

VFW Calls Out TIME Columnist

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WASHINGTON — The national commander of the nation's largest war veterans organization is outraged that a TIME magazine columnist has called for the resignation of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki.

“Freedom of the press isn’t a license for Joe Klein to twist reality about someone who has volunteered virtually his entire life to serve his country,” said John E. Hamilton, who leads the 2 million-member Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and its Auxiliaries. Klein's column, entitled "Ten Years After: A National Disgrace," is posted on the magazine's website and is being published in its March 25 edition.

“Secretary Shinseki has one of the toughest jobs in America,” said Hamilton, a combat wounded Marine Corps rifleman in Vietnam. “It is his responsibility to heal, help and care for our wounded, ill and injured veterans from all generations. What he doesn’t need is criticism from those who have little or no understanding of the real issues or challenges facing his department.”

In his column, Klein criticizes Shinseki for being quiet and reserved, as if the secretary of the nation’s largest integrated healthcare network and second largest federal department has time for a publicized social life. Klein hides behind a so-called “legion” of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who say the secretary lacks the creativity and leadership skills to run the VA, plus sympathizes with their complaint of not being moved to the front of the line ahead of other — but older — disabled veterans. Still worse, Klein accuses Shinseki of not capitalizing on the mass murder allegedly committed by an Army staff sergeant in Afghanistan.

“What occurred in Afghanistan was a tragedy, not an opportunity,” said Hamilton. “The Department of Defense and the VA expend an enormous amount of resources on programs and outreach to provide mental health counseling to those in need, but you can’t mandate any program that first requires someone to voluntarily step forward and ask for help. That same limitation also confronts all of us who are in this battle to end military and veteran suicides.

“And regarding the columnist’s personal attack, just because the secretary prefers a lower profile to someone who might ‘Tweet’ their every movement doesn’t mean he doesn’t care. It just means he’s too busy doing his job, and that’s to fulfill our nation’s promise to her veterans.”

For years the VFW has testified before Congress about the lack of funding for the VA’s Veterans Benefits Administration, especially in the areas of automation and proper staffing. Hamilton said the secretary did the absolute right thing to grant additional presumptive

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

service connections for Vietnam and first Gulf War veterans, but he acknowledged that organizations like the VFW and others who employ service officers to help veterans file their claims knew that the increased workload would overwhelm the existing system.

Thanks to the president and Congress, the VA now has the necessary resources to automate the claims processing system. This means the VA is moving in the right direction, said the VFW national commander, but after years of neglect, the fix will not come overnight.

“We want the VA to succeed, and that’s why we work closely with Secretary Shinseki and his staff to help identify and correct problems in a professional manner from within, not by enlisting the media to sensationalize issues the great majority of Americans and, quite frankly, many veterans don’t understand,” said Hamilton.

“The VFW helped to create the VA in 1930. We will not let it fail. We will also continue to take strong issue with people who blindly criticize the organization or its secretary, who is a combat wounded veteran who understands what it means to serve and sacrifice. Secretary Shinseki gets it, and America should be very appreciative that he volunteered to stay for another tour — the VFW is.”