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House of Representatives

ANOTHER INADEQUATE BUDGET FOR OUR VETERANS

**HON. BOB FILNER
OF CALIFORNIA**

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MR. FILNER: Mr. Speaker and colleagues, I was truly sad when today in the Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing I saw the figures in the administration's budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs for the coming fiscal year.

Last year in an effort that was actually just completed a couple weeks ago, many Members of Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, worked with the support of our Nation's veteran service organizations to finally arrive at a budget, while not completely adequate, at least addressed many of the needs of our veterans.

So I was very disheartened to find ourselves in the same place we were a year ago. We were faced with the same tired old proposals to raise the co-payments on prescription drugs at the VA, a proposal that Congress soundly defeated probably many times.

We are faced with a proposal for a \$250 annual fee for many veterans, which Congress also has defeated. So we are faced

with a VA policy of continuing to suspend enrollments for the so-called priority 8 veterans. These are veterans, but they cannot be enrolled because we cannot handle them.

And this budget request from the administration cuts the VA nursing home program and cuts funding, if you can believe this, for medical research. Imagine how our veterans must feel. Actually, we know how they feel. The Paralyzed Veterans of America has issued a press release entitled, "Another Year, Another Inadequate Budget Request for Veterans' Health Care."

They go on to point out that this request includes the lowest appropriation request for VA health care made by any administration for a decade. Although the VA Under Secretary for Health has testified that an average yearly medical care increase of 12 to 14 percent is needed to meet the cost of inflation and mandatory salary increases, there is less than 2 percent more than last

(over)

year's appropriation recommended in the President's budget.

Likewise, the leaders of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other veterans' organizations have expressed dismay, if I can say the least, at the proposed VA medical care funding. In fact, I feel I should just pull out the old tapes and old speeches from last year and rerun them, except it is not last year. Since the last budget request from this administration, the Nation has sent our young men and women to a war in Iraq, and they will be coming home as, guess what? Veterans.

Caring for our veterans is one of the costs of war, and the budget request does not take note of this fact.

I have enormous respect for Secretary Principi, who I believe does a great deal

with inadequate budgets. But even this Secretary, or should I say especially this Secretary, needs a Congress that will pass a budget that is worthy of our veterans.

So sign me up for the battle again this year. Whatever is needed we will do to fill the budget holes that the President has left in this fiscal year.

Most of all let us take note that this budget request points out the need for mandatory funding for VA health care. Let me repeat, mandatory funding of VA health care. It is now called discretionary, so we have to go through this battle every single year. Let us pass mandatory funding for VA health care so we will not have to rerun the same tapes next year and the next year and the next year.