June 30, 2005 - Remarks on Veterans Health Care

Providing for Consideration of Motions to Suspend the Rules

Mr. Speaker, as the gentleman from Florida has explained, this rule would do two things. It would allow the House to consider legislation under suspension of the rules, and it would waive a provision in the Congressional Budget Act that prohibits the House from adjourning for more than 3 days unless it has completed consideration on reconciliation.

Mr. Speaker, in general, I think far too much of the legislation passed around here is done by suspension, a process that waives all House rules and prohibits all amendments, and even precludes a motion to recommit. Having that said, however, I must add that tonight is somewhat different.

I would ordinarily have more concern about allowing yet another day for considering legislation in this manner, but I do realize that in limited instances, it may be necessary to waive this rule in order to expedite legislation that is truly emergency in nature. It is evident today that two of the four items which are to be considered under suspension are indeed particularly urgent.

One is the temporary extension of the highway bill. Without this legislation, the highway programs will be shut down and significant layoffs will occur. I am hopeful, as I am sure many of my colleagues are as well, that this will be the last time that we will have to pass a short-term extension of this bill. The conferees must finish their work on the highway authorization bill quickly so we can begin building and repairing our Nation's decaying highways and infrastructure.

The other critical bill before us today is the emergency supplemental bill for veterans medical care. We Democrats attempted to address this emerging veterans crisis earlier this week when we advocated for the Edwards amendment and also in March when the gentlewoman from Oregon (Ms. *Hooley*) and the gentleman from Washington (Mr. *Baird*) brought in a resolution asking for an amendment to be approved by the Committee on Rules to include $1.3 billion more. They were turned down.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is being flooded with veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, four times as many as had originally been budgeted for. Trying to help 103,000 of our brave men and women with a budget designed to assist just over 25,000 has produced a shortfall in the Veterans Department funds of more than $1 billion this year, a staggering sum.

The gentleman from Texas' (Mr. *Edwards*) amendment would have filled in a shameful gap between our Nation's professed support for its veterans and its actual action on their behalf; but, Mr. Speaker, the Republican majority in our House was not concerned with this chasm separating rhetoric from reality.

As I said, the Edwards amendment was voted down on a party-line vote. Not a single Republican voted for the necessary health care for our wounded veterans; and on the emergency supplemental bill, as I mentioned before, the Baird-Hooley amendment to provide $1.3 billion that was in March was not allowed by the Committee on Rules on a party-line vote.

This issue is not about Republicans or Democrats. It is about our soldiers. We have a patriotic duty to uphold our end of the bargain and properly care for the fighting men and women of this country.

This is a sacred bond of trust, a contract that the majority has violated; but my fellow Americans believe that refusing to care for our veterans after having voted to send them to war is the height of hypocrisy, and the public is outraged.

As a result, House Republicans have reversed course. They received the wake-up call. They have come back to the table so we can hammer out the funding we need to care for our troops, as we should have earlier this week and in March.

This is a pattern that has become all too familiar. The majority does something unpopular, the public gets incensed, and the majority backs off. It has happened over and over with the ethics crisis in the House. It happened with the recent Republican attempt to kill public broadcasting in America; and now less than 7 days later, they are at it again, having to fess up to the fact that

their priorities are out of step with the American people, their values are out of the mainstream.

Have they had a change of heart regarding the issue before us? Perhaps, or perhaps they just do not want to go home to July 4th parades in their districts before they have dealt with the tangible and pressing need of the veterans they will be saluting.

Let me say I find it absolutely scandalous that the Veterans Administration failed to tell us of this shortfall.

Now, Mr. Speaker, while I give my friends on the right credit for admitting their error and working to fix it, I regret to report that their proposed solution is just not good enough.

They have proposed increasing veterans spending by $975 million, which is still $25 million short of what the Veterans Affairs Department says it needs just this year, and more than half a billion dollars short of what the Senate pledged yesterday. Their bill does nothing to address the issue of veterans funding in 2006, where we are told there will be another more than $1 billion deficit.

I hope and pray we do not have to have this embarrassing debate again next year and can instead solve this problem now. We should always remember, Mr. Speaker, that it is easy to make the right decision when the whole world is watching, but what defines our character is what we do when no one is watching.

The Members of the majority have repeatedly been coerced by popular pressure into doing what is right when all eyes are on them. Now, both I and my colleagues on the Democratic side implore them to do something more: to summon the courage and the wisdom to do what is right when the only eyes on them are their own.