

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell today said that Congress must make it a national priority to care for our nation's veterans, and cast his vote in favor of an emergency supplemental bill that provides more than \$1.7 billion for veterans' health care and cleaning up the mess at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Mitchell said that the legislation also makes our country more secure by setting forth a new, responsible course in Iraq and Afghanistan while holding the Iraqi government accountable.

Mitchell criticized Democratic leadership for insisting on a timeline in Iraq and including unrelated spending in the emergency supplemental.

Mitchell made the following statement following the passage of the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act:

"Today, I voted for the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act because it provides our nation's returning troops and veterans with the care they need and deserve, and makes our country more secure by setting forth a new, responsible course in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The people of my District have told me that after four years and thousands of lives lost, they are looking to Congress to ensure that our commitment in Iraq is not open-ended, that there is not a blank check on American lives, and that the Iraqi government will be held accountable.

"While I have serious concerns about some aspects of this legislation, and, in general, do not support an absolute, Congressionally-mandated timetable in Iraq, I believe that, on balance, this legislation does more good than harm. Ideally, I would have preferred a more bipartisan approach, especially on an issue of this magnitude.

"I am deeply disappointed in my Party's leadership for insisting on a timetable instead of working with our colleagues on the other side of the aisle. I am also disappointed that leadership saw fit to include millions of dollars for unrelated spending projects for shrimp farmers and peanut storage facilities. I will be working with my colleagues to remove these provisions as this bill goes to conference.

"Our sons and daughters are in harm's way, however, and I cannot in good conscience withhold the resources they need while we continue what is likely to be a lengthy debate in Washington.

"I also believe that as the Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation, I have a unique responsibility to our veterans.

"I am working hard to make caring for our veterans a national priority, and this legislation is a good start. It secures a much-needed \$1.7 billion for veterans' health care, including \$550 million to get rid of the maintenance backlog that will help ensure veterans' facilities are clean and well-maintained.

"This bill provides \$20 million to clean up the mess at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

These funds, combined with the Dignity for Wounded Warriors Act of 2007 - which I introduced last month - are an important first step.

"By voting this emergency supplemental down, Congress would send a distressing and insulting message to our injured soldiers, veterans and their loved ones that its years of neglectful under-funding and failed oversight of Walter Reed would go on and on.

"This bill also makes our country more secure. It provides our troops with the resources they need to fight al Qaeda and other terrorists in an increasingly hostile situation in Afghanistan. For too long, the situation in Afghanistan has gone under the radar while al Qaeda and elements of the Taliban have grown stronger.

"In Iraq, we are setting forth a new, responsible course that demands that the Iraqis take responsibility for their own security and stability. That requires the Iraqi government to meet its own benchmarks.

"This is precisely the type of plan the bipartisan Iraq Study Group outlined just a few months ago. The distinguished members of that panel, including James Baker, Lee Hamilton and Arizona's own Sandra Day O'Connor, believed, as I do, that benchmarks are an appropriate way to chart the Iraqi government's progress, or lack thereof.

"Among these benchmarks are quelling sectarian violence, disarming sectarian militias and developing a plan to share oil revenues equitably among all Iraqis. Holding the Iraqi government accountable is imperative because they have not always lived up to their promises."