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Veterans Appropriations: FY 2008 Conference Report

How the President and Congress Differ on Veterans Funding

WASHINGTON – Hundreds of thousands of members of the military have served their country in Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001. But even as their service reminds our nation the great debt we owe to our veterans, VA healthcare is still not adequately prepared to care for those returning from combat and nearly 400,000 veterans are faced with unreasonable waiting times for claims processing.

The House-Senate Conference report is \$3.7 billion above the President's request for veterans' medical care, claims processing personnel, and facility improvements, improving care for the 263,345 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan - 54,000 more than last year.

- **Veterans' Health Care:** \$37.2 billion, \$2.6 billion over the President's budget request for VA hospitals and clinics and research into conditions such as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which are among the most common problems facing Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. In 2008 the VA will treat 5.8 million patients, including about 263,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.
- **Claims Processors:** \$124.2 million to provide 1,800 new claims processors to address the 400,000 benefit claims backlog.

The House and Senate bills, including similar increases, had passed the House [409 to 2](#) and the Senate [92 to 1](#).

The White House strongly opposes these increases:

On June 5th, former Budget Director Rob Portman signaled "that Bush will veto the homeland security measure, as well as an even more generous bill funding veterans' health programs and construction at military bases." [[AP, 6/5/07](#)]

A week later, "the White House [had] backed away from earlier threats to veto a spending bill containing \$4 billion more than President Bush sought for veterans' health care." [[AP, 6/14/07](#)]

On June 13th, as the House of Representatives was considering the Military Construction and Veterans appropriations bill, the White House sent over a letter to say planned increases for veterans were "excessive." [[SAP 6/13/07](#)]

In August, the President directed his Secretary of Veterans Affairs to send Congress a letter letting them know that Veterans didn't really need the \$3.7 billion increase over the President's request.

In October, just to be clear, Jim Nussle, the President's new budget director, sent another letter stating Congressional plans for veterans contained an "excessive level of spending," and threatened to veto other bills if the Congress didn't scale back funding for veterans.

This week, the President complains that we are not sending him Military Construction/Veterans funding as a stand alone bill, but since the President took office it's been consolidated with other appropriations bills 3 times, sent up on its own once, and last year the bill was never enacted at all - the former Majority simply shut down the Congress and went home. [[Thomas](#)]