There are a number of ideas out there for tax relief this year. President Clinton talks about the need for child care. In fact, he talks about expanding the current child care tax credit. Let us compare what that means. Under the President's child care tax credit, which only families with children with incomes less than $50,000 would qualify for, the President's plan would provide $358 in extra take-home pay at the end of the year for the average couple that would qualify.

The Marriage Tax Elimination Act, as an alternative to the President's plan, would actually provide $1,400. If we think about that, at a Joliet day care center for this machinist and schoolteacher living in Joliet, that is 3 weeks worth of day care under the President's proposal or 3 months' worth of day care under the Marriage Tax Elimination Act. The question is, which is better, 3 weeks under the President's plan, or 3 months under elimination of the Marriage Tax Penalty Act?

The bottom line is we should be working to eliminate the marriage tax penalty. It is wrong that our Tax Code punishes marriage with higher taxes. We should make it the centerpiece of our budget discussions. I am pretty proud that this Congress, our new majority, which has been in place for 3 years, has provided more tax relief for middle-class families than any Congress in recent history.

In 1996 we, of course, provided for the adoption tax credit to help families provide a loving home for children. In 1997 we provided a $500-per-child tax credit, which for Illinois families, for 3 million Illinois kids, would allow $1.5 billion in higher take-home pay for Illinois families.

This year let us stop punishing marriage. Let us make elimination of the marriage tax penalty the number one must-do. Let us make it the centerpiece. Let us eliminate the marriage tax penalty, and do it now.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to highlight what is arguably the most unfair provision in the U.S. Tax Code: the marriage tax penalty. I want to thank you for your long term interest in bringing parity to the tax burden imposed on working married couples compared to a couple living together outside of marriage.

In January, President Clinton gave his State of the Union Address outlining many of the things he wants to do with the budget surplus.

A surplus provided by the bipartisan budget agreement which: cut waste, put America's fiscal house in order, and held Washington's feet to the fire to balance the budget.

While President Clinton paraded a long list of new spending totaling at least $46–$48 billion in new programs—we believe that a top priority should be returning the budget surplus to America's families as additional middle-class tax relief.

This Congress has given more tax relief to the middle class and working poor than any Congress of the last half century.

I think the issue of the marriage penalty can best be framed by asking these questions: Do Americans feel it's fair that our tax code imposes a higher tax penalty on marriage? Do Americans feel it's fair that the average married working couple pays almost $1,400 more in taxes than a couple with the almost identical income living together outside of marriage? Is it right that our tax code provides an incentive to get divorced?

In fact, today the only form one can file to avoid the marriage tax penalty is paperwork for divorce. And that is just wrong.

Since 1969, our tax laws have punished married couples when both spouses work. For no other reason than the decision to be joined in holy matrimony, more than 21 million couples a year are penalized. They pay more in taxes than they would if they were single. Not only is the marriage penalty unfair, it's wrong that our tax code punishes society's most basic institution. The marriage tax penalty exacts a disproportionate toll on working women and lower income couples with children. In many cases it is a working women's issue.

Let me give you an example of how the marriage tax penalty unfairly affects middle class married working couples.

For example, a machinist, at a Caterpillar manufacturing plant in my home district of Joliet, makes $30,500 a year in salary. His wife is a tenured elementary school teacher, also bringing home $30,500 a year in salary. If they would both file their taxes as singles, as individuals, they would pay 15%.

MARRIAGE PENALTY EXAMPLE IN THE SOUTH SUBURBS

	Machinist	School teacher	Couple
Adjusted gross income	$30,500.00	$30,500.00	$61,000.00
Less personal exemption and standard deduction	6,550.00	6,550.00	11,800.00
Taxable income	23,950.00	23,950.00	49,200.00
Tax liability	3,592.50	3,592.50	8,563.00
Marriage penalty			1,378.00

But if they chose to live their lives in holy matrimony, and now file jointly, their combined income of $61,000 pushes them into a higher tax bracket of 28 percent, producing a tax penalty of $1,400 in higher taxes.

On average, America's married working couples pay $1,400 more a year in taxes than individuals with the same incomes. That's serious money. Everyday we get closer to April 15th more married couples will be realizing that they are suffering the marriage tax penalty.

Particularly if you think of it in terms of: a down payment on a house or a car, one years tuition at a local community college, or several months worth of quality child care at a local day care center.

To that end, Congressman DAVID MCINTOSH and I have authored the Marriage Tax Elimination Act.

It would allow married couples a choice in filing their income taxes, either jointly or as individuals—which ever way lets them keep more of their own money.

Our bill already has the bipartisan cosponsorship of 232 Members of the House and a similar bill in the Senate also enjoys widespread support.

It isn't enough for President Clinton to suggest tax breaks for child care. The President's child care proposal would help a working couple afford, on average, three weeks of day care. Elimination of the marriage tax penalty would give the same couple the choice of paying for three months of child care—or addressing other family priorities. After all, parents know better than Washington what their family needs.

We fondly remember the 1996 State of the Union address when the President declared emphatically that, quote ''the era of big government is over.''

We must stick to our guns, and stay the course.

There never was an American appetite for big government.

But there certainly is for reforming the existing way government does business.

And what better way to show the American people that our government will continue along the path to reform and prosperity than by eliminating the marriage tax penalty.

Ladies and Gentleman, we are on the verge of running a surplus. It's basic math.

It means Americans are already paying more than is needed for government to do the job we expect of it.

What better way to give back than to begin with mom and dad and the American family—the backbone of our society.

We ask that President Clinton join with Congress and make elimination of the marriage tax penalty * * * bipartisan priority.

Of all the challenges married couples face in providing home and hearth to America's children, the U.S. Tax Code should not be one of them.

Lets eliminate The Marriage Tax Penalty and do it now.

Which is better?

NOTE: The President's Proposal to expand the child care tax credit will pay for only 2 or 3 weeks of child care. The Weller-McIntosh Marriage Tax Elimination Act, HR 2456, will allow married couples to pay for 3 months of child care.

Which Is Better, 3 Weeks or 3 Months?

CHILD CARE OPTIONS UNDER THE MARRIAGE TAX ELIMINATION ACT

	Average tax relief	Average weekly day care cost	Weeks day care
Marriage Tax Elimination Act	$1,400	$127	11.0
President's Child Care Tax Credit	358	127	2.8

URGING MEMBERS TO JOIN THE CONGRESSIONAL DIALOGUE ON VIETNAM

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentlewoman from California (Ms. SANCHEZ) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Ms. SANCHEZ. Mr. Speaker, this past June, United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Vietnam to formally open the United States Embassy there. The recent establishment of diplomatic relations reflects changes between the United States and Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the lifting of the trade embargo in 1994.

Thus, several issues are emerging in the dialogue between the United States and Vietnam. It necessitates the creation of a forum for Members to express their views and to work with the administration on forming foreign policy towards Vietnam.

I rise today to call on my colleagues to join the Congressional Dialogue on Vietnam. It is founded by myself and the gentlewoman from California (Ms. ZOE LOFGREN). This group will facilitate the dialogue between Members of Congress. It will also provide information to interested parties, and it will engage in discussions between Congress, the administration, and the Vietnamese-American community.

Last September I co-chaired a human rights caucus, a briefing on the human rights situation in Vietnam. During this briefing we heard from representatives from international, religious, and human rights organizations about the status of human rights, religious persecution, and the social and political state of Vietnam.

Through this hearing we learned that there are several voices wanting to be heard on this issue, and it is our job to give these groups the forum to do so. I strongly believe that with the normalization of relations between the two countries there comes a great responsibility. Now, more than ever, it is of critical importance that we pay careful attention to the progression of developments in U.S. Vietnam policy. Again, I strongly urge my colleagues to join the Congressional Dialogue on Vietnam, and I look forward to working with each of them on this important issue.

MOVING OUR COUNTRY TOWARDS A FAIRER, FLATTER, AND SIMPLER TAX CODE AND TAX SYSTEM

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from California (Mr. RIGGS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. RIGGS. Mr. Speaker, I take to the floor during morning hour to just bring Members' attention to very interesting developments yesterday that really signaled the first round in a national debate about reforming our Tax Code and moving our country in the direction of a fairer, flatter, simpler Tax Code and tax system.

If Members will for a moment just compare the contrasting styles, the tone of the debate by the proponents and advocates on both sides of this issue. Yesterday two of our Republican colleagues, the House majority leader, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. DICK ARMEY) and the gentleman from Louisiana (Mr. BILLY TAUZIN), spoke to three different groups back here in Washington. This was part of their Scrap the Code tour that they have taken on the road to cities around the country.

Yesterday majority leader Armey, who was one of the leading congressional proponents of the flat tax, and the gentleman from Louisiana (Mr. TAUZIN), one of the leading Congressional proponents of a national sales tax, a national tax on consumption, spoke to these three groups as part of what I think is a very rational, a very level debate about replacing the current Tax Code in favor of one of these two plans, both of which, in my view, would be simpler and fairer than the current system. Again, they have been doing this around the country as part of an effort to inform and engage the American people in this debate.

Contrast their, again, very rational approach to discussing these issues with the President's remarks yesterday back here in Washington. I am quoting from the Washington edition of the Los Angeles Times. The headline is ''Clinton Rips Reckless Overhaul of Tax Code.''

The article says, ''Facing an unexpected stampede in Congress to wipe out the U.S. tax code and replace it with a radical new system,'' and ''radical'' is the word the L.A. Times writer uses, ''President Clinton on Monday denounced the approach as 'misguided, reckless, and irresponsible,' and warned that it would imperil the economy.'' Gloom and doom. These are just scare tactics, Mr. Speaker.

The article goes on to say, ''In an unusually pointed attack, Clinton and his top advisers assailed popular legislation,'' legislation that is now pending in this House, in this Congress, ''that would end the current tax code on December 31, 2001, to make way for a wholly new version.

''No one concerned about fighting crime would even think about saying, 'Well, three years from now we are going to throw out the criminal code and we will figure out what to put in its place,' Clinton told the National Mortgage Bankers Association. No one would do that. That is exactly what this proposal is. That is exactly what some people in Congress are proposing to do.''

Excuse me? I do not see the analogy. I do not see any comparison between our efforts to move the country in the direction of a fairer, flatter, simpler Tax Code with this analogy to throwing out the criminal code. Frankly, I think most of us, the 143 of us that have sponsored legislation to scrap the Tax Code, resent any analogy or suggestion that somehow it is comparable to eliminating the criminal code.

Nothing could be further from the truth, and, as Jack Ferris, the President of the National Federation of Independent Businesses, which is trying to garner 1 million signatures from American citizens nationwide in support of scrapping the Tax Code, as he put it yesterday, what is irresponsible is a 500 million-word code, a 9,000 page Tax Code, that is antiwork, antisaving, and antifamily. That is exactly what we have in America today. We have a Tax Code, a tax system that is riddled with perverse incentives that actually favor consumption and spending over savings and investment.

We cannot go down this path. We should be able to have a rational, informed, bipartisan debate on this in this country without the defenders of the status quo having to, like the President, resort to scare tactics.

Let me tell the Members, what they are attempting to defend is absolutely indefensible. Here are some of the articles that have appeared in publications recently regarding the collection abuses and the culture at the IRS. Here is one that says new audit at IRS finds some agents focused on quotas. ''The IRS Unveils New Taxpayer Protections to Limit Agents' Ability to Seize Assets.''

Why do they have to do this? Because the new commissioner is quoted in here as saying, ''I am concerned about the number of questionable procedural violations that may have occurred in the cases we have reviewed. I am especially troubled about the emphasis,'' in the IRS, ''placed on improving collection status without equal emphasis on customer service and safeguarding taxpayers' rights.''

''Treasury Chief Files Action Against IRS Quotas.''

Another one, ''Top Official Offers Mea Culpa for IRS.''

Mr. Speaker, let us have an informed, rational, bipartisan debate. Let us transform the IRS into an agency that treats all taxpayers with respect and gives them the services they deserve, while we move the country in the direction of a fairer, flatter, simpler Tax Code and tax system.

SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE REPORT ON HONG KONG TRANSITION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. BEREUTER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. BEREUTER. Mr. Speaker, last March, Speaker GINGRICH visited Asia. In the course of his visit to Hong Kong, he determined it would be appropriate to create a House task force to observe and report on the Hong Kong transition as it moved from colonial rule of the United Kingdom to become a separate but integral part of the People's Republic of China. He mandated that I chair that task force.

We created a bipartisan task force of equal numbers from the membership of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the House Committee on International Relations, eight members total. The Speaker mandated that we visit Hong Kong and Beijing a minimum of every 6 months and provide a quarterly report to the Congress on the transition, to let the People's Republic of China know that we are watching that transition and to thereby try to protect the freedoms that existed in Hong Kong before the transition. Interestingly, the Australian Parliament has a similar effort underway.

In the first report of the Speaker's Task Force on the Hong Kong Transition, dated October 1, 1997, we reported that Hong Kong's reversion to China was characterized as ''so far, so good.'' Six months after the official reversion, that characterization still applies.