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Opinion - Bush budget betrays veterans

By George J. Bryjak, Guest Columnist

In his final debate with Sen. John Kerry, President George W. Bush stated that "we're meeting our obligation to our veterans, and the veterans know that ... Veterans are getting very good health care under my administration, and they will continue to do so during the next four years."

The president's pre-election declaration couldn't be farther from the truth. In his fiscal year 2006 budget proposal, veterans' medical programs would receive an increase of 1.7 percent, significantly less than the 13 percent to 14 percent the Veterans Administration testified that it needs to maintain current levels of service. A substantial portion of this shortfall would have to be made up by veterans whose co-payment for a month's supply of prescription drugs would double from \$7 to \$15.

In addition, some veterans would be required to pay a \$250 "user fee" just to access the VA's health care system. Sen. Daniel K. Akaka noted that increased drug co-payments and user fees will make it "prohibitively expensive" for many veterans to utilize VA clinics and hospitals. The Hawaii Democrat calculated that if the president's budget proposal is passed, more than 192,000 individuals would be forced out of the veteran's health network. The Veterans of Foreign Wars estimates that as many as 220,000 men and women could lose benefits.

The New York Times reports that thousands of Michigan veterans are on waiting lists for medical services, and some reservists returning from Iraq say that they have not received the health care they were promised. A veterans clinic in Pontiac, Mich., has capped new enrollments while cutbacks in an Altoona, Pa., VA hospital are forcing veterans to look elsewhere for medical treatment.

The new budget calls for a reduction of \$351 million in the VA's nursing home program as well as \$104 million in state grants. This translates to 28,000 fewer funded veterans in state institutions in FY 2006 than in FY 2005. The timing couldn't be worse as the number of veterans over 85 years of age is expected to double in the next eight years. Rep. Lane Evans, D-Ill., is correct in his assessment that the Bush administration "wants to pull the rug out from under our oldest veterans' right at the peak of their need for long-term care services."

Just as thousands of wounded men and women are returning from the Middle East, the FY 2006 budget cuts \$4 million from medical and prosthetic research, bringing to \$53 million cut from this important work in the last two years. The president's budget also calls for eliminating 3,712 full-time medical care employees, mostly nurses.

According to one estimate, up to 17 percent of service personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have mental health issues ranging from anxiety and readjustment disorders to chronic psychological problems, including psychosis. Will the VA have sufficient funds to provide professional counseling for tens of thousands of soon-to-be-ex-service men and women?

Since Bush took office in 2001, the number of veterans appealing a VA medical decision has increased from 87,291 to almost 155,000. With budget-related staff cuts, an already lengthy appeals process will take even longer. How many veterans will become increasingly ill - or die - waiting for a benefits-related decision?

The president's hatchet job of veterans' medical benefits has been denounced by every major veterans organization in the country. American Legion National Commander Thomas Cadmus said: "No active-duty service member in harm's way should ever have to

question the nation's commitment to veterans. This is the wrong message at the wrong time to the wrong constituency."

Thomas H. Corey, National President of Vietnam Veterans of America noted that "It does a disservice to those of us who donned the uniform to defend the rights, principles and freedoms that we hold dear. It does not bode well for those returning from the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Perhaps the most telling remarks of this betrayal were those of John Furgess, VFW commander-in-chief. "The country's 25 million veterans, 2.2 million uniformed members and their families, voted overwhelmingly for this administration last year to make a difference in their lives, yet this budget fails to live up to the nation's obligation to veterans because it doesn't acknowledge that the costs of war continue long after the last shots were fired."

Defending the administration's commitment to veterans, newly appointed Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson said: "We had to make tough decisions. We have to set priorities." It's painfully clear what these priorities are. When the president needs votes, he sports his commander-in-chief jacket and mingles with the troops. But economic decisions reward the only constituency that counts in his administration: the wealthy.

While the proposed VA medical budget is \$3.5 billion short of what that agency needs, United for a Fair Economy, an independent think tank, estimates that between 2002 and 2004, the richest 1 percent of Americans received roughly \$197 billion in tax breaks. In light of the biggest tax giveaway in history, Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness David Chu had the audacity to say that providing pensions, health insurance and other benefits for military widows and retirees has "gotten to the point where they are hurtful. They are taking away from the nation's ability to defend itself."

The president's callous indifference to the plight of veterans via his FY 2006 budget proposal is nothing more than a rerun of the FY 2005 budget that was \$2.6 billion short of the VA's request. Speaking of the latter proposal, then VFW Commander-in-Chief Edward S. Banas Sr. complained: "This funding package is a disgrace and a sham ... To ask this nation's veterans to subsidize their health care is outrageous. They have already paid for health care with their sweat and their blood."

What could be more damaging to the morale and welfare of the nation's veterans and active duty personnel than to sabotage their sacrifice by underfunding the VA health care budget? The president's fiscal policy regarding both the wealthiest among us and the working and middle-class Americans who defend this country is beyond unpatriotic. It's obscene.

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