them the best information they could at the time, but Congress was derelict, Congress was not responsible, Congress did not do what it should do for the American people.

I am very concerned. And, frankly, I am very disappointed. I am saddened that this Congress is, in effect, playing games. I hope very much, and I ask, I plead with the other side, at least let's hold off just a little bit. Don't immediately object. Let's figure out a way to work this out.

We have a few hours here tonight. It is very simple. These are provisions everybody has agreed on. There is no disagreement. The only problem the other side of the aisle, the majority, has is when to do it. I indicated that the drop-dead date for the IRS is October 15, so now is the time to do it—not later. We cannot couple this with estate tax repeal. We cannot couple this with the minimum wage increases. We have tried that a couple, three times. It did not work.

The dye is cast. Senators have cast their votes. So let's get on with it. Let's get on with it. Let's put those issues behind us. We do not have to deal with minimum wage or estate tax tonight, but we do have to do the extenders tonight. This is very timely.

I very much hope that nobody objects right away. Maybe we could put this off for a few minutes, maybe a half an hour or something, and plead with those who are sane, who want to do this right, to just get this package of extenders passed. So I am going to ask consent, but maybe somebody could modify the consent to hold it off a little longer while we try to work out a way to get this passed.

Mr. President, we do not apparently have the consent request printed right in front of me right at this moment. But I am going to have it later tonight. That is probably better because that means maybe cooler heads will prevail and we can figure out a way to get this passed.

I see my good friend from Arizona is standing in the Chamber. I know he would like to get these provisions passed. I know he has other considerations too, but he would like to have this provision passed, and I think everybody on the floor would like to get these provisions passed. We can deal with these other issues, but we don't have to deal with them tonight. We cannot tonight. It is too late. But everybody has agreed to this package of extenders—everyone. The chairman of the Finance Committee has been desperately trying to get this passed. I hope later on tonight, when we ask consent, we get it.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington is recognized for 15 minutes.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, it is my understanding that under the current consent agreement, following me on this side is Senator HARKIN and Senator MENENDEZ, with Republicans in between.

I amend that consent and ask unanimous consent that following Senator MENENDEZ, Senator LANDRIEU be allowed to speak for 15 minutes, Senator SALAZAR for 15 minutes, Senator LAUTENBERG for 15 minutes, with Republicans in between, as per their request.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. CHAMBLISS. Mr. President, reserving the right to object, would the Senator again give me that order? I missed it somehow. Let me see if I can insert myself in one of the Republican slots.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, following me is an empty Republican slot.

Mr. CHAMBLISS. Mr. President, if I could be inserted in there for up to 10 minutes, please.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I would like the same insertion, following the Senator from Georgia, in the appropriate order, for no more than 10 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Does the Senator so modify her request?

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I modify the current request that following myself, Senator CORNYN be recognized for 10 minutes, Senator HARKIN for 10 minutes, Senator CRAIG for 10 minutes, Senator MENENDEZ for 10 minutes, a Republican Senator as designated for 10 minutes, Senator LANDRIEU for 15 minutes, a Republican Senator for 10 minutes, Senator SALAZAR for 15 minutes, a Republican Senator for 15 minutes, and Senator LAUTENBERG for 15 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. CHAMBLISS. Mr. President, again reserving the right to object, I will tell Senator CORNYN you paid him a great compliment, but that it be Senator CHAMBLISS instead of Senator CORNYN.

Mrs. MURRAY. I apologize. It is Senator CHAMBLISS. And I apologize.

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

VETERANS HEALTHCARE

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I rise to discuss how we are doing in caring for America's veterans. With our country at war, with 1.5 million Americans who have served in the global war on terror, and with many of them coming home in need of care—it is a critical question.

Last week, we got a shocking report from the Government Accountability Office, which found that the VA has misled Congress about its failure to plan for our veterans.

Based on that report and other research, I came here to the Senate floor 2 days ago and shared my concerns with the full Senate. I said that the Bush administration has not been honest with us about its failures to plan for the needs of our veterans, and that we still have a lot of work to do to get back on track. And I warned that—3½ years into this war—the Bush administration still does not have a plan to meet the needs of all the veterans who will be coming home.

In my speech on Tuesday, I said that Congress needs to provide real oversight of the Bush administration so that we can ensure our veterans get the care they have earned. For those who want to see my full remarks and all the evidence I cited, you can watch or read my speech on my Web site at http://murray.senate.gov.

This morning, the Senator from Idaho came here to the Senate floor and spoke with great passion about our veterans. The distinguished chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee took issue with some of the things I said in my remarks here on Tuesday.

I respect the Senator from Idaho. I appreciate his leadership of our committee, and I am pleased to provide more information before the full Senate. I want everyone to know that the Senator from Idaho and I have worked together on veterans issues.

I want to point out that when the VA finally admitted that it was facing a $3 billion shortfall—the chairman was first to stand beside me and find the funding to fix the problem. And I thank him for that.

I am proud to say that the Senator from Idaho and I agree on many points. We both agree that the VA provides excellent healthcare. When I was in college during the Vietnam War, I interned at the VA hospital in Seattle. I saw firsthand how dedicated and talented VA employees are.

Today, that ethic of service and commitment to quality beats in the heart of every VA employee. I am proud of the progress we have made helping the VA become a model for effective, high quality healthcare.

The Senator from Idaho and I also both agree that we have increased VA funding. It has been an uphill battle—and the facts tell me that we are not prepared for the many veterans coming home—but we both agree that we have increased veterans funding. I might point out that we in Congress provided those increases in spite of years of inadequate budget requests from the White House.

We agree that the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee works in a bipartisan fashion under the leadership of Senator CRAIG and Ranking Member AKAKA. As I have said many times on this floor—taking care of our veterans is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. It is an American issue, and we all need to be part of the solution.

And finally, I couldn't agree more with the Senator from Idaho that we should focus on the facts. Those facts should guide our budgets and our policy decisions. If the facts say everything is fine, that's great. But when the facts say there are problems, we need to hear those facts, and we need to respond based on the facts.

That's why the GAO report is such a bombshell. Professional, independent government investigators found that the Bush administration has not told us the facts about its budget and planning problems.

Think about that—if the people we rely on for the facts are not telling us the truth, we've got a real problem. If they're hiding the truth, we won't be able to provide veterans with the services they need. And one of the answers has to be more oversight and more accountability, so we can get to the truth.

Let me turn to the three main points that are relevant here:

First, the Bush administration does not have a real plan to meet the needs of our Iraqi War veterans—and that failure is impacting the care we provide all veterans.

Second, the Bush administration misled this Congress and it is still not providing us with up-to-date, timely information.

And third, we in Congress need to provide real oversight and demand real accountability—or our veterans are gonna fall behind.

Mr. President, I am very concerned that the Bush administration still does not have a plan to meet the needs of our returning servicemembers. And to prove that I want to point to three sets of figures that come from the VA itself.

The first piece of evidence concerns the number of veterans the VA expected to treat this year.

For fiscal year 2006, the VA planned to take care of about 110,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. 110,000. How many are they actually treating? 185,000. So in this fiscal year—that is just about to end—the VA underestimated demand by 68 percent. And that is just for those veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. If the VA had an accurate plan, they wouldn't have been so far off.

Let's go to the second piece of evidence that shows the VA has no plan. As I said, this year we are treating 185,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. How many will we treat next year? The VA estimates that it will only be 109,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. We are treating 185,000 today, but the VA thinks that number is going to go down dramatically next year.

Given what we know about our continued involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, that simply defies logic. And you have to wonder how the VA ever came up with those figures in the first place. Its projection for next year is even lower than its projection for this year. Where are they getting these numbers? Why are they so wrong?

Those are the questions we in Congress need to be asking. If the VA really thinks that next year we will have fewer veterans seeking care, it clearly has no plan to deal with those who will be coming home.

Let me turn to the third piece of evidence that shows the VA has no plan to deal with Iraq war veterans. In July, the VA told us it will need $1 billion each year for the next 10 years to care for veterans from Iraq.

But the fact is—for this year alone—we are already spending more than $1 billion. They have given us a 10-year estimate, and they are already wrong in the very first year. And the lion's share of veterans have not separated from the Pentagon yet, so it is a safe bet that demand for VA services will go up and that will require more funding.

So the VA is already wrong in the figures it provided us just a few months ago. That's because they don't have a plan.

The fact that they predicted 110,000 enrolled Iraq War veterans this year—and they are already serving 185,000 shows they don't have a plan.

The fact that they think demand for care will drop next year shows that they don't have a plan.

And the fact that we are already spending more than they said we would need for Iraq war vets shows they don't have a plan.

This is unacceptable. If we tolerate it, then we are not doing our jobs here in Congress. They don't have a plan, and we better have some oversight and accountability before more veterans end up getting hurt.

Next Mr. President, I want to turn to the facts of the GAO report that I requested. This report—prepared by independent, credible government investigators—tells us what is really happening. All of us care about the facts and we all care about getting this right, and that's why we should all take this report to heart. Unless we learn from our mistakes, we are never going to do any better for America's veterans.

In that spirit, I want to focus on four findings. First, the GAO found that the VA knew it had serious problems with its budget, but failed to notify us in Congress. Even worse, it misled us.

The report suggests that the VA could still be sending us inaccurate information in its quarterly reports.

Second, the GAO found that the VA was basing its budgets on ''unrealistic assumptions, errors in estimation, and insufficient data.''

Third, the Pentagon failed to give the VA up-to-date information about how many servicemembers would be coming down the pipeline into the VA.

Finally, the GAO found that the VA did not adequately plan for the impact of servicemembers from Iraq and Afghanistan.

For me, I think one of the most disturbing findings is that the VA kept assuring us in Congress that everything was fine—while inside the VA it was clear that shortfalls were growing.

The VA became aware it would have problems in October 2004—but didn't admit those problems until June of 2005. Veterans were telling me of long lines and delays in care.

For months, I tried to give the VA more money, but the administration fought me every step of the way. And who paid the price for the VA's deceptions? America's veterans, and that's just wrong.

Let me walk through some of the deceptions found in the report. It shows a very troubling gap between what the VA knew and what the VA told us.

According to the GAO report, starting back in October 2004, the VA knew money was tight. It anticipated serious budget challenges, and created a ''Budget Challenges'' working group.

Two months later, in December 2004, the budget group made internal recommendations to deal with the shortfall. It suggested delaying new initiatives and shifting around funding.

Two months later, in February 2005, the Bush administration released its budget proposal for 2006.

The GAO found that budget was based on ''unrealistic assumptions, errors in estimation and insufficient data.''

A week later at a hearing—on February 15, 2005, I asked the VA Secretary if the President's budget was sufficient. He told me:

> I have many of the same concerns, and I end up being satisfied that we can get the job done with this budget.

Let's remember what was happening back at that time. I was hearing from veterans that they were facing delays in care and that the VA system was stretched to capacity. But the VA continued to say everything was fine.

On March 8, Secretary Nicholson told a House committee that the president's fiscal year 2006 budget,

> gives VA what it needs.

I was hearing a much different story as I spoke with veterans around the country. That is why on March 10, I offered an amendment in the Senate Budget Committee to increase veterans funding by 3 percent so we could hire more doctors and provide faster care to veterans. Unfortunately, Republicans said no.

That same month, the VA's internal monthly reports showed that demand for healthcare was exceeding projections. That was another warning sign that the VA should have shared with us, but it didn't.

On March 16, Senator AKAKA and I offered an amendment here on the Senate floor to increase veterans funding by $2.85 billion. Once again, Republicans said no.

The next month, on April 5, Secretary Nicholson wrote to Senator HUTCHISON saying:

> I can assure you that the VA does not need emergency supplemental funds in FY 2005.

A week later, on April 12, I offered two amendments on the Senate floor to boost veterans funding. First, I asked the Senate to agree that the lack of veterans funding was an emergency and that we had to fix. Republicans said no.

Then I asked the Senate to agree that supporting our veterans was a priority. Again, Republican said no. As a

result, veterans didn't get the funding they needed, and the deception continued.

On June 9, I asked Secretary Nicholson at a hearing if he had enough funding to deal with the mental health challenges of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. He assured me the VA was fine.

So for 6 months we had happy talk that everything was fine with the VA. Then, in June—just two weeks after the Secretary's latest assurance—the truth finally came out. On June 23, the VA revealed a massive shortfall of $3 billion.

I went to work my colleagues, and we came up with the funding. But we could have solved that problem much earlier and saved veterans the delays they experienced.

By misleading us, the Bush administration hurt America's veterans. We could have provided the money when it was needed. We could have been hiring the doctors and nurses we needed. We could have been buying the medical equipment that was needed. And we could have helped keep thousands of veterans off waiting lists for care.

Here's the bottom line: The Bush administration knew about a problem back in October 2004.

They saw it getting worse, but they kept assuring us everything was fine. They worked to defeat my amendments to provide funding, and they didn't come clean until June 2005. That is unacceptable.

I think America's veterans deserve real answers. This report shows that the VA was not telling Congress the truth and was fighting those of us who were trying to help. We need to bring Secretary Nicholson before the Veterans' Affairs Committee so we can get some real answers. We need to ensure the VA does not repeat the same mistakes of the past 2 years. We owe that to our current and future veterans who sacrifice so much for us.

We need an explanation of why the VA misled us about so-called management efficiencies. The GAO found those alleged savings were nothing but hot air. This report clearly shows the Bush administration misrepresented the truth to us for 4 fiscal years, through 4 budgets, and 4 appropriations cycles about these bogus savings. And when they could not make these efficiencies a reality, they took the funds from veterans' healthcare. That is unacceptable.

The report also suggests that even in its latest quarterly reports to us—the VA is slow to report and does not provide key information we required—such as the time required for veterans to get their first appointment.

The GAO report also says that the Department of Defense failed to provide the VA up-to-date information on how many servicemembers would be separating from service and seeking care at the VA. That is really frustrating to me because I have been asking every general who comes up here if they're doing enough to ensure a smooth transition from the Pentagon to the VA.

In fact, on February 16 of last year, I questioned Secretary Rumsfeld directly. I got him to agree that caring for veterans is part of the cost of war but he had no real answer when I asked why his request for the war did not include funding for veterans.

Finally, the GAO report verifies that the VA failed to plan for the impact of the veterans coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mr. President, I would like to take a moment to respond in detail to some of the points my colleague from Idaho raised. He is a very dedicated and hard-working advocate for America's veterans.

At times, we may disagree on policy, but it is never personal. And it is my highest hope that whatever policy disagreements we may have will result in better service for America's veterans.

The Senator from Idaho said that VA healthcare is the best care in the world. And I certainly agree as I said earlier. But too often, veterans are barred from that receiving that care and are put on waiting lists.

For example in the VA Service Network that covers Alaska, Oregon, my home State of Washington and Senator CRAIG's home State of Idaho, the VA states that there are over 10,000 veterans on waiting lists for their initial appointments. There are thousands more waiting for specialty care. Veterans in need are told to wait months before they can see a doctor.

In fact—of the 21 regional Service Networks—the region that covers both Washington and Idaho is the worst at getting veterans primary and specialty care appointments within 30 days of the date requested. That data comes straight out of the VA's own quarterly budget reports. It is not my interpretation.

So great care is important, but making sure veterans can actually get timely access to that care is equally important. And that's an area where the VA is falling short.

The Senator from Idaho pointed out that we required the VA to submit quarterly reports on budget execution. He says we have received three such reports this year. That is accurate. But what the chairman did not say is what the GAO found. From page 5:

> However VA's reports have not included some of the measures that would assist Congress in its oversight, such as measures of patient workload that would capture the costlines of patient care, and the time required for new patients to be scheduled for their first healthcare appointment. Moreover, while VA has 12 months to execute its budget, it did not submit its first two quarterly reports to Congress until nearly 2 months after the end of each quarter, using patient workload data that were as much as 3 months old at the time of submission.

That is the GAO telling us that the VA's information was late and outdated. We need to demand better.

Let me comment on another statement by the Senator from Idaho. He said that we've had great success in delivering service to veterans. Then he said this:

> it doesn't mean that every veteran got exactly what they wanted the moment they asked for it.

That has never been the standard. The question is this: Can veterans who need help get it when they need it?

The evidence I have seen suggests we have got a long way to go. On Tuesday, I shared with the Senate the story of a soldier in Virginia who is back from serving our country in Iraq. He can't sleep at night so he called the VA for an appointment. They told him he would have to wait 75 days to see a doctor. That is unacceptable. Ensuring that veterans get timely care—especially for mental health services—is a dire need.

Again, don't take my word for it. Remember what a VA undersecretary said in medical journal recently—that mental health care services are ''virtually inaccessible'' because of long waiting lines. So when we use a reasonable standard, it is clear we are falling far short of what our veterans deserve.

Senator CRAIG said that during the last 6 years, the administration and Congress has increased VA funding by 70 percent. But let me remind him that every step of way Congress had to fight the administration for those increases.

I know that we are putting more funding into the VA than we have historically. I have worked with my colleagues to fight for that funding. But let me remind my colleague from Idaho that we still have thousands of veterans waiting for primary and secondary care—or not being allowed to access care at all.

The funding that this Congress has provided for the VA still does not provide enough to ensure that every veteran who is eligible can access care. The VA takes what Congress appropriates and then limits which veterans can access care to make the care the VA provides fit within the budget box Congress provides.

Time and again, proposals for increased fees and copays are presented to discourage veterans from accessing VA care. I am happy to say we have fought off this administration's efforts to put those increased fees and copays in place. But—at the same time—the administration has limited access to the VA for Priority 7 and 8 veterans.

The VA admitted that fees and copays within its fiscal year 2007 budget would discourage 200,000 enrolled veterans from accessing care, and another 1.1 million from enrolling at all. This is wrong. We need a real budget based on the real needs. Not one based on limited access and discouraging veterans from seeking the care they were promised.

The Senator from Idaho wanted to be very clear that he had called hearings and exercised oversight. I agree. He did. I was one of the people who pushed for those hearings. I was at those hearing. I demanded answers at those hearings.

And one thing is clear—those efforts were not enough. We are still not getting straight answers from the VA. We are still getting out-of-date information. We still do not have a plan from the VA to care for the veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

So yes, there were hearings—I think we'd all agree that after a $3 billion error that hurt our veterans there better be hearings—but they were not enough. And we need more oversight and more accountability if we're going to make sure veterans do not get hurt again.

The Senator from Idaho asked—why now? Why am I calling for more oversight now? Because the GAO just released its report. I didn't tell the GAO how long to take in its investigation. When it had the facts, it released them, and I spoke up immediately. In fact, I think the Senator from Idaho will remember the morning the GAO released its report I shared the results with our Veterans Affairs Committee at a public hearing.

I thought everyone on the committee needed to know immediately that government investigators found the VA had not told us about the problems it knew about and that the VA is providing quarterly reports that are late and based on old information. Simply put, I spoke out when we got the facts.

I would add that if anyone believes that my remarks on Tuesday are the first time I have stood up and spoke out for our veterans—they just have not had their eyes open over the past few years. And I would remind my colleagues that there is no moratorium on speaking out for our veterans. Whenever we learn facts that affect America's veterans, I'm going to share them, and I'm not going to stop speaking out until we in Congress do the right thing.

Furthermore, unless we change the path we are on, we will be talking about this issue next September, the September after that, and every month in between. This is not going away.

So we in the Senate debate a lot of issues—none more significant than the issue of going to war. We are at war, and this body has a responsibility to meet our obligations in prosecuting that war—that includes taking care of our veterans. Today, we are not meeting that obligation. That is not just my opinion. It is the only conclusion a reasonable person could draw from the GAO report. And however inconvenient that may be—that is a fact.

Mr. President, I repeat my conclusion from my remarks here on Tuesday. Veterans deserve better, and this Senate and America can do better.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia is recognized.

AGRICULTURAL DISASTERS

Mr. CHAMBLISS. Mr. President, I rise to express my support for providing relief to agricultural producers nationwide.

Earlier today Senator CONRAD from North Dakota led a debate on the floor regarding agricultural disasters; especially the severe drought causing severe loss of crops all across America, and the need to extend a helping hand to farmers.

We always hope to stay out of the disaster business, unfortunately Mr. President, this has indeed been a very unusual year. In August of 2006, in my State of Georgia, 155 of 159 counties were designated by the Secretary of Agriculture as primary natural disaster areas due to losses caused by drought and excessive temperatures.

Cotton and peanut harvests are underway today in the State and, unfortunately, the Department of Agriculture's most recent crop summary rates dryland fields in poor to fair condition, with much lower yields than usual. If peanut production forecasts are realized, we could have the lowest production yields on peanuts since 1980. Losses extend beyond the fields and have had a serious effect on livestock producers as well. For example, in addition to losses due to drought, many pastures and hayfields have experienced severe armyworm infestation.

My staff continues to receive calls from across the State with concerns about crop and pasture conditions. I have personally heard the calls and seen the need for agricultural disaster assistance throughout Georgia. As chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I convened eight farm bill hearings across the country this summer. I will have to say that in traveling to these regions and visiting with the producers, I can report that there has been severe disasters occurring in each and every section of our country from an agricultural standpoint. Rural America is hurting.

While the Senate did not have the opportunity today to proceed with the vote on this very important issue, I want to be clear that I do support disaster assistance. Earlier this year, the Senate passed disaster assistance in the fiscal year 2006 supplemental appropriations bill. Unfortunately, that provision was dropped in conference. Since then, the situation has greatly worsened. Fortunately, we currently have a disaster package in the Senate agriculture appropriations bill, which we expect to complete after the November elections.

The appropriate place to address agriculture disaster is in the agriculture appropriations bill. However, we will need to refine and improve this disaster package based upon current circumstances. For example, the current disaster package provides assistance only for losses for the 2005 crop-year. Unfortunately, the losses in 2006 appear to be more extensive, more widespread, and more severe than the 2005 losses. The University of Georgia Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development estimates that at this point agriculture production losses may total over $819 million in Georgia alone.

At the current time, we may not know the full extent of the 2006 crop damage, but it is evident in looking across the country that crop and livestock assistance is needed.

The Secretary of Agriculture has agreed with us on this point. Earlier this summer he announced in the Dakotas that a disaster indeed had taken place across America. However, he provided what I thought, frankly, was a fairly nominal response to the issue.

America's farmers provide this country the safest, most affordable food and fiber supply of any country in the world. It is our duty to stand by them in this time of need.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa is recognized.

READING FIRST

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, the Education Department's inspector general released a blistering report last week about a program called Reading First. The inspector general reported that Education Department officials, one, mismanaged the program; two, steered school contracts to publishers they favor and away from others; three, flagrantly ignored Federal laws on maintaining local and State control of school curricula.

These are serious findings by the inspector general. Reading First is one of the largest programs in the Education Department. Congress has appropriated about $5 billion, or about a billion dollars for each of the past 5 years. So when we learn that a program of this size is being mismanaged, that laws are being broken, we need to take pause and investigate further.

Soon after Reading First was created, a number of publishers, researchers, and local school officials complained that the Department favored certain reading programs over others. They claimed that the Department pressured States and local school districts—sometimes subtly and sometimes bluntly—to purchase its preferred programs and reject others.

These kinds of activities are illegal. The law that established the Education Department states:

> No provision of a program administered by the Secretary or by any other officer of the Department shall be construed to authorize the Secretary or any such officer to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school, or school system . . . over the selection or consent of . . . textbooks, or other instructional materials by any educational institution or school system, except to the extent authorized by law.

Now, when we established the Department of Education—and I happened to be here at that time; I was in the House of Representatives at that time—the hue and cry went up to those who were opposed to establishing the Department of Education that the Department of Education would begin telling local school districts what to