Mr. Speaker, we are moving swiftly into the Iraq

Watch time, and many other Members will be down here shortly to talk

about a couple of different issues, one would be the issue of Iraq that

has been going on for some time in a working group here.

Congress has been talking about this issue over and over and trying

to bring some awareness and some clarity to many of the people of this

country who are very concerned with what is going on in Iraq. I would

also like to, since we claimed the time here, I would also like to talk

a little bit about the veterans and a little bit about what is going on

here with the budget.

As we just talked about, and as the gentleman from New York

articulated and the gentleman from Florida articulated as well, there

is some real pressure being put on the budget here in the United States

Congress, and I did mention it towards the end. One of the programs

that is going to take a real beating here in the 2005 budget is going

to be the issue of veterans.

Now, the President has made a formal request of this body for another

$80 billion to help fund the Iraq war, and this will take the grand

total over $300 billion that we will spend on the Iraq war. And that is

just today. That is up to this point. This $80 billion may get us

through the year, but some analysts say it may not. We are going to be

over $300 billion in what we have spent in Iraq.

Now, there is nobody in this Chamber who will not support the troops,

who need our support. Many of us have argued, and I was on the

Committee on Veterans' Affairs in the last Congress, many of us argued

vehemently that we need to fully fund veterans health care in the

United States of America. If we are going to continue to say there are

other priorities in the budget, or that a certain amount of people who

make a certain amount of money, a lot of money, the Bill Gateses of the

world, should somehow get a tax cut and that we should do it on the

backs of the veterans of the United States of America, and tell them

their copay is going to go from $2 to $7, $7 to $15; that their annual

fees are going to be increased up to $250 if they are a category seven

or eight veteran, then this is an issue that I think as much as Social

Security attacks some of the fundamental concepts and promises of this

country.

Is there anything more despicable than to go out and tell a veteran

who has left a limb somewhere across the world that somehow he is not

going to be able to get the kind of benefits he was promised? That is

what is happening with the irresponsibility of the budgeteering that is

going on in the United States Congress today.

We showed the deficits: $450 billion. We are out borrowing money,

paying interest on it, and eating up a bigger share of the budget in

years to come. And we are not challenging the top 1 percent, or people

making $1 million a year or more to somehow pay their fair share, to

say they do not have to on the backs of the veterans.

And no one can squirm out of this one. This is one you just cannot

get away from. You can maybe talk private accounts will yield more

interest and at least get people thinking, but how can you not ask

people who benefit the most from the capitalistic system to pay and

meet their obligation to the rest of society? Because if it were not

for those people, if it were not for the veterans of the United States

military, there would be no capitalistic system for anyone else to make

money off of. That is the fundamental premise. So we need to make sure

that we find the resources in the Congress to do it.

I would like to just take this opportunity to acknowledge the

gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. Smith), who was the Republican chairman

of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, who was a great advocate for

veterans in this country and who was removed from the chairmanship of

the committee because he was too strong of an advocate because he

wanted more resources put in.

I live in Ohio, and a lot of those folks have moved into the State of

Florida, south Florida, Miami, and they have some sun and fun; but

there are a lot of veterans who have stayed in my community and who are

having a lot of difficulties accessing the system. So I think it is

appropriate that we are here following this debate, the generation that

gave us Social Security, the generation that freed Europe, the

generation that saved southeast Asia in many ways, and who created a

lot of the opportunities that we have here today and set us on this

path of democracy and fiscal responsibility for years to come, social

justice. I think we have an opportunity to honor those folks,

especially as we have more people from our generation coming back.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Florida (Mr. Meek).

Just as we are talking about this and all the

sacrifices that are being made over there and all the questions that

are coming up and what is going on, before I yield to the gentleman

from Ohio, there are a couple of statistics that I think we need to

share with the American people about the investment in our veterans,

because we have to focus on the ones that are coming back and new

veterans that are being created every day. I know the gentleman has

been out to Walter Reed and I have been out to Walter Reed several

times. There is nothing more tragic for any of us who serve in this

body than to go over there and see some of these soldiers and the

sacrifices that they have made for the country, and to come and look at

some of what is happening here in the Congress, where our President's

budget for health care programs provides only 106 million more dollars

than last year, $3.5 billion less than the veterans service

organizations that come here and testify before the Committee on

Veterans' Affairs and meet here say they need. The veterans groups, the

American Legion, they are not going to come before Congress and ask for

anything more than their soldiers that they served with need. And they

say they need $3.5 billion more. And so when you are telling us that

you are only going to increase it by $106 million in the President's

budget, it is outrageous.

I yield to the fine gentleman from Ohio whom I split Mahoning County

within the great State of Ohio.

We just had an hour where we discussed Social

Security and the private accounts, not to get back into it, but this

many Members on the other side are willing to

borrow $5 trillion over the next 20 years to pay for the privatization

plan. If you had come here and said, you know, we maybe need to borrow

$3.5 billion to fully fund veterans, I think many of us on this side of

the aisle would say, well, we think we should balance the budget, we

probably think that there is a better way of doing it, but what a much

better reason to go out and borrow money, $3.5 billion compared to $5

trillion granted, to meet the obligation that we have.

I thought it would be interesting just to show since 2001, I have

these charts working tonight so I am going to do one final chart. This

is the increase, funding increases since 2001. This is the percent of

increase in funding. The red is defense, the lavender is homeland

security, and the blue is 9/11 response, New York City, international

and airline relief. This is 2004, 2003, 2002, 2001. In 2004, 69 percent

of the increase in funding from this Congress went for defense, 9

percent for homeland security, and 12 percent for 9/11.

These are three priorities I think the whole Congress could agree on.

But to have a 70 percent increase in the military? You are telling me

we could not find $3.5 billion that could not get to Halliburton in

order to fund some of this for our veterans? My point is that this is

an issue of priorities. This comes down to one word, choice.

What is the choice that this Congress wants to make?

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I appreciate the

comments, and I have just got to say it is stunning. We are down here a

lot and we get wrapped up and frustrated and upset about this; but I

mean, when we take a step back, this is stunning what we are doing. It

is absolutely stunning that we can somehow expect the American people

and the veterans that are sitting at home tonight who make $22,000 a

year, who struggle and many people in our community in northeast Ohio

who have lost their steel jobs or their rubber jobs and have moved into

the VA health, they have moved into VA health because they do not have

anything else. But they made the sacrifice. When the bell rung, they

were there.

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I would just like

to say that that would not be the least embarrassing thing about this

war.

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I think if you are

sitting at home listening to this debate that we are having here, the

discussion we are having here, there is a real key component, and I

mentioned it earlier and I think it is worth reiterating: Every major

veteran's service organization is against what the President and this

Congress is doing.

This is the most noble generation in the history of our country. They

are fiscally conservative. They are Republicans and Democrats. They are

frugal. They saved. They never had the kind of personal debt that our

Nation has today, not their generation.

They are not going to ask for money just to ask for it. They need it,

and they see the need with their friends, within their organizations,

and they are asking for it. If you do not believe the gentleman from

Ohio (Mr. Strickland), the gentleman from Washington (Mr. Inslee), the

gentleman from Ohio (Mr. Ryan) or the gentleman from Florida (Mr.

Meek), believe all the veterans organizations that are out there

sticking up for their membership. If there is anybody you should

believe, it is them.

Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I would like to

thank both gentlemen tonight and just say we are willing to work with

the other side to find the $3.5 billion, whether it is out of the $500

billion or $600 billion increase to the Medicare program that we just

found out about, we could squeeze $3.5 billion out of that, or whether

it is asking the wealthiest to help. We are willing to work with them

and follow the veterans organizations and do what is right to our

veterans who made the sacrifices.