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House of Representatives

CONDEMNING THE ACTIONS OF SEPTEMBER 7, 2007, RESULTING IN DAMAGE TO THE VIETNAM VETERANS WAR MEMORIAL

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. FILNER. I rise in strong support of this bill which condemns the action that resulted in damage to our Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We all know that this memorial recognizes and honors the men and women who are veterans of our Nation who served in one of America's most divisive wars. The memorial grew out of a need to try to heal the Nation's wounds as America struggled to reconcile its different moral and political points of view on this war. In fact, the memorial was conceived and designed to make no political statement about the war. It was designed to bring us together. It was designed as a place where everyone, regardless of their opinion of the war, could come together, remember and honor those who served and those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service of their country. I think all of us, wherever we were during that terribly

divisive time, feels at peace and feels a relationship to those people who served our Nation.

The memorial, as I said, has paved the way towards reconciliation and healing, a process that still continues. That's why, Mr. Speaker, I think we were all so disturbed when we heard about the senseless act of vandalism that happened earlier this year. Someone walked along that memorial with some type of oil applying it secretly on the wall as they walked by. The unknown oil has done real damage to the polished granite surface. But it did more than damage the wall, Mr. Speaker. It damaged the respect we have for our Nation's veterans and their sacrifice, damaging the healing process; and it takes us, as a Nation, back to a time when we did not

honor or take care of our returning Vietnam veterans.

It takes us back to a time when many people in this country confused the war and the warrior. If you did not like the war, you said to heck with the warrior. That was a deep mistake on our part, Mr. Speaker, a tragic mistake, and one, as a Nation, we still suffer from today.

We did not provide these veterans the care they needed. We didn't welcome them back with honor and dignity and respect, and we're paying a price today. More than half of the homeless on the streets throughout America tonight, are Vietnam vets, over 200,000. Others still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, other ailments. And as I said earlier, as many Vietnam veterans have now committed suicide as died in the original war. We, as a Nation, have to rectify this wrong. We have to take care and provide the health care, the treatment and the support that our Vietnam veterans deserve and need. We have to say that we are sorry for the treatment that they received when they came home, and honor these courageous men and women for their sacrifice to this Nation.

Anything that subtracts from this healing process is an outrage to the honor and memory of these brave veterans who fought and died for our country. And that is exactly what the senseless, needless act of vandalism that was perpetrated on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial does. It rubs salt into the wounds of our veterans that are still healing, and dishonors those that deserve nothing less than our Nation's honor and gratitude.

So, Mr. Speaker, through this resolution we condemn this act. We condemn those who are responsible. The oil is not just a stain on a piece of granite; it is a stain on the fabric of

our Nation, a Nation still healing from a divisive war but a Nation that honors the sacrifices of its soldiers and veterans.

Maya Ying Lin, who designed the Memorial, said, "..... this Memorial is for all those who have died, and for us to remember them."

Mr. Speaker, let us remember their patriotism and valor and let us condemn the discordant acts of those who seek to tarnish them....

Mr. Speaker, I thank Mr. *Carter*. I thank all the Members who spoke on this legislation. It is an important bill. But I must say, we ought to go further than this resolution.

Mr. *Poe* said voting for this resolution means we're standing up for our troops. Well, I just spoke recently to the Annual Convention of the Vietnam Veterans of America. I'll tell you what they define as standing up for our troops—and there will be legislation embodying all of this soon. It would mean that we would look at the 200,000 Vietnam vets who are on the street homeless tonight and solve that moral blot on our record.

Most of us go to Stand-Downs every year, where the whole community comes around for 3 days and provides security and comfort, medical attention, dental health, legal assistance, clothes for the homeless vets in that community. The community comes together and has a holistic approach of drug and alcohol abuse and job counseling. So we know what to do for those 3 days. But the last five or eight Stand-Downs that I've addressed I said, I'm tired of coming to Stand-Downs. We should have Stand-Downs 365 days a year. That's what the Veterans Administration ought to do. With a \$100 billion budget, you

would think we could take care of the Vietnam vets who are homeless. That would be standing up for the troops.

In addition, many of them have been fighting for decades to get compensation for an agent orange disability. And the law, while we have extended the areas to which presumption applies and give these brave veterans health care and disability compensation, there is still too many areas that are not awarded a claim.

At this stage (I would like to talk to Mr. *Johnson* later about this), I would say all these agent orange claims, if they have medical backing and help by a veteran service officer, are presumptive, and have them stop fighting after all these decades and get the care and attention that they need.

I will tell you, I have just got a list of 500 veterans from one State, Vietnam vets, who got Parkinson's disease in their early fifties. That's way earlier than the average age of onset for the general population. So it's obviously Vietnam that was the cause. Yet the law says there is no proof that agent orange caused Parkinson's or Lou Gehrig's disease, and so they're shut out. That's a shame. They served us; we should serve them. Let's grant all these agent orange claims.

And we ought to, according to the representatives at the convention, give the status of "mandatory" or "assured funding" to the health care for our veterans. Right now, health care in our budget is called "discretionary." We fight over it every year, Democrats, Republican, House, Senate, VA Committee versus everybody. We should not play politics with veterans health care, and we should have a guaranteed mandatory budget.

Those are the things that would really tell our Vietnam vets that we care about them. So let's pass this resolution. The wall is, as we've heard today, so important to our memories, to our healing, to those brave men who fought for us. But let's go further and really give the Vietnam vets a thank you and pass legislation that will not only end homelessness and grant the agent orange claims, but give mandatory funding for the VA health care budget.