maximum amount of portability because one is not relying upon some program or some insurance benefit. The individual owns the money.

As Republicans, we hear it over and over again: we like to own things. In this case, one keeps control of that money. If a person loses their job, that money stays with them. It is there for the purchase of COBRA benefits should they need it or to tide you over until one obtains health insurance benefits with another job.

This is an important point that I do not think a lot of people understand. I had a medical savings account for my last 5 years in the private sector. I came to Congress. A medical savings account is not available to Members of Congress, or at least it was not last year when we were sworn in. That money that I had in the medical savings account remains for me in that account. It is growing year by year through the miracle of compound interest.

And should I go back to the private sector at some time, I fully would expect to use that money to once again join another medical savings account somewhere else.

Another program that the President spoke to the other night when he was here, and this is an extremely important point, and, realistically, Mr. Speaker, we cannot get this one done fast enough. In fact, the House has already passed association health plans. We did this last June. This proposal would give small businesses the ability to band together across State lines, if need be, to purchase health insurance as part of a larger group. This gives small businesses greater bargaining power when it comes to the health coverage needs of their employees.

In addition to that, it lowers administrative costs. The other body has this bill. Of course, I encourage them to take this up and pass needed relief for Americans working for small businesses.

Association health plans will decrease the number of uninsured and give small businesses the ability to offer health insurance to their employees that they previously might not have been able to afford or in subsequent years would have to abandon because of the cost.

This is a win-win situation for the employee and for the business owner. Finally, the President spoke to the issue of tax credits for the uninsured. This is probably one of the most powerful ways to really reduce the number of uninsured in this country. The gentlewoman from Texas (Ms. GRANGER) has offered this bill. I am happy to be a cosponsor of this bill. I look forward to us moving this bill forward in the House this year. I was glad the President spoke to that.

Mr. Speaker, one might ask how many people will be helped with these three proposals that are out there now. You get a number of estimates around from different people, some more optimistic, some more pessimistic. I think we would all agree as Republicans one probably could not get a more pessimistic estimate than from Roll Call. Mr. Morton Kondracke in his Pennsylvania Avenue column from January 26, that was a week ago Monday, Mr. Kondracke was actually critical of the President's State of the Union address about not doing more for the uninsured.

But by Mr. Kondracke's own figures, we would reduce the number of uninsured in this country by 10 million over this next year simply by doing these three proposals which are all easily within our grasp.

Medical savings accounts have been done; association health plans have been done in the House awaiting action over in the other body; finally, tax credits for the uninsured, something we can take up and do with a minimum of heavy lifting this year.

Mr. Kondracke goes on to say that the association health plans would provide relief for 2 million workers. Health savings accounts would benefit an additional 4 million people, and the tax credits would benefit another 4 million people. This is 10 million. This is one quarter of the uninsured in this country done in this year.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think we have got a message in front of us that is just too powerful to ignore. And I look forward to working with my friends on both sides of the aisle to get these three things done this year and get them working for the American people.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from the District of Columbia (Ms. NORTON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Ms. NORTON addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS BUDGET

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. FILNER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker and colleagues, I was truly sad when today in the Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing I saw the figures in the administration's budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs for the coming fiscal year.

Last year in an effort that was actually just completed a couple weeks ago, many Members of Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, worked with the support of our Nation's veteran service organizations to finally arrive at a budget, while not completely adequate, at least addressing many of the needs of our veterans.

So I was very disheartened to find ourselves in the same place we were a year ago. We were faced with the same tired old proposals to raise the copayments on prescription drugs at the VA, a proposal that Congress soundly defeated probably many times.

We are faced with a proposal for a $250 annual fee for many veterans, which Congress also has defeated. So we are faced with a VA policy of continuing to suspend enrollments for the so-called priority 8 veterans. These are veterans, but they cannot be enrolled because we cannot handle them.

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And this budget request from the administration cuts the VA nursing home program and cuts funding, if you can believe this, for medical research. Imagine how our veterans must feel. Actually, we know how they feel. The Paralyzed Veterans of America has issued a press release entitled. ''Another Year, Another Inadequate Budget Request for Veterans' Health Care.''

They go on to point out that this request includes the lowest appropriation request for VA health care made by any administration for a decade. Although the VA Under Secretary for Health has testified that an average yearly medical care increase of 12 to 14 percent is needed to meet the cost of inflation and mandatory salary increases, there is less than 2 percent more than last year's appropriation recommended in the President's budget.

Likewise, the leaders of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other veterans organizations have expressed dismay, if I can say the least, at the proposed VA medical care funding. In fact, I feel I should just pull out the old tapes and old speeches from last year and rerun them, except it is not last year. And since the last budget request from this administration, the Nation has sent our young men and women to a war in Iraq, and they will be coming home as, guess what? Veterans.

Caring for our veterans is one of the costs of war, and the budget request does not take note of this fact.

I have enormous respect for Secretary Principi, who I believe does a great deal with inadequate budgets. But even this Secretary, or should I say especially this Secretary, needs a Congress that will pass a budget that is worthy of our veterans.

So sign me up for the battle again this year. Whatever is needed we will do to fill the budget holes that the President has left in this fiscal year.

Most of all, let us take note that this budget request points out the need for mandatory funding for VA health care. Let me repeat, mandatory funding of VA health care. It is now called discretionary, so we have to go through this battle every single year. Let us pass mandatory funding for VA health care so we will not have to rerun the same tapes next year and the next year and the next year.

CONGRESS MUST DECLARE WARS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BURGESS). Under a previous order of

the House, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. PAUL) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PAUL. Mr. Speaker, there is plenty of blame to go around for the mistakes made in going to war in Iraq, especially now that it is common knowledge that Saddam Hussein told the truth about not having weapons of mass destruction and that al Qaeda and 9/11 were in no way related to the Iraqi Government.

The intelligence agencies failed, for whatever reason this time, but their frequent failures should raise the question of whether or not this secret spending of $40 billion annually of the taxpayers' money is a good investment. The administration failed in making the decision to sacrifice so much life and limb by plunging us into this Persian Gulf quagmire that will surely last for years to come. But before the Congress gets too carried away with condemning the administration or the intelligence gathering agencies. It ought to look to itself.

A proper investigation and debate by this Congress, as we are now scrambling to accomplish, was warranted prior to any decision to go to war. An open and detailed debate on a declaration of war resolution would certainly have revealed that the U.S. national security was not threatened and the whole war could have been avoided. Because Congress did not do that, it deserves the greatest criticism for its dereliction of duty.

There was a precise reason that the most serious decision made by a country, the decision to go to war, was left by our Constitution, to the body closest to the people. If we followed this admonition, I am certain that fewer wars would be fought, wide support would be achieved for the sacrifices, there would be less political finger-pointing when events go badly, and blame could not be placed on one individual or agency. This process would more likely achieve victory, which has eluded us in recent decades.

The President has reluctantly agreed to support an independent commission to review our intelligence gathering failures and that is good. Cynics said nothing much would be achieved by the commission studying the pre-9/11 failures but it looks like some objective criticisms will emerge from that inquiry. We hope for the best in this newly named commission. But we already hear that the inquiry will be deliberately delayed, limited to the failure of the agencies, and may divert into studying intelligence gathering related to North Korea and elsewhere.

If the inquiry avoids the controversy of whether or not there was selective use of the information or undue pressure put on the CIA to support a foregone conclusion to go to war by the administration, the inquiry will appear a sham.

Regardless of the results, the process of the inquiry is missing the most important point, the failure of Congress to meet its responsibility on the decision to go or not go to war. The current mess was predictable from the beginning. Unfortunately, Congress voluntarily gave up its prerogative over war and illegally transferred this power to the President in October of 2002. The debate we are now having should have occurred here in the halls of Congress on a declaration of war resolution. Indeed, the Congress chose to transfer this decisionmaking power to the President in order to avoid the responsibility of making the hard choice of sending our young people into harm's way against a weak Third World country. This the President did on his own, with Congress' acquiescence. The blame game has only emerged now that we are in a political season. Sadly, the call for and the appointment of the commission is all part of this political process.

It is truly disturbing to see many who reneged on their responsibility for declaring or rejecting war in Congress by voting to give the President the power he wanted are now his harshest critics.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. DEFAZIO) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. DEFAZIO addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. FEENEY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. FEENEY addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

THE VALUE OF INVESTMENT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. HONDA) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. HONDA. Mr. Speaker, I would like to start out my comments with a quote. ''See, I ran for office to solve problems, not to pass them on to future Presidents and future generations.'' President Bush at a fund-raiser in Oregon, August 21, 2003.

Mr. Speaker, I believe our national budget should reflect a community's values and priorities. It should reflect the needs of the American people, including good jobs, safe community, quality education, and access to affordable health care.

In my home district in Silicon Valley, we understand the value of investment. This means crafting budgets based on right choices. Do we fund a trillion dollar tax cut or do we provide after-school programs for our children? Do we give away billions to HMOs or do we help seniors afford their prescription drugs? Do we increase tax breaks for the businesses that ship jobs overseas, or do we work to recover the 2.6 million manufacturing jobs lost in the past 3 years?

Unfortunately, the budget submitted by President Bush fails to fund priorities important to middle-class Americans. President Bush's budget has a different set of priorities: budget-busting tax cuts, fiscal irresponsibility, overpayments to HMOs, and reduced funding for important domestic programs.

President Bush's budget lays out $1 trillion for tax cuts but provides $9.4 billion less for education than was promised in the No Child Left Behind Act. In California alone, this will result in $897 million less for school districts through the title I programs and $105 million less for children with disabilities through the IDEA program. President Bush is eager to make his tax cut permanent and even make new ones. But he cannot seem to deliver the funds promised when he signed the No Child Left Behind Act nearly 3 years ago.

President Bush's budget includes $46 billion in overpayment for HMOs as a part of the Republican Medicare plan but it does nothing to lower the price of senior citizens' prescription medication.

President Bush has claimed for 3 years that his economic program would create jobs. But in that time the U.S. has lost nearly 3 million jobs. The President asserted in the State of the Union address that additional tax cuts would create jobs, but the numbers do not support this claim. This is not even a true budget because it will miss the costs of ongoing military operations in Iraq.

The budget also avoids long-term reform of the alternative minimum tax, even though the AMT will soon force millions of middle-class families to pay more taxes. And this is in direct contrast to the original intent of AMT. A recent estimate by the Congressional Budget Office put the full price tag of AMT reform at over $500 billion, a cost not factored in by the President's budget.

If this budget reflects President Bush's priorities, then it is clear where his priorities lie. President Bush has chosen the interest of an elite few over the needs of the many. I urge my colleagues to align their priorities with those of the American people and oppose the budget proposed by President Bush. That budget reminds me of Swiss cheese. It is full of holes.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from Tennessee (Mrs. BLACKBURN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mrs. BLACKBURN addressed the House. Her remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

MUSHARRAF'S ROLE IN NUCLEAR EXCHANGE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. PALLONE) is recognized for 5 minutes.