I thank the gentleman from Ohio for yielding. We also

have with us tonight the gentleman from Washington (Mr. Inslee). There

are some things that I think the American people need to understand

about what is happening here in Washington, D.C., especially as we

discuss the budget and its relevance to the veterans population. I am

amazed. I am truly amazed and puzzled. I really do not understand why

the President and why the Republican leadership in this House would

choose to treat veterans with such disdain.

Why do I say that? I will share with you some recent history with

this administration. One of the first things the President did after

becoming President during his first term was to increase the cost that

a veteran pays for a prescription drug from $2 a prescription to $7 a

prescription. I introduced legislation to repeal that increase but

unfortunately I was unable to get that legislation passed. So now many

veterans, thousands of veterans, pay $7 for each prescription they get

through the VA. Seven dollars may not sound like a lot of money, but

many of the veterans who are in need of medication take 10 or more

prescriptions a month, and many of these people are on fixed incomes.

Many of them have fought our wars. In fact, you can be a combat-

decorated veteran and you can be a priority 8 veteran. That is the

veteran that the administration says makes too much money to currently

qualify to participate in VA health care. Or you can be a priority 7

veteran, and a priority 7 veteran is a veteran that has a medical need

but the medical need is not a direct result of the military service,

and so they are charged more for the VA health care they receive.

So the President increased the cost of a prescription drug from $2 to

$7. Shortly after, the VA issued a new policy. It was in the form of a

memo that went to all the VA health care providers. It said basically,

and I am summarizing, but it said too many veterans are coming in for

service and we cannot afford to treat all these veterans and

consequently there are waiting lines; and so we are going to solve this

problem by rationing care to veterans, and we are going to ration care

by prohibiting our nurses and social workers and physicians from

proactively informing veterans of the services they are entitled to

receive under the law.

We are talking about services that lawfully were made available to

them by the actions of this Congress. I thought that was egregious. I

have filed suit against the Veterans' Administration in conjunction

with the Vietnam Veterans of America to try to overturn this egregious

policy. That suit is currently before the court. I am hopeful the court

will recognize that the VA is in violation of law and will force them

to withdraw this onerous gag order.

We see a pattern developing here. Because then the VA decided that

they were going to create a brand-new category or priority group for

veterans, and they called that new category priority group 8. They

said, this group just simply can no longer enroll and receive VA health

care. And why? Well, because they make too much money, so they should

not be able to get health care. The formula that is used to determine

if a veteran is high income and no longer entitled to receive VA health

care is based on a Housing and Urban Development formula.

In my district, you can make as little as $22,000 a year and the VA

will consider you high income and tell you that you can no longer

receive VA health care. Think of that. Those of us who serve in this

Chamber, the American people have a right to know that, make over

$150,000 a year. Maybe we can pay $7 a prescription for our

prescription medications if we need to. Maybe we can find the ability

to afford the kind of health insurance that will take care of our

medical needs if we need to. But I submit to you that if you make

$22,000 a year, you are not high income. I think it is shameful, I use

that word, but it is shameful that this government would make a

decision to treat our veterans in that manner.

And now, before I yield back to my friend from Ohio, the Republican

leadership in this House has done something just very recently that the

American people have a right to know about. Because over the last

Congress, Democrats and Republicans worked together on the VA Committee

to preserve adequate funding. It was not as much as I wanted it to be,

but at least it was enough to maintain at least the current level of

services. And we did that with the help of some of our Republican

colleagues. The chairman of the VA Committee in the last Congress

really enabled us to keep VA funding at a level that enabled current

services to continue. That Republican Congressman's name was Chris

Smith. He is a Republican Congressman from the State of New Jersey.

Many people who watch C-SPAN know Chris Smith because he frequently

stands in this Chamber and he argues and advocates for an end to

abortion. I would call Chris Smith, at least in my judgment, he is the

most pro-life Member of this House. I just point that out to emphasize

that he is a true conservative. He is a true conservative.

Chris Smith had served on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs for 24

years, nearly a quarter of a century. He had been the chair of the VA

Committee for the last 4 years. But because he was an advocate for

veterans, Speaker Hastert and the leadership in this House decided they

were going to strip him of his chair's position. Not only did they do

that, they removed him from this committee that he had served on for 24

years, and they did that in the face of opposition from 10 of the

national veterans service organizations. I am talking about the

American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of

Foreign Wars, the AMVETS, the Vietnam Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans

of America, the Noncommissioned Officers, the Jewish War Veterans. All

of these veterans organizations wrote Speaker Hastert a letter, they

all signed their name to that letter, and they said to Speaker Hastert,

it would really be a shame for Chris Smith to be taken out of the

chair's position and to be removed from this committee because he has

been our friend. He has been an advocate for veterans. What was Speaker

Hastert's response? Chris Smith was stripped of his chair's position,

removed from the VA Committee.

I am asking my friend from Ohio, do you see a pattern here? It seemed

that time after time after time, this administration and the leadership

in this House of Representatives, they are taking steps that are

harmful to veterans.

Mr. Speaker, what the gentleman says is true. There

are several ways we can find the money to pay for veterans health care.

For one thing, we can cut back on these tax cuts that have gone to the

richest people. There are people in this country who have never served

in the military, never put their lives on the line; and yet this

President, during this time of war, has decided to give them a huge,

huge tax cut, while our veterans, many of them becoming increasingly

elderly and disabled, are being deprived of adequate health care,

having to wait for weeks and months to get a doctor's appointment. That

is just wrong.

So the President had a choice: tax cuts for the richest people in

America or adequate funding for VA health care. He chose tax cuts for

the richest among us.

There is something else I would like to share with my friend from

Ohio. We are spending in Iraq today about $1.25 billion a week. Think

of that. And we cannot find an additional $3.5 billion for our

veterans, all of our veterans. I do not want to choose among our

veterans. I do not want to say this veteran is worthy and this veteran

is not worthy. All of these people have served the country. They are in

need of help and health care, and I am getting sick and tired of

hearing about focusing on the core constituency. Of course we need to

focus on the core constituency. But that does not mean that we should

neglect other veterans as well. And that is what is happening. And I

hope the people in this country, especially the veterans and the

families of veterans, are paying attention because we are treating our

veterans in a shabby manner.

The President's budget that he sent us a couple of weeks ago is a

shameful document. It cuts back on nursing home care for veterans. It

is a shameful document. And I do not want to hear my colleagues over

there say these are tight budgetary times, we just do not have the

money.

We have the money, Mr. Speaker, to pay for what we think is

important. We have the money for that. The fact is that President Bush

and this leadership do not consider America's veterans a priority. They

cannot run from that fact. And I would just invite any of my Republican

friends to come to this floor and let us discuss this openly. Let us

discuss the fact that President Bush is asking that our veterans pay

increased costs for medications, that he wants to impose a $250 annual

user fee for many of our veterans to use a hospital. I think it is

shameful. I really think it is shameful.

Mr. Speaker, as I say, I would invite any of my

Republican friends to come down here and challenge what we are saying

because what we are saying is the truth.

Mr. Speaker, the fact is that, as I understand it,

about $9 billion is unaccounted for.

Mr. Speaker, I have introduced legislation to make

this government stop what they are doing, stop fighting these veterans,

these tortured veterans. The gentleman explained it well, but I would

like to just take a stab at it as well because what we have here is

these are soldiers that were captured during the first Gulf War, and

they were terribly tortured under Saddam Hussein's regime. This

government, as my colleagues recall, had held on to billions of dollars

that were Iraqi dollars, and when these tortured Americans sued and won

their suit, they were laying claim on those dollars that this country

had possession of, and this administration returned that money to Iraq

and literally used the Justice Department to go to court to try to set

aside that judgment that would compensate these soldiers.

And the gentleman from Washington State is right. At the same time,

here is Secretary Rumsfeld speaking of the Iraqis who were abused at

Abu Ghraib prison saying they are going to be compensated. So our

Secretary of Defense is willing to use American dollars to compensate

Iraqis who had been abused by Americans, and at the same time this

government is fighting to keep our American troops who were tortured in

Iraq from being compensated with Iraqi dollars. How can one explain

that to the American people? It is unbelievable.

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman will continue to yield,

I think it shows a moral blindness. I really do. I mean, we are talking

here about decisions that are made that affect the lives of American

soldiers, and in this case soldiers who were tortured. There is no

question that they were tortured. There is no question about that.

There is no question as to who was responsible. It was the Iraqi

Government under Saddam Hussein.

Now this administration is trying to play, I think, word games

because they are saying, well, that was the government that existed

under Saddam Hussein and now that Saddam Hussein has been removed from

office, this new government is not responsible for what happened under

Saddam Hussein. But I would remind the gentleman from Washington State

the money that we were holding on to here was money that was from the

Saddam Hussein government and regime. So I would like to ask the

President if I had a chance to talk with him, I would like to say: Mr.

President, why do you think Iraqis who were mistreated at Abu Ghraib

deserve to be compensated with American tax dollars and at the same

time you do not believe that American soldiers who were tortured when

they were captured and held in Iraq should be compensated with Iraqi

dollars? That seems like a fairly straightforward question, and I just

wonder how the President would answer that.

And the soldiers that are active duty.

And Reservists and Nation Guard.

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman will yield further, we

are standing here and talking about this, and there are probably

Americans watching and perhaps a few listening to us, and what we are

saying sounds almost unbelievable.

I understand how someone listening to this may be puzzled, because

there is no rational explanation, as far as I am concerned. Why should

this government put a greater value on compensating Iraqis than on

compensating tortured Americans? It just does not make sense. And it

does not fit the image that is usually presented to the American people

by this administration, because you hear a lot of rhetoric about how

much we appreciate our soldiers, how much we appreciate what the

military does for us, but the world now knows, and certainly most

Americans that have paid attention, that we did send our soldiers into

battle without adequate body armor, and we have them driving around in

vehicles in Iraq that are not properly armored, and we have people over

there conducting patrols and driving long distances and taking fuel

from one part of Iraq to the other part of Iraq without night vision

goggles. So we know there has been that kind of neglect.

But what my friend has brought to our attention here tonight

regarding these tortured Americans and the administration's fighting

them through

the courts to keep them from getting compensated by the Iraqi

government is nearly unbelievable.

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman will yield further, why

is there not an outcry about this? I think one of the reasons is that

the American people are not fully aware of what is happening and find

it hard to believe. I can understand why someone listening to us

tonight would find it hard to believe what we have said, because it is

so outrageous.

It is outrageous. As I said a little earlier, it is contrary to the

public image we get from this administration, because if you listen to

rhetoric coming from the White House and coming from the leadership in

this House here, you would think that they really appreciate the

veterans and they care for veterans and they were going to do

everything they could to care for veterans. But the facts just do not

match the rhetoric.

You could also wonder why is there not an outcry from many of the

Republicans who I know care about veterans? I have friends on that side

of the aisle that I know are veterans themselves, and they deeply in

their hearts care for veterans. The gentleman from New Jersey (Mr.

Smith) was one such person that I mentioned, the former Chair of the

committee. But I think there is a hesitancy to speak out, because if

you speak out and you challenge the leadership over there, there is a

price to pay.

The gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. Smith) found that out. When he

spoke up for veterans, he was stripped of his chairman position and he

was taken off of a committee that he had been on for 24 years. That is

almost unbelievable. Twenty-four years, a quarter of a century almost,

this man had served on that committee.

Mr. Speaker, if the gentleman will yield further, I

do not think is it is a good message to the rest of the Republicans who

serve there. The message is if you challenge us, you are in trouble. So

it silences even their own Members. It keeps them from having the

ability to speak up and speak out.

I have said before, we are elected to come here to represent the

people who vote for us and make us their representative. We do not come

here to serve the gentleman from Illinois (Speaker Hastert). We do not

come here to serve the gentleman from Texas (Mr. DeLay) or the

gentlewoman from California (Ms. Pelosi). We come here to represent the

people who send us here.

If my Republican friends do not have the freedom to speak up and

speak out about what they think is right for their constituents without

getting a committee taken away from them or getting a position taken

away from them, well, then they become impotent, quite frankly. They

are not able to be a true representative.

I ask this question: Where are the friends of the gentleman from New

Jersey (Mr. Smith)? Where are they in the Republican caucus? I want to

tell you, if that happened to my friend from Washington State, if our

Democratic

leadership did that, or if our Democratic leadership did that to my

colleague from the State of Ohio, I would be outraged, and I think

Members of our caucus would be outraged. We would not stand for it.

But there is a silence over there that is very, very troubling. What

it means is there is one or two or three people who are in charge of

what happens in this House, and the others go a long to get along.

I quoted this statement from Ben Franklin before. I think it is good

and applicable. Ben Franklin said, ``If you act like sheep, the wolves

will eat you.'' I wonder if my colleagues over there are not acting

like sheep? They are being awfully quiet. They let an honored,

respected, hard-working, committed, devoted, dedicated member of their

caucus be treated in that manner, be treated in that manner, and I did

not hear any public outcry at all. None at all.

I think it must be because of fear, because I know there are people

over there who respected the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. Smith), who

believed he was right in his thinking and in the position he was trying

to take as an advocate for veterans. Yet I did not hear any public

outcry.

I think it is a shame that this House would be so constrained out of

fear of what the leadership may do if the individual members speak up

and speak out.