

April 4, 2005      Many military veterans were shocked to see that the federal budget for 2006 makes several cuts in veterans benefits and services. Under the proposed budget, the Veterans Administration will increase once again the co-pay cost of prescription drugs, while adding a new annual fee for medical benefits. The budget also calls for the reduction of veterans home funding and limits the number of VA nursing home beds. Some members of Congress have even suggested rewriting the definition of "veteran" in a way that could deny VA health benefits for millions of retired servicemen. Unfortunately, the trust that members of our armed forces put in their government has been breached time and time again, and the recent budget vote represents another blow to veterans. Even as we send hundreds of thousands of soldiers into Iraq, Congress can't get its priorities straight. Our invasion of Iraq will swell the ranks of our combat veterans, many of whom will need medical care as they grow older. Sadly, health issues arising from the first war with Iraq still have not been addressed. Congress should immediately end the silence and formally address Gulf War Syndrome, which has had a devastating impact on veterans who served in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. As a medical doctor, I believe the syndrome is very real, and likely represents several different maladies caused by exposure to conditions specific to the Gulf region at the time. Congress and the VA should stop insulting Gulf War veterans and recognize that the syndrome is a serious illness that needs treatment. We can only hope and pray that our soldiers in Iraq today do not suffer from similar illnesses in the future. It's easy to talk about honoring veterans and their sacrifices, even while the federal government treats veterans badly. Congress wastes billions of dollars funding countless unconstitutional programs, but fails to provide adequately for the men and women who carry out the most important constitutional function: national defense. We can best honor both our veterans and our current armed forces by pursuing a coherent foreign policy. No veteran should ever have to look back and ask himself, "Why were we over there in the first place?" Too often history demonstrates that wars are fought for political and economic reasons, rather than legitimate national security reasons. Supporting the troops means never putting them in harm's way unless America is truly threatened. Today's American soldiers are the veterans of the future, and they should never be sent to war without clear objectives that serve definite American national security interests. They should never fight at the behest of the United Nations or any other international agency. They should never serve under a UN flag, nor answer to a UN commander. They deserve to know that they fight for the American people and the Constitution, and that the decision to send them into battle was made by their own Congress via an express declaration of war—NOT by UN bureaucrats who don't care about them. Only by using American troops judiciously and in service of the Constitution can we avoid the kind of endless military entanglements we witnessed in Korea and Vietnam. We honor our veterans by ensuring that their service to the nation is never in vain.