

Congressman Jim Kolbe

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Statement



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Congress Increases Veterans Funding

America's veterans have provided invaluable service to our nation. There is no way to put a price tag on what they have done to protect our liberty and freedom. But we can, and we must, recognize their service by providing adequate and appropriate benefits. Each year we make progress in doing so. This year was no exception.

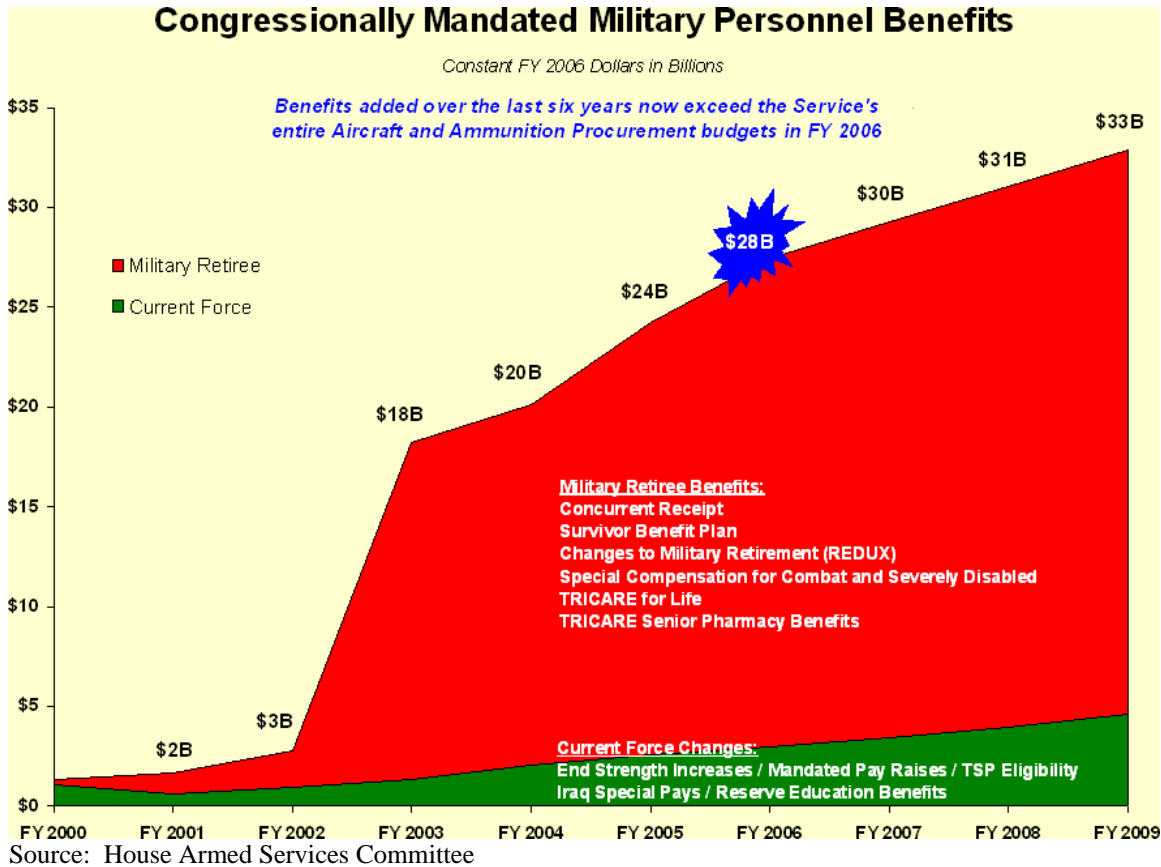
The annual Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) appropriations bill provides funding for veterans programs. The VA appropriations bill for fiscal year 2006 (HR 2528) provides over \$70 billion in total veterans funding. This amount includes \$22.5 billion for veterans health care, \$575 million above the Administration's request. Importantly, the legislation did not include new user fees or increased prescription co-payments as the Administration originally proposed. With this bill, Congress increased VA health care funding 18% over the past 2 years. On November 18, the House passed the final version HR 2528; I voted in favor. President Bush signed the bill into law on November 30.

On December 29, 2005, Congress passed a 1% across-the-board cut to fiscal year 2006 discretionary spending in all government programs excluding the VA.

Although the overall population of veterans is decreasing, the number of veterans enrolled in the VA has increased by 70% since 1999. This is partially due to an aging population of Korean War and Vietnam War veterans and the relative attractiveness of VA benefits in an environment of skyrocketing health care costs. But another major factor is the expanded eligibility for access Congress provided when it passed the Veterans' Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of 1996, which opened the VA medical system to all veterans, regardless of their income or whether their ailments are service connected. The VA appropriations bill for fiscal year 2004 (HR 2861) provided more than \$1 billion to adjudicate veterans compensation and pension claims and reduce the claims backlog that has resulted from the increase in enrollees.

Funding for veterans is not confined to the VA appropriations bill. The Department of Defense (DoD) will spend approximately \$35 billion on military pensions and health care entitlements through the Defense Appropriations Bill, including \$4.7 billion on Tricare-

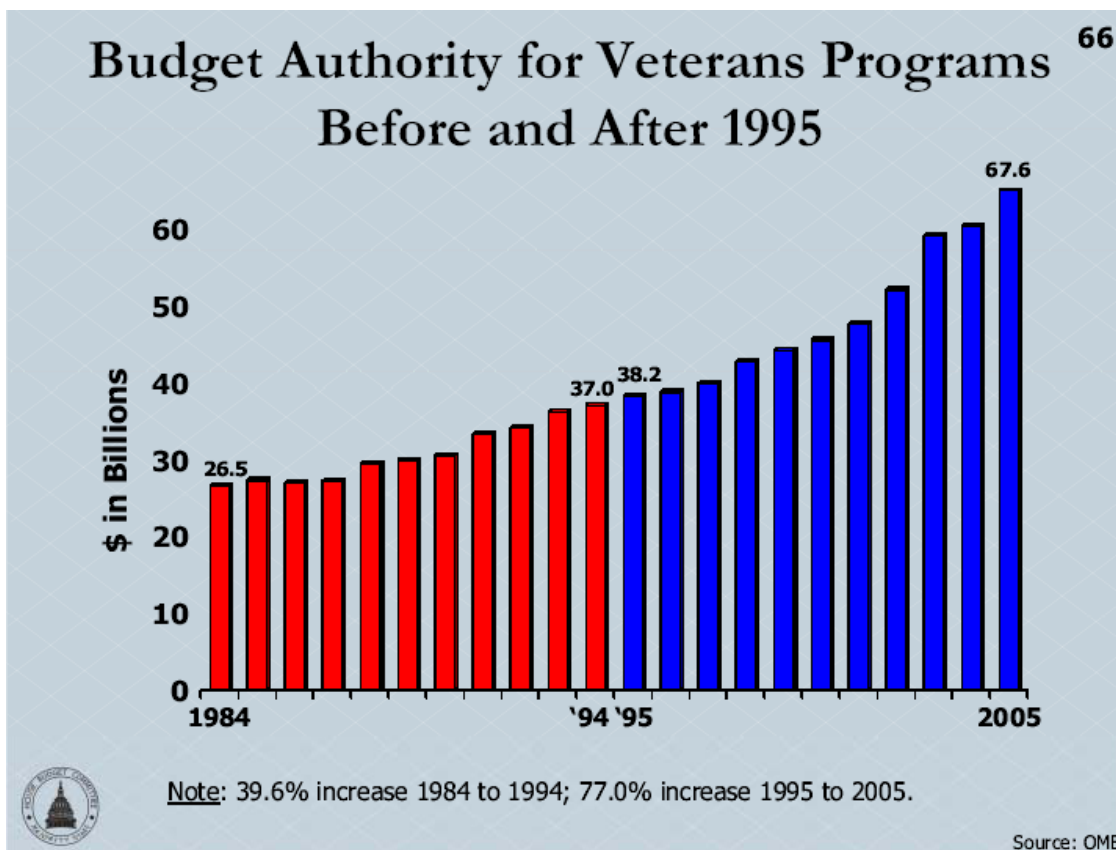
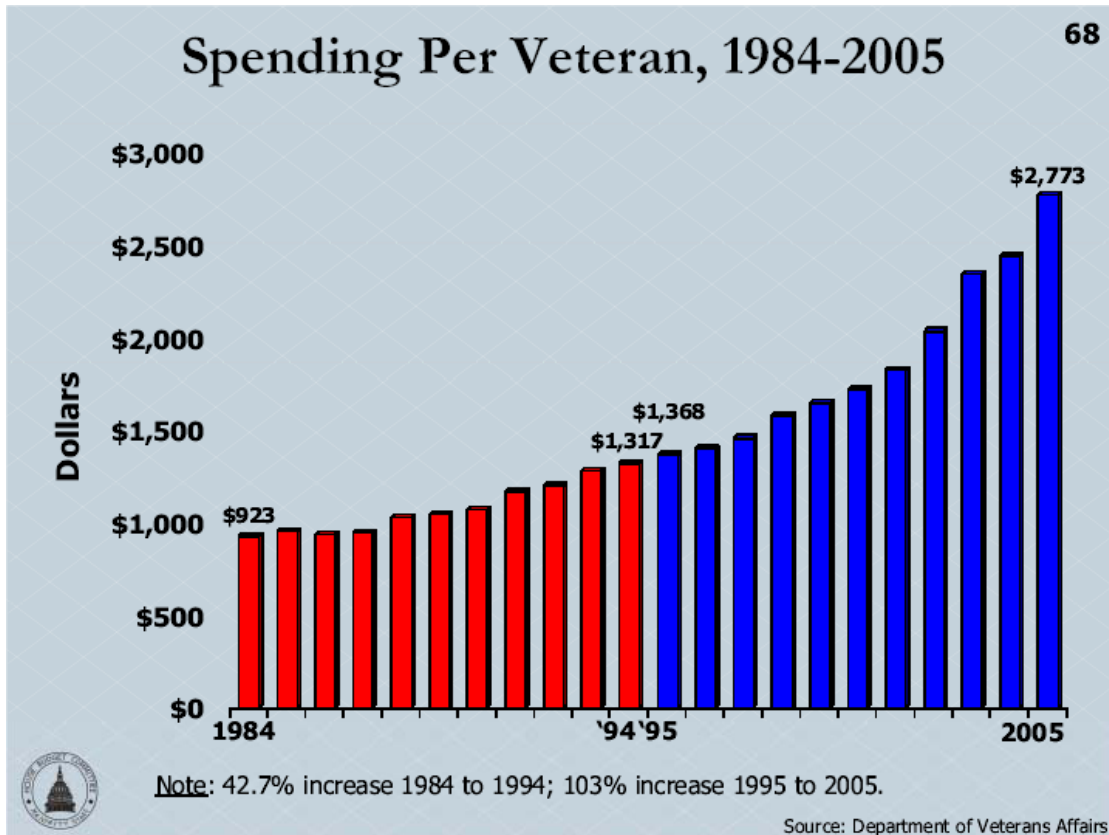
for-Life. In addition, DoD funds retiree health care through non-civilian providers. The following chart shows the \$28 billion in DoD funding for new benefits Congress has provided military retirees since 2000. Also, funding is provided for veterans job training and employment programs in the appropriations bills for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Commerce.



The United States spends more money on veterans than on any function other than national defense, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, and interest on the national debt. We spend more on America's 25 million veterans than we do on education, foreign aid, homeland security, housing, NASA, highways, or welfare.

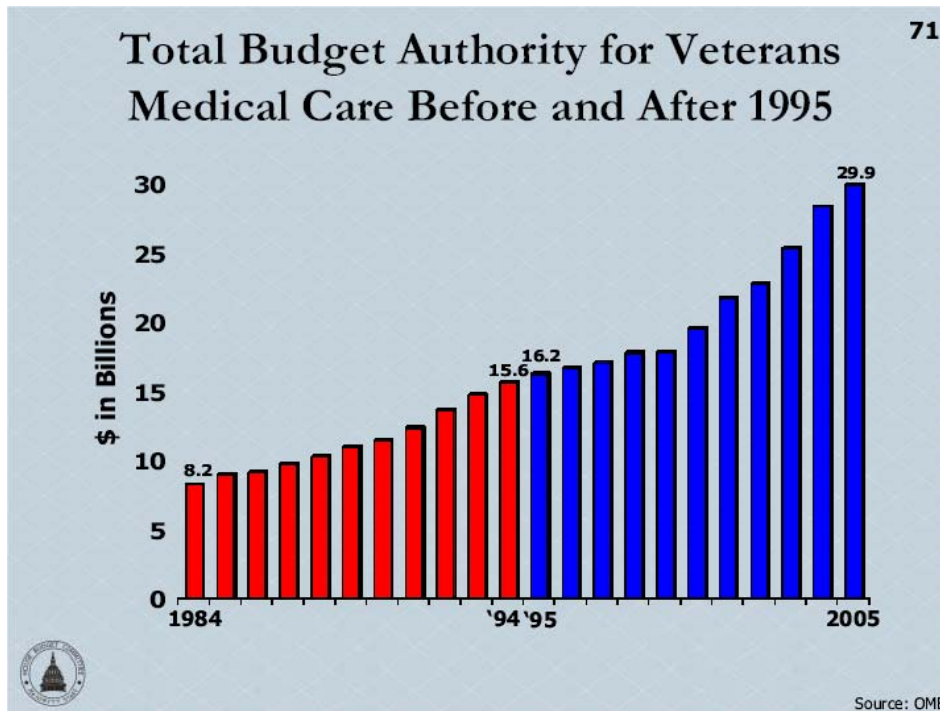
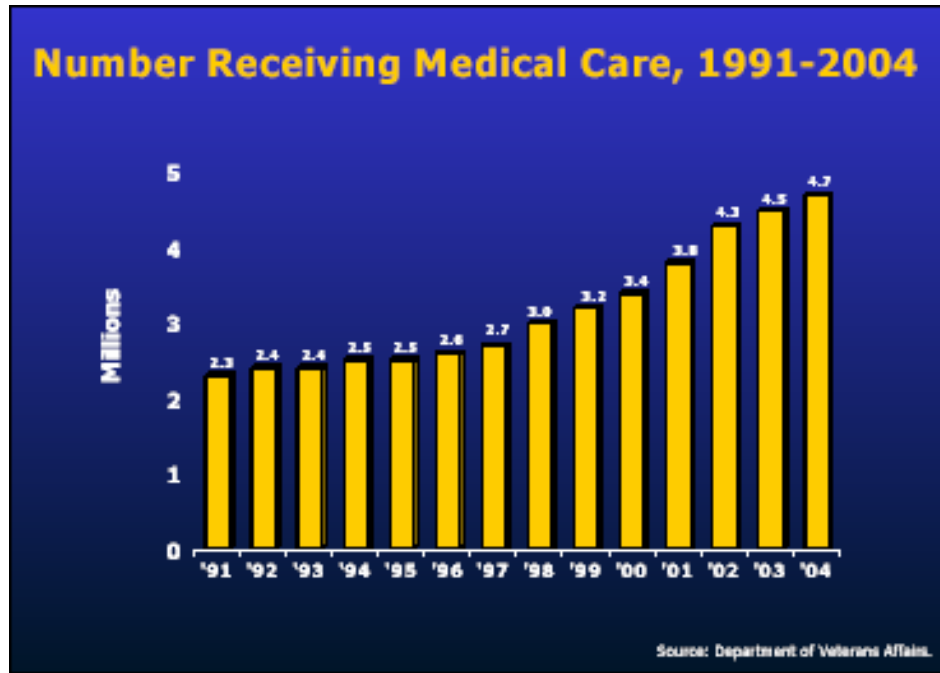
Recent History of Veterans Funding. The increases in this year's budget carry on a strong commitment to our nation's veterans over the last 10 years. Since 1995, when Republicans took control of the House of Representatives:

- Veterans budget has increased 77%.
- Spending for veterans medical care increased from \$16.2 billion to \$29.9 billion – an 85% increase.
- The number of veterans receiving care increased from 2.5 million to 4.7 million – an 88% increase.
- Monthly education benefit payment levels under the Montgomery GI Bill *more than doubled*, from \$405 to \$1004.
- Total per-veteran spending increased from \$1,368 to \$2,773 – a 103% increase.



Veterans Medical Care

Since 1995, we have made great strides in improving benefits for our nation's 25 million veterans. Some of the most important improvements include expanded eligibility for medical care in 1996 and 1999. As a result, the number of veterans using VA medical care has increased from 2.5 million in 1995 to 4.7 million today.



Veterans Montgomery GI Bill Education Benefits

Since 1995, we have fought to increase funding for the education benefits veterans have earned through their service to the nation.

