, to not allow the ceremonies to take place in honor of our soldiers as we have done in the past, but that is only going to anger the American public. Americans will not take kindly to dismissing the deaths of our soldiers. They will not take kindly to any attempts to change the protocol that we had gotten used to when we could, for a moment, stop and focus on the fact that lives had been lost and provide a ceremony in honor of them for all of the American public to see.

Mr. Speaker, while I am here talking about veterans, and I am trying to make the connection between how we can do better by those in Iraq than we are doing by those who have already served long before them, whether it was in the Vietnam War, whether it was in Desert Storm, whether it was in World War II, I am anxious to send a message this evening, and that message is that the people of this country want to see this administration and the Members of this Congress do better by our soldiers and our veterans. I am hopeful that we will not have to see our American people become so angry that they embarrass this administration and this President by demanding that we get the truth, that we understand exactly what is happening, that our soldiers are taken care of, that they are brought back in the traditional ceremonies that we have gotten used to. I want Mr. Rumsfeld and the President of the United States to look the press in the eye and show that they are truly sorry for the deaths that are being caused. I do not wish our leaders,

whether it is the President or Mr. Rumsfeld, to just say in so many words: Get used to it. The sacrifices have to be made, that this is what war is all about and this is what we are going to be experiencing for some time to come.

Again, these are not the kind of words that people want to hear. This is not the kind of truth that the administration would like to confront. But as a Member of Congress, elected by the people to represent, I take this time leading up to Veterans Day to not only talk about our soldiers in Iraq but to say over and over again, we can do better by our veterans. We must do better by our veterans. Again, as it was said by the gentlewoman from Georgia, on Veterans Day, Members of Congress and leaders all across this country will be going to ceremonies. They will be at the veterans hospitals. They will be at the various VFW posts. They will be in places where veterans are. And they will talk about how they honor the sacrifices that our veterans have made. But what they will not talk about is what are we going to do to get the homeless veterans off the street? What are we going to do to create more cemetery space for our veterans? What are we going to do to reduce the long waiting times and the long waiting periods that our veterans are experiencing at our VA hospitals?

But, Mr. Speaker, I am hopeful because of the Democrats, because of our bill, because we are saying what is possible, and we have laid it out in a very clear and concise way, that the veterans themselves in the middle of these ceremonies will look the Members of Congress and others in the eye and instead of allowing them to get away with the ceremonial side of this, will ask about the substantive side of the public policy issues and say: What are you doing to protect us or to provide services for us, to make sure that you respect the investments that we have made.

Mr. BISHOP of Georgia. Mr. Speaker, when the Nation observes Veterans' Day, our collective purpose is to thank the men and women who have faithfully worn the uniform of the country's armed services for the service and sacrifice that has kept us strong and free.

But I think we should thank veterans for something else, as well.

In addition to their service in the military, we should also express the Nation's gratitude for the unshakeable foundation of patriotic citizenship that veterans have always provided in civilian life—and that the country cannot do without, especially during times of peril such as these.

Veterans never stop fighting for a free and secure country.

They have fought for a strong defense and strong foreign policy. They have fought for integrity and responsibility in government. They have fought to protect the U.S. flag and all it represents, including the respect we owe to those who have paid the price for freedom. They have fought for the benefits veterans have earned and deserve, including disability benefits for those who have suffered perma-

nent injuries in military service. They have fought for the American ideal of freedom and justice for all.

Those of us who serve in Congress should thank veterans not only by making speeches, but also by rolling up our sleeves and addressing the critical unmet needs of our veterans' population.

We need to act on long-pending "concurrent receipt" legislation so that we no longer deny disability payments to military retirees. Last year, Congress provided some new benefits to disabled retirees in lieu of concurrent receipt. But many disabled veterans still do not believe equity has been achieved. There is nothing that justifies a denial of these benefits to any eligible veteran, and Congress should correct this wrong right now.

We need to improve the veterans' health care system so that we no longer have a backlog of more than 100,000 veterans who are waiting six months or more to receive the care they need. Some veterans are waiting up to a year or more. This means many are getting sicker while they wait, and I fear some are not making it. This is intolerable.

We need the most cost-effective system possible, and I have no quarrel with the concept of the Veterans' Administration's Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services program. But we need to make sure that any reorganization does not end up downsizing or eliminating facilities that veterans need, thereby reducing access even more.

We need a VA budget that meets the needs—not one that falls below the new fiscal year's authorization by \$1.8 billion and barely keeps pace with inflation. I believe we need to cut taxes to stimulate the economy and provide relief to middle and lower income working Americans, but we do not need to provide an average tax cut of \$88,326 to Americans earnings more than \$1 million a year when we could trim that amount by just a few thousand dollars and save enough revenue to take care of some of our critical needs.

We need to fulfill the country's promise to our fellow Americans who have devoted a substantial part of their lives in defense of the country, many putting their lives on the line.

We live in difficult and dangerous times.

But we should be confident about the country's ability to meet the grave challenges we face.

As long as we have people in our country who stand ready to make whatever effort and sacrifice is necessary, we should be confident that our Nation has what it takes to defeat the forces that would do us harm and that we will succeed in advancing the cause of freedom for our generation and for generations to come.

As our veterans demonstrate every day, patriotism is alive and well.

And that should give us all hope for the future.

As we celebrate Veterans' Day, 2003, let us say to all of the Nation's 25.1 million veterans: "We thank you, we support you, we need you, and may God bless you for keeping the country free and strong."

GENERAL LEAVE

Ms. WATERS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on the subject of my special order.