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House of Representatives

HONOR THE VALUES OF THE FLAG BY PROVIDING FOR OUR VETERANS

HON. BOB FILNER
OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MR. FILNER: Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak against this rule and against the underlying motion.

As the chairman said in his eloquent opening remarks, our flag is a grand and glorious symbol of our great Nation, of our fundamental values of freedom, liberty, justice and opportunity; and it is those values we must protect.

We are not going to protect these values by tampering with the Bill of Rights and our Constitution. These have stood the test of time, and it is impossible to legislate patriotism. We protect these values through proper education of our children, nurturing their love and patriotism of our country and nurturing their respect for our flag and the men and women who keep our Nation strong.

Yes, through the years our values have always included respect for our veterans, also. As a child, I heard from my veteran father of the sacrifices made by the men and women of our armed services to keep our Nation free during World War II; and we have just witnessed the willingness of our current generation to put themselves in harm's way without hesitation when called upon by their President and their Nation.

So why are we having this debate now?

This is a shell game, Mr. Speaker. They want us to look at this shell that has the flag and they are waving it furiously. They are waving it furiously, but they do not want us to watch the shell that has veterans' benefits, which they are taking away. They vote first, a \$25 billion cut in our Nation's veterans, and then it is "only" \$15 billion.

Is this the way we honor our flag and honor our veterans? I find it deeply disturbing that many Members of the House of Representatives seem to be tenaciously determined, year after year, to pass this amendment at the very time, at the very time they vote for budgets that cut services and benefits to our Nation's veterans. This is hypocrisy, and the veterans who are here to lobby on this bill should understand the hypocrisy that is going on and the shell game that is happening. This hypocrisy will not escape these veterans.

True respect for our veterans means that we do not abandon them when they return to our shores. Do my colleagues know 14,000 veterans right now have waited longer than a year and a half for their action, many more for four or five years, for adjudication of their claims. There are veterans in San Diego who

have died while waiting for their appeal to be adjudicated.

Two hundred thousand of our veterans right now are waiting longer than 6 months for their first health care appointment with the VA, their first health care appointment. This is the way we honor our veterans? Some of them will die before their first appointment.

We have educational benefits under the GI bill that do not pay for college education. My father went to college on the GI bill. He bought a home on the GI bill. I am in Congress because of the GI bill, and what are we doing now? We are not even given enough for anyone to buy a home or go to college.

This House has recommended to increase prescription drug co-payments and impose a new enrollment of \$250 for many veterans whom we are supposedly honoring today. Let me tell my colleagues about concurrent receipt, which allows disabled veterans who are retired from the military to receive both their disability compensation and their military retired pay. It has been on our agenda

for years. The congressional leadership, the Republican leadership, while working diligently on passing this amendment, cannot find the courage, cannot muster up their skills at legislation to pass concurrent receipt. The very people who are arguing for this bill vote ``no" when it comes to our veterans, vote ``no" when it comes to our concurrent receipt.

I ask the gentlepeople from the majority party, what will be the morale of our soldiers, soon to be veterans when they return home from Iraq, when they know they will have to wait for the promised services that the VA has made, when they know that they will have to pay more for less? What will be their morale when they see we are not keeping our promise to veterans? Are they going to wave the flag?

I challenge my colleagues to put first our values that our great flag represents. We are patriots. We are Americans. Let us restore our contract with our Nation's veterans. That is the way to express our patriotism and to protect our Nation's flag