

On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the year of 1918, the world celebrated the end of World War I, and in recognition November 11th became known as Armistice Day.

Had World War I really been “the war to end all wars,” perhaps we would still be celebrating Armistice Day today. However, in 1939, World War II consumed Europe, Africa, the Pacific and finally the world. Congress subsequently proclaimed in 1953 that November 11th would be a day to honor all of America’s veterans and called upon Americans everywhere to rededicate themselves to the cause of peace.

Americans celebrate this Veterans Day at a time of ongoing global threats to our nation’s security. As American troops fight terrorism around the world, it is particularly important to honor the 25 million living American veterans, especially those who have recently returned from battles overseas. It was recently announced that 2,000 U.S. troops have now died in Iraq, including 31 brave men and women from Maryland who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Like all Americans, I mourn the loss of these brave patriots.

On Veterans Day, we show our appreciation in symbolic ways: parades, town meetings, and family get togethers. While words of thanks are a valuable part of this celebration, it is even more important to honor our veterans by providing them with the services they have earned.

The most pressing need, according to nearly every veterans group across the country, is health care. Unlike other wars in recent memory, citizen-soldiers are fighting on the front lines of this conflict. With more guardsmen and reservists deployed than at any other time in history, the obligation to provide our veterans with adequate care has never been stronger.

Unfortunately, the Republican-led Congress is poised to implement a Fiscal Year 2006 Budget that does not fulfill our responsibilities as a nation. In a shortsighted and ineffective attempt to appear fiscally responsible, Republicans have proposed a blind 2 percent across-the-board cut to every discretionary federal program, including those for veterans.

If imposed, this cut would adversely impact many programs that already have funding shortfalls, namely veterans health care. A 2 percent cut to the House-passed level of funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) would total more than \$600 million, resulting in nearly 100,000 fewer veterans receiving health care this year.

In Iraq, 15,000 soldiers have been wounded in combat – including more than 7,000 injured too badly to return to duty. Furthermore, thousands of our troops have been hurt in incidents unrelated to combat and 300 have undergone at least one limb amputation. As these new veterans with special health needs enter the system, we should be increasing resources to help provide our veterans with healthy and productive lives, not scaling back.

I oppose Republican attempts to balance the budget on the backs of our veterans. In contrast, I co-sponsored the GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century earlier this year. This legislation would increase our investment in health care, education, and jobs for veterans, and meet the needs of America's military families. It was endorsed by the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans and other veterans groups.

Veterans Day is an important time to reaffirm our support for every American service member who fought to protect our freedoms. As I participate this Friday in Veterans Day events, I look forward to sharing my thanks with the veterans and the families of servicemen and women in the 5th Congressional District. Their bravery and sacrifice for our nation deserves our recognition, our respect and our deep gratitude.

America's veterans have laid the foundation of our great nation. The sacrifice of service is considerable, and we are eternally grateful for the patriotism of our troops. On this Veterans Day, I salute America's bravest, and pledge to honor their courage year round.