

**TESTIMONY OF REP. SILVESTRE REYES (TX-16)**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS**  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**APRIL 6, 2006**

Good afternoon. I would like to thank Chairman Jeff Miller and Ranking Member Shelley Berkley for holding this hearing and for allowing me to testify on H.R. 5037, the Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act. I would also like to express my appreciation to Rep. Mike Rogers for his leadership on this important matter.

Members of the Subcommittee, I know all of us agree that United States military men and women who give their lives serving their country deserve to be buried with respect and dignity. The families of these courageous men and women also deserve funerals that allow them to say goodbye to their loved ones and mourn their loss in peace. However, organized protests have recently occurred throughout the United States at the funerals of soldiers killed while serving in our current military operations. Some protestors have even used signs that read "Thank God for IED's" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers."

As a Vietnam veteran, a member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and the House Armed Services Committee, and simply as a human being, I knew I had to do my part to end these senseless protests. Over 100 such protests have been held, and whatever the reason for the protest, it is despicable to heckle families whose loved ones have died – under violent and stressful conditions – during the families' time of pain and mourning.

That is why I joined with my colleague Rep. Rogers and other members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee to introduce legislation in the House of Representatives to ensure that the families of those who have died serving our nation can hold dignified funerals for their loved ones. I am proud to serve as the lead Democratic co-sponsor of H.R. 5037. The bill is narrowly tailored to protect military families from these verbal attacks, while also protecting our freedom of speech.

The Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act would:

- Prohibit all demonstrations 60 minutes prior to and after funerals taking place at Department of Veterans Affairs' national cemeteries or the Department of Army's Arlington National Cemetery (the only areas over which the federal government maintains jurisdiction);
- Impose a 500-foot restriction on demonstrations at national cemeteries and Arlington National Cemetery;

- Allow for a civil infraction for violations, including monetary fines and/or jail time of six months to a year, as consistent with the authority granted to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs under current regulation; and
- Express the sense of Congress that all states should enact similar restrictions for state and private cemeteries, as well as funeral homes.

It is sad that such legislation is needed, but these protestors have been malicious and hateful to these families, who are bearing the brunt of this war. This bill is necessary to protect their peace and dignity during their time of great loss and personal tragedy.

I would also like to make my colleagues aware that we have recently heard that these protestors are planning to stage similar demonstrations at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and other facilities where seriously injured soldiers are being treated. That should give you an idea just how contemptible the protestors are, as if more evidence was needed.

H.R. 5037 has the support of several Veterans Service Organizations, including the Vietnam Veterans of America, American Veterans (AMVETS), Disabled American Veterans, Fleet Reserve Association, Jewish War Veterans of the USA, Military Order of the Purple Heart, and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Again, I thank the Subcommittee for holding this hearing today and strongly urge you to move the bill forward so that it can be considered by the full House as soon as possible.