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Putting America's Veterans First

This week the House approved the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill.

This legislation continues the efforts of Congress for the last two years to make veterans their first priority. In 2007, Congress passed three separate appropriations bills that increased total funding for Veterans medical care by \$11.8 billion, so that they can receive the quality of care that they deserve.

The emergency supplemental passed by the House last week included increases for VA medical care and also expands the GI bill to provide a full, four-year college benefit to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The appropriations bill rejects the President's proposal to cut the Department of Veterans Affairs construction by \$788 million to ensure that the Department has the resources it needs to address buildings that have fallen into disrepair.

Highlights of the Military Construction and Veteran Affairs Appropriations Bill:

Quality of Life Initiative: provides \$336 million, not requested by the President, to continue a quality of life initiative for troops and their families started in the 2008 supplemental including: nearly \$200 million for five new trainee and recruit housing facilities for the Army and Marine Corps to improve the barracks soldiers and marines live in when they train; and \$136 million for medical military construction and planning activities to upgrade substandard medical treatment facilities. For years, service members and their families have said that quality of life issues are their top priority, but they have been neglected by this Administration.

Growing the Force: provides \$5.6 billion in military construction and family housing, to support the Administration's program to increase the size of the Army by 65,000, the Marine Corps by 27,000, and the Guard and Reserve by 9,200 personnel.

Mental Health and Substance Abuse: provides \$3.8 billion for specialty mental health care and \$584 million for substance abuse programs.

Assistance for Homeless Vets: provides \$130 million for the homeless grants and per diem program, rejecting the President's \$8 million cut and is the same as 2008, including \$32 million to hire additional personnel for the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program.

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New Generation Prosthetics: provides \$1.6 billion, \$250 million above 2008 and \$116 million above the President's request, to provide veterans with appropriate prosthetic support given recent advances in technology.

Ensuring Opportunities for Higher Education

This week the House approved legislation aimed at protecting college students from aggressive and deceptive lenders.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act would require lenders and colleges to adopt strict codes of conduct. It would also expand scholarship aid to students and increase funding for graduate study at institutions that primarily serve minorities. In addition, the bill would boost college aid and support for veterans and military families by creating new scholarship programs and support centers for veterans.

Some key provisions of the legislation include:

Encouraging colleges to rein in price increases and provide consumers with helpful information

- Holds colleges and universities accountable for their tuition hikes by requiring them to report their reasons for tuition increases.
- Ensures states maintain higher education funding and encourages colleges to use innovative methods to keep costs down.

Restoring integrity and accountability to the student loan programs

- Requires institutions and lenders to adopt strict codes of conduct.
- Provides students with fair and full information about their borrowing options when taking out and repaying student loans, including the terms and conditions of both federal and private student loans; and promotes financial literacy and education for students and parents.
- Protects students from aggressive marketing practices by lenders.

Simplifying the federal student aid application process

- Streamlines the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, and creates an easy-to-navigate two-page FAFSA-EZ form for low-income families.
- Provides families with extra time to plan for their college expenses.
- Encourages the Department of Education to coordinate with the Internal Revenue Service to use financial information that the government already has.

Expanding college access and support for low-income and minority students

- Makes college more affordable for low-income and non-traditional students by allowing students to receive Pell Grant scholarship aid year round.
- Expands funding for graduate student programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Predominately Black Institutions.
- Strengthens the TRIO and GEAR UP college readiness and support programs for low-income and first-generation students.

Increasing college aid and support for veterans and military families

- Creates a new scholarship program for active duty military personnel and family members, including children and spouses of active duty military service members or veterans.
- Establishes support centers to help veterans succeed in college and graduate.
- Ensures fairness in student aid and housing aid for veterans to make it easier for them to go to college while also fulfilling their military service duties.

Effort to Lower Gas Prices Falls Short

Legislation that would take crucial steps to curb excessive speculation in the energy futures markets in order to bring down gas prices was narrowly defeated this week. The measure received a strong majority support in a House vote of 276 to 151, but it failed to receive the two-thirds necessary to pass under suspension of the rules.

The Commodity Market Transparency and Accountability Act would have taken common sense steps to curb excessive speculation in the energy markets, further close the Enron loophole, bring much-needed transparency to commodities and futures markets, and strengthen enforcement to prevent market manipulation and to prosecute fraud.

It also would have given the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) needed flexibility, so that it could curtail excessive speculation and other practices distorting the energy market.

Economic experts have testified that excessive speculation in the energy markets may be responsible for artificially increasing oil prices an additional \$20 and \$60 per barrel, and the International Monetary Fund recently stated that "speculation has played a significant role in the run-up of oil prices."

Federal Apology for Slavery

This week the House approved legislation apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of African-Americans. This marks the first time that the federal government has ever formally apologized for slavery or racial segregation in United States history.

Last year, the North Carolina General Assembly took a similar step by formally apologizing for "the injustice, cruelty and brutality of slavery." I co-sponsored the federal legislation and urged House leadership to vote on the measure.

An apology on the part of the federal government is important and long overdue, and there is a power in acknowledging error and mistake. This cannot change the past but it allows us to confront the ghosts of the past so that we can more easily move forward toward a brighter future.

This resolve acknowledges the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow, and apologizes on behalf of the American people for the wrongs of those who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow.

There was strong precedent for this legislation, including the apology approved by the U.S. Senate in 2005 for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation when it was needed to protect people.

Workplace Pay Equity

This week the House approved legislation aimed at narrowing the earnings gap between America's working men and women.

The Paycheck Fairness Act makes modest common sense changes to strengthen the Equal Pay Act (EPA) so that it will be a more effective tool in combating gender-based pay discrimination. The bill will close numerous loopholes in the 45-year old law that has enabled employers to evade liability.

Although the wage gap between men and women has narrowed since the passage of the landmark EPA in 1963, gender-based wage discrimination remains a problem for women in the U.S. workforce. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, women only make 77 cents for every dollar earned by a man.

This affects women of color are even more. Statistics show that African American women make 68 percent of men's earnings while Hispanic women make only 56 percent of men's earnings. The Institute of Women's Policy Research found that this wage disparity will cost women anywhere from \$400,000 to \$2 million over a lifetime in lost wages.

Highlights of the Paycheck Fairness Act:

- Clarifies the 'any factor other than sex' defense so that an employer trying to justify paying a man more than a woman for the same job must show that the disparity is not sex-based; it is job related and necessary for the business.
- Prohibits employers from retaliating against employees who discuss or disclose salary information with their co-workers. However, employees such as HR personnel who have access to payroll information as part of their job would not be protected if they disclose the salaries of other workers.
- Strengthens the remedies available to include punitive and compensatory damages. Under the EPA currently, plaintiffs can only recover back pay and in some cases double back pay. The damages would not be capped.