

Earlier in the week, the New York Times reported that the Army is considering cutting the length of its 12-month combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to relieve the stress of duty. This could be a positive step. Special attention also needs to be paid to considering new ways to honor the service of our reservists and offer new incentives for signing up. The debt we owe our soldiers shouldn't be limited to a welcome-home parade. It begins before we send them abroad and it shouldn't end when they return home. This is a debt we must honor every day.

But consider the welcome home thousands of Guard members received when they returned stateside recently only to find they had lost their jobs while they were fighting in Iraq. Over the past 3 years, thousands of Guard members and reservists have come home to find themselves out of work.

Ron Vander Wal, a member of South Dakota Guard's 200th Engineer Company had to sue his employer just to get his old job back. Ron is now back at work, but he never should have had to go to court to get what was rightfully his.

Thousands more aren't as fortunate. And every time a soldier returns home to find that he has less than when he left to fight, we have failed that soldier. How can we ask our soldiers to fight for us overseas and then force them to fight for their jobs once they get home? Sadly, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

More than 400,000 reservists and National Guard members have been mobilized since September 11, 2001. They represent 40 percent of our forces in the region. Their bravery and professionalism have been vital to every aspect of our mission in Iraq. Many of them have been working to improve the lives and health of average Iraqis. And yet, when they return, one out of every five Guard members and Reservists—and 40 percent of junior enlisted personnel—will have no health insurance of their own. That is simply unacceptable.

This kind of neglect is regrettably reflected in our treatment of veterans, as well. Last month, I spoke to a woman from Hartford, SD, whose father served in the Navy—in Vietnam and elsewhere. Recently, her father died, and in his final months the family struggled with the VA to get the benefits he needed. This woman became quite frustrated with the VA and its ability to care for veterans. Today, this woman who loves her country and is proud of her father's service says she will advise her children against joining the military, because she feels our country just doesn't take care of its vets in their hours of greatest need.

That is intolerable. Not only is it morally wrong not to honor the service of our veterans, but it directly affects our ability to recruit the next generation of American heroes. Something needs to be done.

Let there be no doubt, the problems with the VA health system are not the fault of the doctors and nurses and the other men and women who work at VA hospitals and clinics. They are among the most talented, most dedicated health professionals in this country. But they can only do so much with the resources they are given. And from the first days of this administration, the White House has systematically tried to reduce veterans benefits, cut funding to the VA, and shortchange the healthcare of America's veterans.

Over the past 4 years, the budget for veterans health has risen far less than has the cost of delivering health care, forcing VA hospitals to meet rising demand with shrinking resources. The White House's 2005 budget deepens this trend by including less than a one-tenth of one percent funding increase, while health costs nationwide are rising at double digit rates of inflation. Overall, the White House budget falls nearly \$4.3 billion short of veterans' needs, according to the independent budget created by leading nonpartisan veterans groups.

The veterans least able to pay are being asked to pick up the difference. Over the course of the last 3 years, the amount vets have paid toward their own care has increased a staggering 340 percent, or \$561 million. And if the White House gets its way, vets would need to pick up more than a half billion dollars more of their care in 2005.

This is wrong. Americans treasure their freedom and we treasure those who have sworn to defend it. The kind of treatment our veterans and reservists are receiving defies the gratitude Americans feel in their hearts and betrays our tradition of caring for those who wore the uniform of their country.

There are two steps Congress should take immediately. First, we should pass the National Guard and Reservist Bill of Rights which I introduced earlier this month. This bill codifies a set of rights the men and women serving in our National Guard and Reserve have earned with their service to our Nation. It states that every reservist has the right to straight answers about his or her deployments, and deployments that are no longer than those of full-time soldiers; the right to the best equipment the Nation has to offer; the right to adequate, timely, and problem-free compensation; the right to child care for his or her family; the right to quality, affordable health care; the right to employment when he or she returns home; the right to education benefits; the right to a fair retirement plan; and the right to representation at the highest levels of the Department of Defense. Perhaps most important, this bill of rights would ensure that the Guard and Reserve remain attractive opportunities for Americans who want to serve their country.

Second, it is time we made good on a simple promise to veterans: If you wore the uniform of our Nation, if you fought under our flag, your health care

needs will be met for life. The full funding of veterans health care should be made mandatory under law. For too long, the VA budget has been subject to the give and take of budget politics. We need to set things straight. The funding for the VA should no longer be set by political convenience, or back-room deals, or the zero-sum game of budget politics. One thing, and one thing alone, should govern the care of our veterans; that is, the needs of our veterans.

How could we do otherwise? How could we let our country move forward and leave behind the men and women whose bravery has won our freedom and prosperity? Moreover, how could we let our children grow up believing that our Government fails to honor and repay those who risk their lives in service to the Nation.

We cannot afford to wake up one day and discover that our military lacks the manpower it needs to defend our country. The signs of an impending recruitment crisis are all around us. We should not let this Congress adjourn without taking real steps to prevent this developing problem from undermining the strength of our military for years to come. It is time to act.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. FRIST. Mr. President, very quickly, I understand the Senator from Massachusetts will be recognized shortly. I ask him, is he going to be speaking on the underlying bill?

Mr. KENNEDY. I will be speaking about issues that are included in the underlying bill.

Mr. FRIST. I will ask that following the Senator's time we be given a like amount of time to comment on whatever subject it would be. Then I encourage that we would be able to go straight to the underlying bill. We have the managers here, and I know the Senator has a statement he wants to make.

I ask unanimous consent that Senator KYL follow Senator KENNEDY, with a similar amount of time to respond on the topic, whatever it may be, and we will go straight to the bill. I want to encourage us to stay on the underlying bill.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Massachusetts is recognized.

POLICY IN IRAQ

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, I thank the leader and the leadership. I know the matters we have before us are of great importance and urgency. So is the matter about which I will address the Senate.

By any reasonable standard, our policy in Iraq is failing. We are steadily losing ground in the war. Even after