

VFW Comment on Senator Burr's Open Letter to Veterans

Senator Burr's allegations are mean-spirited and profoundly wrong

May 26, 2014

This letter is in response to the open letter you made available for distribution late Friday, May, 23, 2014. First and foremost Senator, I will afford you the same amount of respect you demonstrated for the Veterans of Foreign Wars by the monumental cheap-shot and posturing you've engaged in by enlisting in an absolutely disgusting ambush style of politics. Without the courtesy or benefit of conversation or dialogue with me or the VFW Adjutant General regarding your disagreement with VFW's recent testimony to your committee, you chose instead to take the low road and question VFW's motives and levy a pejorative personal attack on VFW staff. Senator, this is clearly one of the most dishonorable and grossly inappropriate acts that we've witnessed in more than forty years of involvement with the veteran community and breaches the standards of the United States Senate. Your allegations are ugly and mean-spirited in every sense of the words and are profoundly wrong, both logically and morally. Quite frankly Senator, you should be ashamed.

The VFW staff you chose to rebuke and whose principles you have questioned walk the walk. They've been there, done that and some of them have the scars to show for it. Collectively, those same staff members have among them more than 47 combat deployments. This includes deployments to Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan. Their awards include four Purple Hearts, sixteen Air Medals, Bronze Stars and a variety of other awards. Some rely on VA for their healthcare and residual treatment associated with their military service. They understand *first-hand* the problems existing within the system because, unlike the majority of people, *they've been willing to do what others won't*. Senator, that is exactly why we find your personal attack so disgusting.

The men and women working in our DC office are dedicated professionals. Importantly, they take the work they do personally. They do it because they care. I suggest you compare

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the more than exorbitant amount of days off you receive, including virtually the whole month of August, two weeks around Easter/Passover, and certainly not a single five-day work week to the often time long, arduous hours they put forth **every** week of the year. Surely, with all the issues and the current emergent need for solutions, you must have more important things to do than to assail the character, people and motives of America's VSOs '

Let me assure you Senator, our DC staff does not operate in a vacuum, or independently from its headquarters in Kansas City. The staff operates under the direction of me and the Adjutant General. The testimony that was provided to your committee was vetted and approved by me and the Adjutant General only after careful study and consideration. We don't act in hopes of grabbing a headline or securing an interview on cable news; our only agenda in this is to ensure the veterans of our nation receive timely and adequate healthcare. If you have issues then I suggest you contact either one of us directly.

The fact of the matter is this; every year the VFW, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS and Paralyzed Veterans of America have been trying to call attention to the issue, warning Congress of the consequences, and trying to work with Congress and VA on solutions.

Each year our organizations build an analysis of VA benefits and services known as the Independent Budget, and each year since 2005 the Independent Budget has warned Congress

about the dangers of long wait times and care rationing due to improper resources, oversight and accountability.

Last year, and again this year, then-VFW Commander-in-Chief John Hamilton and I warned you and both the House and Senate Veterans Affairs committees about the dangers of long wait times. This decade of stern warnings has fallen on deaf ears.

There's no doubt that the culture within VA needs to change. In a letter to the President, we made it clear that he needed to take immediate steps and ensure necessary authority to Secretary Shinseki that will guarantee the status quo of protecting enmeshed and "untouchable" bureaucrats within the VA system cannot and will not continue. We urged

him to provide him authority to impose the strongest disciplinary actions, including removal and prosecution whenever and wherever necessary, on any VA employee who would abdicate their responsibilities and have a hand in the mistreatment or abandonment of those who have earned timely and adequate healthcare.

Clearly, you were not listening during VFW's testimony. Nowhere did we suggest that we were interested in protecting anyone. I suggest you read the transcript. We find it especially specious that you seek to point fingers without at least an acknowledgement of some responsibility by Congress in all of this. Your assumption that we do not listen to what our members have to say is insulting. We spend most of the year traveling to and visiting VFW Posts world-wide. We have direct contact and speak at length with our members. We listen. And what you should know is this; that there is huge, and growing sentiment within most of the veteran community regarding the inaction of Congress, because they are keenly aware, (if the past is any guide), they will enact no budget, no regular appropriations bills, nor other key legislation.

If we've been remiss in anything Senator, we've been remiss in being too polite with Congress. For years, the VFW has come to Congress with hat in hand and for years, we've heard the same old story. You can be assured Senator, that you've done a superb job in showing us the error in our ways. You can also be assured that in the future, we will spend a substantial percentage of our time seeking to inform our members and our constituents of the repeated failure to act by our elected officials. We will not stand by and let our members be distracted by rhetoric or finger-pointing and we certainly won't abide our veterans being used as political footballs. And you can be sure that we will let our membership know the low-regard you hold for their organization.

Sincerely,

William A. Thien

Commander-in-Chief

John E. Hamilton

Adjutant General