Madam Speaker, the irony could not be thicker or, for

that matter, sweeter. Today, the day before Veterans Day, the

Republican leadership failed to gather the necessary votes to pass a

shameful budget reconciliation bill that will, among other things,

decrease funding for veterans. Somewhere Mr. DeLay should be left to

wonder how the callously efficient arm-twisting regime that he

installed in the House has crumbled so quickly.

The sheer audacity of trying to pass a budget reconciliation bill

that provides more tax breaks to the wealthy at the expense of

important social-net programs for the poor is unbelievable. The

programs slated to be cut include health care for veterans, Medicaid,

student loans, and child support enforcement.

The idea that America's Republican leaders would slash funding for

veterans the day before they should be honoring them would be even more

appalling than it already is if it were not so commonplace. In fact,

this pattern has repeated itself throughout President Bush's tenure in

office.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 coincided with the sharp

decrease in veterans health care and other benefits for those who have

bravely served in our Nation's military. The backlog at veterans

hospitals had never been greater than when the United States went to

war in Iraq. Now, with more than half a million soldiers having served

in Iraq, the burden on the VA will only increase.

And while the U.S. has spent over $200 billion for military

operations and reconstruction in Iraq over the past 2 years, during

this same time period the Bush administration and the Republican

Congress have repeatedly refused to provide veterans with the benefits

they have earned and the benefits they deserve.

Our Nation's so-called leaders have continually refused to fix the

system called ``concurrent receipt,'' whereby veterans health benefits

are deducted from their retirement benefits. This veterans tax is

wrong, and it needs to be fixed. Unfortunately, the Republicans in

Congress are too busy trying to pass bills that would make the rich

even richer, instead of fixing real inequities in our system.

Mr. Speaker, veterans deserve our respect not only on November 11,

Veterans Day, but all throughout the year. They deserve our respect,

they deserve our support, and they deserve all of the benefits our

government has promised them without scrimping, without exception,

without escape clauses. They certainly did not offer any excuses when

they enlisted in our military.

Six weeks ago, I traveled to Iraq with a small congressional

delegation to learn more about the mission and the heroic Americans

carrying it out. Nothing I saw changed my mind about the wrongness of

our Iraq policy. But one thing did move me: I came away from the trip

absolutely awed by our soldiers. They were even more committed, more

dedicated, and more courageous than I had ever imagined.

Having met and talked with them, it pains me to the core that their

fate rests in the hands of leaders who have failed them time and time

again. The men and women who wear the uniform deserve so much more.

They deserve civilian leaders who will put their safety before their

own political interests. They deserve leaders who would not send them

to Iraq on false pretenses on a poorly defined mission without all the

tools they need and without a plan to get them out of there; and they

deserve leaders who will give them adequate medical and financial

support when they come home.

For all the reasons I have mentioned today, it is time to bring our

troops home from Iraq. We need to focus on healing the wounds incurred

over the last 2\1/2\ years of war and administering to America's

domestic priorities. If we want to truly honor our veterans on Veterans

Day, the best thing we can do is prevent more veterans from being

created. We could do this tomorrow, if we wanted to, by ending the war

in Iraq and bringing our troops home. That would be the best gift of

all.