

Every Veterans Day, Americans come together to remember those who have served our country around the world in the name of freedom and democracy. The debt that we owe to them is immeasurable. Their sacrifices and those of their families are freedom's foundation. Without the brave efforts of all the soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and Coast Guardsmen and their families, our country would not live so freely.

On this Veterans Day, we continue to be engaged in hostilities in Iraq and Afghanistan, and young men and women will pay the ultimate price while wearing the uniform of our nation. Let us honor the memory of the 4,300 Americans who have died in Iraq and nearly 900 who have died in Afghanistan. We also honor the sacrifices of our wounded: more than 31,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and 4,300 in Afghanistan.

As we remember their patriotic sacrifices, we renew our commitment to keep our promises to the nation's 3 million troops and reservists, their families, and 24 million veterans.

We promise to help them succeed. During this economic crisis, Congress has enacted critical measures to expand educational opportunity and economic relief. The new Post 9-11 GI Bill, which began in August, provides the opportunity for a full, four-year college education, allowing up to 2 million warriors of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts to be part of a new American economic recovery, just like after World War II. Veterans coming home are facing double digit unemployment, so this Congress has enacted incentives for businesses to hire unemployed veterans. As part of the Recovery Act, Congress provided nearly 2 million disabled

veterans a \$250 payment to help make ends meet.

We promise to provide the benefits they have earned and support military families. Many of our troops have served multiple tours of duty, with great strain on their families and substantial cost to their financial futures. In response, Congress provided special \$500 payments for the 185,000 service members and veterans forced to serve under stop-loss orders since 2001. Congress also has taken steps to reduce the backlog and waits for veterans trying to access their earned benefits. This year, we are also increasing military pay 3.4 percent and expanding TRICARE health benefits.

We promise to meet their needs for high-quality health care. This Congress has made an unprecedented commitment to veterans' health care. With this year's budget, we have increased the investment in veterans' health care and services by 60 percent since January 2007 -- including the largest single increase in the 78-year history of the VA. This funding has strengthened health care for more than 5 million veterans, resulting in the addition of 17,000 new doctors and nurses, and more Community-Based Outpatient Clinics and new Vet Centers.

It has been critical to meeting the needs of the 363,000 veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in need of care over the last three years. This funding also is expanding mental health screening and treatment -- vital to the many veterans suffering from PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury -- and strengthening access for veterans in rural areas.

Congress also just enacted a law that paves the way for ensuring sufficient, timely and predictable funding for veterans' health care, a key priority of many veterans' groups. This law authorizes Congress to approve VA medical care appropriations one year in advance of the start of each fiscal year. Gone are the days when any delays in the political system threaten resources for veterans' medical care.

Politics and partisanship should never be a factor in our support for American veterans or troops. On the battlefield, the military pledges to leave no soldier behind. As a nation, let it be our pledge that when they return home, we leave no veteran behind. This day and every day, let us honor their service with actions that fulfill our commitment to our troops, their families, and our veterans – and that are worthy of our grateful nation.