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Held in Contempt

By Leonard Fein

Excuse me: You support our troops, don't you?

Of course you do. We all do, whether or not we go the bumper sticker route. Those of us who want them home before nightfall support them not less than those of us who want them to have better body armor; those of us who supported the war support them as do those of us who opposed it.

Our troops? They're mostly kids, and they are very much in harm's way. Almost 2,300 have so far been killed and more than 16,000 have been wounded.

It's the wounded I want to talk about for a moment here. You've seen the pictures, mostly out of Walter Reed Hospital in Bethesda, Md. The 19 or 20 year-old high school football player who lost a leg, the guitar player who lost a hand, the aspiring actor who lost his face.

The good news out of Iraq is that the percentage of the wounded who survive their wounds is higher than in any preceding war, a consequence in large part of improvements in both body armor and battlefield medical care; the bad news that goes along with that is that 6% of the wounded require amputation and 20% have sustained head or neck injuries. Now they are destined to spend months, if not years, in rehabilitation, and their lives will be quite different from what they just yesterday supposed. Plainly, they deserve the very best care we can provide them.

So how is it that hidden in the budget President Bush has proposed to Congress for 2007 are future cuts in the budget for hospital and medical care for veterans?

You wouldn't know this if you were to look just at the basic 352-page document that was transmitted to Congress on February 6. Actually, that document provides for an increase of almost \$2 billion in spending on hospital and medical care for veterans for the 2007 fiscal year.

But while the document provides estimates on tax cuts and on entitlement programs in the post-2007 years, it offers no information on discretionary spending in those years. That's a departure from standard practice, presumably to insulate the readers from shock. So when it comes to discretionary spending during those years, you're on your own — or you can turn to the remarkably useful analysis by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. The center has dug out the data and the relationships buried here and there in ancillary background materials, and it is from them that we learn that by 2011, cuts in hospital and medical care for veterans will total \$9.3 billion (compared to the base year, 2006).

Shocking? Well, why not look at some of the other categories: How about higher education, slated for \$15.8 billion in cuts by 2011, a 19.8% cut in 2011 alone? Or, if education's not your thing, how about a 22% cut in "recreational resources," a category that includes national parks and programs for pollution control and abatement?

And so forth.

Is this about reducing the deficit? But 36% of the growth in the national deficit since the beginning of 2001 comes from increases in defense, international affairs and the costs of homeland security, and 40% comes from tax cuts. Another 12% comes from growth in entitlement costs, including the Medicare prescription drug benefit. That leaves growth in discretionary programs since 2001 as a 12% contribution to the deficit.

Or try it another way: The budget proposes \$285 billion in tax cuts between 2007 and 2011. The total cuts in discretionary programs over those same five years, if the president's recommendations are accepted, will come to \$183 billion.

So there's really a very simple trade-off: If you want to keep the discretionary program at their current level, settle for a tax cut of "only" \$102 billion. That way, you won't have to reduce programs in nutrition or in low-income housing, as the president proposes we should. The same for college scholarships and loans, for community health centers, for occupational health and safety, for research on alternatives to oil.

Or, if you believe that these and other programs could benefit — meaning that our society and our nation could benefit — from an intelligent expansion of such programs, you have another \$102 billion in tax cuts just sitting there.

Think some of the tax cuts should be preserved? Alright, but do bear in mind that while the tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 — the cuts the president now seeks to make permanent — provide an average saving of \$650 a year to people in the middle fifth of households, their benefit to people who make more than \$1 million a year comes to an average of \$136,000 a year.

If made permanent, the \$2.7 trillion in cuts will provide \$900 billion to the top 1% of households over the next 10 years, \$600 billion of that to the top two-tenths of the top percentile, namely those who make more than a \$1 million. That means that one out of every three dollars in cuts goes to the top 1%, leaving two out of three dollars to the remaining 99% of us.

The conclusion is unavoidable: This administration has neither respect nor affection for the American people. And it has contempt for government. That contempt emerges not only from its budget proposals — including, not so incidentally, this year's cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, education and a host of others — but from its indifference to the incompetence of the people it appoints to high office.

Who, then, are the brain-injured — those who govern with such disdain for the people, or the people who sit idly by, content to grouse to their friends and neighbors?