

# Gilmore *FOR AMERICA*

America Must Keep Faith with Our Veterans

**As the only veteran in the race, I understand how much our veterans have sacrificed to ensure our nation's security. We must keep faith with them as they have with us.**

Many of our finest soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and coast guardsmen have been wounded in the wars our nation has had to fight. Many more will be in the fights necessary to defeat the terrorist networks and other enemies.

Some come home suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that makes them more vulnerable to other problems they encounter regardless of whether they remain in the military or return to civilian life.

It is our duty to ensure that they, and our other veterans, are given the care and benefits they have earned in faithful service to America.

In my Army life, and since, I shared many of their experiences and thus have a perspective on the military that no non-veteran can have. I am personally committed to fulfilling America's promises to veterans, and to active duty members who will become veterans. I will not allow them to be forgotten upon discharge.

Most Americans do not realize, as I do, that to many veterans the fact of discharge from active service is a shock that can cause a sense of alienation which we must understand and help them deal with. It is part of the context of their lives.

Keeping our promises to veterans is essential to national security particularly as we rely on fewer and fewer people to comprise our all-volunteer military

Most of us grew up in families that had several World War Two and Korean War veterans among them. They were treated with the honor they earned and, through the Veterans Administration and the Defense Department.

The GI Bill, in its various forms, put many of them through college. I'm an example of how the GI Bill helps veterans who need it to get a college education.

But now the Veterans' Affairs Department is broken. The situation is so bad that, according to a September 2, 2015 report by the VA's Inspector General, 307,000 veterans who had applied for healthcare had passed away while their applications were still pending. The IG also substantiated the report that employees incorrectly marked unprocessed applications as completed and possibly deleted 10,000 or more transactions from the VA's Workload Reporting and Productivity (WRAP) tool over the past 5 years. That's a falsification of federal records which is a federal crime. Anyone who is guilty of that conduct will be fired and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

The administration of the Veterans Affairs Department is a long way from repaired. Transparency is severely lacking and congressional oversight is insufficient. For example, between August 2014 and February 2015 about 894,000 appointments failed to meet the new standard of setting the appointment in 30 days. Why is that permitted? It shouldn't be.

Why hasn't the appeals process for denied claims been reformed?

Why is the requirement of strict proof that a "pre-existing personality disorder" didn't exist at the time of enlistment used to deny claims? Pre-existing personality disorders should not be a barrier to VA treatment. If the veteran had a pre-existing personality disorder, why were they recruited in the first place? People who have significant personality disorders shouldn't be allowed to serve because they may put the lives of other soldiers at risk. But if they do escape detection and serve, it's the government's responsibility to help them once they're in the VA system.

There are so many other aspects of the VA's performance that need reform. If I am elected president, I will appoint a new Department secretary and, together, he (or she) and I will clean that Augean stable. Transparency and best practices management will be the rule, not the exception as they are now.

Some of the VA's problems will have to be solved by legislation either to provide authority where it is lacking or to compel reforms. A bill such as HR-1994 – which authorizes the firing or demotion of employees who have falsified records and protects whistleblowers – is essential. That legislation

passed the House and was ignored by the Senate. That's just wrong. Sen. McConnell should make it a priority to pass that bill as soon as congress reconvenes.

Another great concern of veterans – of both Vietnam and of the veterans of the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan – is their exposure to toxic chemicals such as Agent Orange and the clouds burning oil from Kuwaiti oil wells ignited by Saddam Hussein's troops in the 1991 Gulf War. Legislation such as S-901, to study and determine the levels of exposure and what the VA should do to ensure treatment of these veterans and their sons and daughters who also may have been affected is also essential.

There are other special needs veterans have. PTSD must be diagnosed as soon as possible and treated for as long as a veteran suffers from it. The same is true for the scourge of drug addiction that plagues many states. Some veterans turn to drugs or alcohol as a means to deal with PTSD. They deserve treatment, not neglect.

There will be other problems such as these we will discover in future years. Whatever they may be, I will see to it that veterans' service-related problems are diagnosed, identified, researched and treated by the VA system.

I am greatly concerned by the number of suicides among veterans and active duty members. We clearly aren't doing enough to prevent those suicides, so suicide prevention must be a high priority in the next administration.

We should also determine how to reform the VA. Many veterans live long distances from VA hospitals. They should be permitted to get care in closer civilian hospitals when travel to a VA facility is too burdensome or dangerous to their conditions. In addition, we should determine if the VA system should be privatized and veterans authorized to seek care anywhere it is available.

The bottom line is that what the medical profession calls the "standard of care" should be the same for veterans as it is for civilians, regardless of anyone's wealth, healthcare insurance or any other criterion.

I am greatly concerned that the pay and benefits for retired military members is inadequate. Military pay and benefits now comprise over 25% of the entire defense budget. We cannot allow any budget reductions to fall on the shoulders of a declining number of retirees and active duty members.

Fewer than 13% of all Americans are veterans, a number which is decreasing dramatically each day with the passing of our WWII generation. A far smaller percentage of American's are currently responsible for our nation's security today than during the last half century. They deserve every bit of thanks and care we can give them.

Our veterans have sacrificed so much to ensure our nation's security. We must keep faith with them as they have with us.

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