

## OPENING STATEMENT SEN. BERNARD SANDERS

### PREPARED REMARKS OF SEN. BERNARD SANDERS AT THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS= AFFAIRS HEARING ON THE FY 2008 BUDGET FOR VETERANS= PROGRAMS

February 13, 2007

Mr. Chairman:

Let begin by thanking you for holding this hearing. In my view, there is no group of Americans who have done so much for this country and yet are continually mistreated by this Administration, as our veterans.

Mr. Chairman, I also want to express my appreciation to Secretary Nicholson for his appearance today. I also sit on the Budget Committee and to this point the Secretary of Defense has refused to appear to justify the astronomically large increase the President's budget requested for the Defense Department. So I do not take the presence of cabinet secretaries for granted.

Mr. Chairman, I want to begin by saying that I believe that there is no greater obligation of this government than to provide our nation's veterans with the health care and benefits they deserve ? and most importantly ? that they have earned. And that their comrades earned. These health care services and benefits have already been paid for with the sweat, blood, and, in fact, the lives of American men and women who have answered their country's call.

Yet year after year we see budgets coming down from this President that fail to give the funding that is needed to provide veterans with the health care they need, to conduct the important medical research, to maintain VA facilities, and to make timely and accurate determinations of disability benefits. Year after year, the President's budget nickels and dimes veterans with proposed fee increases. And year after year, the President refuses to request the funds needed to unlock the doors of the VA health care system to the million plus veterans who have had those doors slammed in their face by this Administration.

Frankly, when it comes to veterans this Administration, and this Congress in the last few years, has paid lip service to patriotism while they fail to support the true patriots ? the men and women who have served this country.

Mr. Chairman, at a time when our country is at war in Iraq, at war in Afghanistan, and at war around the world fighting international terrorism, how can a President send us a budget that more than doubles the prescription drug copayment for some veterans from \$8 to \$15? How can he send us a budget that asks veterans to pay up to \$750 annually for the health care they have earned when the VA itself believes this will drive over 100,000 veterans out of the VA health care system? How can he send us a budget that effectively cuts VA medical and prosthetic research ? such as research to deal with the epidemic of PTSD that we are seeing in the war in Iraq. Not to mention the Gulf War-illness that veterans of the last Gulf War are still suffering with.

Mr. Chairman, I have to say quite honestly that I view this Administration's treatment of our veterans to be an issue of morality. And let's be honest about it. For this Administration to continue to give huge tax breaks to wealthy Americans at a time when we have so many unmet needs in the VA is immoral.

Let me just give you a few examples, Mr. Chairman. We all know that the veterans organizations do a tremendous job each and every year putting forward what they call the Independent Budget. This Independent Budget details the funding that would be needed to truly meet the needs of our veterans. They are to be congratulated because they put it out every year regardless of what party is in charge. It is the veterans' organizations' best assessment of what the need is.

This year's Independent Budget reveals that the Administration's proposed budget is about \$4 billion short. Now, Mr. Chairman, those of us in the Congress know that there are many competing funding priorities. So, let's see what the priorities of this Administration are. Let's see what President Bush believes is a higher priority than \$4 billion to care for our veterans.

In his budget, President Bush proposes the permanent elimination of the estate tax. This tax cut benefits only the top two-tenths of one percent of the population. A recent study reveals what repealing the estate tax on the superrich really means. Eliminating the estate tax will save the Walton family, heirs to the Wal-Mart fortune, over \$32 billion. That means one family gets a tax break that is eight times the amount that we need to meet the needs of millions of veterans.

Two members of the Cox family, of Cox Cable fame, would save almost \$5 billion each. Is it more important to give a tax break to these billionaires or more important to provide the \$4 billion we need to fund veterans needs?

Two members of the Koch family, the family that has the largest privately owned company in the world, will each save some \$4.7 billion. Three members of the Mars family, of Mars candy bars, will save \$3.9 billion each. Just those few examples provide enough funding to raise VA spending by \$4 billion above the baseline for 15 years. What is this Administration's priority? Keeping faith with veterans? Or rewarding the very wealthiest people in this country with tax breaks they don't need ? at the expense of veterans?

Mr. Chairman, I have to say that one of the most glaring examples of the abandonment of our veterans is the bar on category 8 veterans. Since 2003 this Administration has closed the doors of the VA to enrollment by new category 8 veterans. Estimates are that over a million veterans have been denied access to care as a result.

Now I know the Administration line is that these are so-called "high income" veterans. But the truth is that these veterans make as little as \$27,000. My own office hears from these veterans who are unfairly and immorally denied care. Take for example a Korean War veteran who called my office because he was facing high prescription drug costs. His income places him \$110 over the income level that puts him in Priority 8 and therefore ineligible. My office was also called by an 81 year old World War II veteran who wanted to enroll in the VA health care system to get an annual health exam. He applied for benefits and was put in Priority 8 status meaning he was barred from the VA.

Mr. Chairman, these are real examples of war veterans in Vermont who are being shut out of the VA by this Administration because they believe that giving the Walton family a tax cut is a higher priority than caring for these veterans. And the story is the same all across this country. In my view, this is a disgrace. And I have not even touched on the lack of adequate funding to increase the staff who make claims determinations, or the impact of the cuts to medical research, or the failure to keep up the physical infrastructure of the VA, or the lack of adequate funding to provide desperately needed mental health services for our returning soldiers. Or, Mr. Chairman, the whole issue of this Administration's failure to provide the resources so that deserving veterans returning from the current wars don't displace older veterans within the VA system.

Mr. Chairman, in my view, we should reject this Administration's budget. We should look to the veterans organizations and their Independent Budget as a guide. In that regard, Mr. Chairman, my office is currently working on legislation that would enact many of the legislative changes that the Independent Budget recommends. If this Administration refuses to lead, we should ask them to get out of the way. I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman and the rest of the members on this committee, on this and other legislation. As demonstrated by your consistent support for our veterans, you and I agree that veterans gave us their all and they deserve better than what this Administration is prepared to give them.