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Tax Reform Can Bring Prosperity Back to America

By Congressman Vern Buchanan

The U.S. tax code today is complicated, unfair, and punishes everyone from families to employers trying to compete in the global marketplace. Instead of promoting economic growth and enhancing our international competitiveness, it does just the opposite. In short, it's hurting our economy.

The tax code consumes more than 71,000 pages and it gets longer all the time.

Individuals and families spend more than \$6 billion simply trying to file their tax returns, with more than 90 percent of our citizens forced to retain a paid tax preparer or utilize income tax software in order to meet their obligations.

It's so complex that even the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) commissioner cannot prepare his own tax return. How can middle-class families expect to comply with a tax code that the IRS commissioner finds too difficult?

The IRS says the average person spends 21.4 hours filling out tax forms. A USA Today editorial lampooned the complexity by noting that the instruction booklet for Apple's iPad is one page, while the instructions accompanying the IRS 1040 long form consume 172 pages.

And, the IRS has already announced that it is behind schedule for the upcoming April 15th filing deadline because the Congress and President waited until the waning days of last year before reaching agreement on legislation extending existing tax rates for another two years.

Calling our tax code "an anchor" around the neck of our people, our businesses, and our economy doesn't do justice to the enormous dead-weight it represents.

It's well past time for the Congress and President to put aside their respective political interests and work together on a major tax reform package. And, the guiding principle of this effort must

be tax simplification.

Income tax compliance costs for the business sector exceed \$150 billion annually. Tax simplification can help create new jobs by allowing businesses to re-direct these funds for better usage.

Businesses won't waste this money attempting to comply with our broken-beyond-repair tax code, but rather dedicate these funds to design better products, expand their production facilities, or hire more workers.

Also, tax simplification will help U.S. businesses sell more services or goods to consumers around the world, and help led to renewed job creation and economic growth through higher export levels.

Finally, our businesses increasingly find themselves competing in a global marketplace, not just a North American or European marketplace. Increasingly, businesses from China and India are becoming more competitive with U.S. businesses.

Very shortly, the United States will have the highest corporate income tax rate among its key industrialized allies. This will shackle our businesses, as they attempt to compete globally with businesses that pay lower rates. Over the long term, this puts our business sector at a competitive disadvantage, which needs to be solved.

I call upon President Obama to make tax reform and simplification a high priority this year. He can and should outline his vision for a simpler, fairer, pro-growth tax code to the American people in his upcoming State of the Union speech.

Both parties in Congress should work together on a new tax code that creates jobs, revitalizes our economy, and helps America resume her rightful role as the leader of the global economy.

Buchanan Bill Says NO to Cuba

By Congressman Vern Buchanan

The economically impoverished nation of Cuba wants to drill for oil 50 miles from Florida's coast. If oil is found in commercially viable quantities, it would benefit Cuba, not the United States.

But the bigger problem is that Cuba, using Chinese-made equipment, wants to drill a well even deeper than BP's Deepwater Horizon that exploded last year in the Gulf of Mexico. Cuba has neither the resources nor the technology to handle a spill, and help from American companies would be greatly complicated by the trade embargo.

It would only take three days for a spill to reach our beaches. And if disaster strikes, who pays the price? Not Cuba or China – but America. The economic and environmental damage would be catastrophic.

We cannot allow this project to move forward.

Last week, I introduced legislation (H.R. 372) aimed at blocking Cuba from drilling so close to our shores. Obviously we can't tell Cuba what to do since we don't have diplomatic relations with that country. So my legislation would attack the problem by allowing the U.S. Interior Secretary to deny American oil permits to any company that does business with an embargoed nation, like Cuba. A Spanish firm, Repsol, is now working with Cuba and hopes to begin drilling later this year. Repsol also has 20 drilling permits awaiting approval for projects in the Gulf of Mexico. My bill essentially tells Repsol to decide whether it wants to continue doing business with Cuba or with the United States.

Current law prohibits off-shore drilling within 125 miles of Florida's coast. The reason Cuba can drill so close is that the island nation's territorial waters extend to 50 miles off the Florida Keys. U.S. companies have the best deep-water equipment, but cannot participate in the Cuban drilling because of the 45-year economic embargo against Fidel Castro's communist regime.

Repsol's oil platform for Cuba is now being built in China and would be transported by sea to begin operating off the Florida coast later this year. As we have learned from the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, an oil spill can devastate a regional economy and impose serious long-term environmental damage to precious natural resources.

Facing pressure from the United States several years ago, Repsol scrapped plans to build a gas development plant in Iran. It's my expectation that Repsol would take similar action and abandon its contract with Cuba if my legislation is passed.

The proposed oil well would drill 5,600 feet, which would exceed BP's 5,000-foot well at Deepwater Horizon. Quickly capping a blown well at that depth would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. We need to do everything possible to prevent another Deepwater Horizon from ever happening again.

Buchanan Bill Cracks Down on Illegal Pill Mills

Florida "Ground Zero" in Prescription Drug Battle

By Congressman Vern Buchanan

A parent's worst nightmare is having to bury a child. That nightmare is becoming a tragic reality for far too many families in Florida.

On average, seven people die from prescription drug abuse every day in Florida. These are not just numbers.

Garrett Harney's last words of despair to his mother were "Mom, I can't be helped." Garrett overdosed on oxycontin and xanax in 2006. His mother, a Sarasota resident, is now trying to help save lives by spreading the important message that prescription drug abuse is a deadly serious problem in Florida.

I held a public forum in Sarasota last week to discuss ways to combat the growing threat of illegal "Pill Mills." These so-called "pain management" clinics are nothing more than drug dealers posing as doctors and health providers. They have turned Florida into the nation's warehouse for narcotics. Florida has more pain clinics than McDonald's restaurants.

As a result of what I heard from families and law enforcement authorities who attended my public forum, as well as my discussions with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and others, I have drafted legislation to put these Pill Mills out of business and make our communities safer again.

My three-point bill to be introduced next week in the U.S. House of Representatives will do the following:

- Toughen federal penalties for Pill Mill operators by doubling the prison sentence from 10 to 20 years and tripling the fine from \$1 million to \$3 million.
- Use assets seized from violators to fund drug monitoring databases in the states, enforce actions against Pill Mills; and for drug treatment programs. The DEA last month seized an estimated \$2.5 million in illicit assets owned by Pill Mill owners in South Florida.

- Reclassify hydrocodone combination drugs (one of the most addictive and dangerous drug mixtures) to make them a Schedule II drug that is more difficult to prescribe and obtain.

I support a state drug database approved by the Florida Legislature that would allow us to track these narcotics and identify abusive practices. Florida's prescription drug epidemic has exploded upon us in just a few short years due to the proliferation of an estimated 1,300 Pill Mills.

The cost of this epidemic is enormous. Lower employee productivity. Higher emergency room diagnostic and treatment costs. The high cost of drug addiction treatment itself. The \$15,000 - \$20,000 in costs to treat addicted babies in neonatal intensive care. The \$1.4 million in lifetime costs that addicts incur. Rising health insurance premiums to pay for uncompensated care. The burden on taxpayers and society is staggering.

My legislation attacks the root of this problem – Pill Mills. The first responsibility of government is to protect its people from harm. While there may be sharp differences of opinion about the ever-growing role of government in the 21st Century, I think we would all agree that shutting down these Pill Mills, and the pain they have caused countless families and the costs they have passed along to the rest of us, should be a high priority.

And we can achieve this goal without appropriating new money or expanding government. Everyone benefits. Except the drug dealers posing as health care providers.

America's spirit and resolve remain as strong as ever

By Congressman Vern Buchanan

On September 11, 2001, we experienced the worst terrorist attack in our nation's history. America's response was swift, unified and inspiring.

We will never forget the 3,000 innocent men, women, and children who perished that day including the brave emergency responders who rushed into the destruction and risked their own lives to help others.

The worst day in our nation's history also brought out the best in the American spirit as first responders from across the country joined in recovery efforts, countless Americans gave blood and donated time and money to charitable causes, and men and women from all walks of life volunteered for military service to defend their nation.

Ten years later, September 11th remains a day of remembrance and reflection. It also serves as a stark reminder to our enemies that America will never shrink from upholding our bedrock principles of freedom and democracy. Americans have demonstrated that we are capable of coming together as a nation to face any threat that jeopardizes our way of life.

The fight against radical terrorism is an ongoing battle that we can and must win in order to preserve freedom for future generations of Americans.

Since that fateful day, the changes we've made to protect our homeland from attacks have made us stronger. The constant vigilance and brave work of our armed forces and intelligence community have kept our country safe. Yet we must not take this for granted.

Incidents like the failed "underwear bomber" of Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in 2009 and the car-bombing attempt at Times Square last year remind us that our enemies have not given up. We must remain vigilant in protecting our citizens without sacrificing the values that make us

the greatest nation in the world.

That means prosecuting terrorists in military tribunals, not civilian courts. As the author of the "Military Tribunals for Terrorists Act," I believe terrorists should be treated as enemy combatants, not common criminals.

We must also be more selective about where we send foreign aid. Foreign assistance is sometimes necessary when trying to root out terrorism, such as in terrorist haven Yemen. Other countries might not be so deserving of our assistance, such as Pakistan, which received \$13 billion in U.S. aid over the last ten years, yet missed Osama bin Laden hiding almost in plain sight.

When terrorists struck our nation, they failed to realize that the American spirit does not crumble in the face of oppression; our nation was forged under the yoke of tyranny. September 11th is now a day that brings Americans together and gives us strength.

While it seems like there is endless disagreement in Washington these days over issues big and small, the lesson of 9/11 is that America's spirit and resolve remain as strong as ever.

The Time Is Now

By Congressman Vern Buchanan

This week, for the first time in 16 years, the U.S. House of Representatives will vote on a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. This represents a historic opportunity to put an end to Washington's out-of-control spending spree and helps ensure the long-term financial security of our children and grandchildren.

While it is unfortunate we have reached this point, the evidence is clear that the only way to stop Congress and the President from spending money we don't have is through a constitutional mandate.

The federal government borrows \$188 million every hour of every day of the year. It is more obvious than ever that Washington has proven incapable of making the tough choices necessary to rein in spending and reduce the federal deficit.

Unbelievably, in the last 50 years, the federal budget has only been balanced five times. 49 out of 50 states, including Florida, have balanced budget requirements. Why should Washington be any different?

The very first measure I introduced in Congress was a Constitutional Amendment requiring a balanced budget. It simply requires the federal government to live within its means.

For too long, Republicans and Democrats have turned a blind eye to our government's budgetary mess.

The 111th Congress added more to the national debt than the first 100 Congresses combined. As a whole, the current share of the \$14 trillion debt is \$45,800 for every man, woman, and child in the U.S. This reckless pattern of borrowing and spending has put our country on a road to bankruptcy.

Now, more than ever, Washington needs to make the tough choices necessary to balance the budget for taxpayers today and for future generations.

The enormity of our fiscal challenge may have been best expressed by Admiral Mike Mullen,

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who warned "the biggest threat we have to our national security is our debt." In more apocalyptic terms, Erskine Bowles, co-chair of the president's debt commission, said "the debt is like a cancer... it is going to destroy the country from within."

The time is right for Congress to ratify a balanced budget amendment and send it to the states.

Buchanan represents Florida's 13th district and serves on the House Ways and Means Committee.

Washington's spending addiction

By Congressman Vern Buchanan

The new year begins with disturbing news that our national debt now exceeds the size of our total economic output -- something that hasn't occurred since World War II.

The nation's ever-growing \$15.2 trillion debt has surpassed our \$15.1 trillion GDP (gross domestic product). This inauspicious start to 2012 represents a troubling development that will leave a heavy burden on our children and grandchildren.

Against this backdrop, the White House intends to ask Congress this month to raise the nation's debt ceiling yet again.

Washington remains addicted to spending money it doesn't have. This pattern of reckless spending by both parties over the past decade must end!

That's why the very first measure I introduced in Congress was a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. It simply requires the government to tighten its belts while all Americans are tightening theirs. Unbelievably, in the last 50 years, the federal budget has only been balanced five times. The time is now for Washington to make the tough choices necessary to balance the budget for taxpayers today and future generations.

And when it comes to the economy, there is no bigger issue than creating jobs and putting Americans back to work. We are suffering through the worst jobs climate since the Great Depression. It is imperative that both parties and the president put aside the partisan attacks, roll up their sleeves, and work to revitalize the entrepreneurial spirit that has made our country great.

Before coming to Congress, I was fortunate to serve 30 years in the private sector, creating thousands of jobs. I know what it means to hire new workers, balance budgets, and exercise fiscal discipline that keeps a business moving forward.

Visiting with local small businessmen and -women throughout our community, I am constantly reminded of one fundamental truth: Government doesn't create jobs, the private sector does. That's why we need pro-growth policies that invigorate private sector expansion. We can start with a simpler, fairer tax code and less bureaucratic red tape to allow small business to prosper.

I have introduced my own jobs plan in the U.S. House. My 10-point plan contains some of the following provisions:

- Broadly restructure our corporate tax system in order to encourage businesses to keep their jobs in America, and bring new facilities and jobs here by making larger U.S. companies more globally competitive.
- Repeal the new, heavy-handed requirement that all businesses buy health insurance for their workers. Government-mandated health insurance coverage is a job-killer.
- Pass far-reaching legal reform that removes frivolous lawsuits from our court system. They slow down the justice system tremendously and also prevent legitimate claims from getting the attention they deserve.
- Abolish overly burdensome paperwork requirements on employers that drive up costs while keeping job growth down. We don't need to make it any harder than it already is for a business to grow and expand.

It's time for Congress and the President to work together to rebuild the prosperous economy that was once the envy of the world.