

A BARBEQUE IN THE LAND OF HYPOCRISY

By Joe Carvalko

THE HEADLINES LAST WEEK drew attention to an old story: that veterans eligible for VA benefits are experiencing extraordinary wait times before being able to see a doctor, some die as they wait, and others are bamboozled by cancellations when clerks erase appointments to make it appear as if the VA is meeting its targets. Can we cut the hypocrisy once and for all?

Unfortunately, the story of treating veterans as second class citizens is not new; this one is a rerun of a problem brought to national attention in 2010, again reminding us how two-faced we are as a country when we turn recruits into warriors promising never to abandon them, and then, when they no longer serve a military objective, we dump them onto the street. Yes, we, you, me, the folks we elect to Congress and those that are hired by the government to manage the Veteran's Administration.

At a hearing before the Senate Affairs Committee this week, senators feigned indignation about patients dying while on wait lists, but everyone on the committee knew that this was an old story. Before senate cameras they vigorously interrogated Secretary of Veterans Affairs Shinseki trying to cover for what has been a lack of their own oversight, or a failure to follow up on a well-documented problem: the VA's inability to absorb the explosive population of wounded vets from Iran and Afghanistan and the aging population of Vietnam warriors, given the allotted congressional funding. Yes, at the end of the day, Congress does not want to spend what it will take to fix the problem.

The Obama Administration promises to conduct yet another investigation, and it has fired the second in command at the Department of Veterans Affairs. It is no coincidence that he was scheduled to retire this year, anyhow. This is political theater at its worst.

And, for how the congressional sham plays out, we need not look too far, either. In a deplorable display of partisan obstruction 3 months ago, Senate Republicans blocked a bill that would have authorized the construction of 27 VA clinics and medical facilities, because Democrats would not allow an up or down vote on an amendment that would have attached sanctions on Iran. Who is at fault? The veterans who need medical treatment don't care! Certainly no one gave them a pass when they were obliged to defend the country, when come hell or high water they put their lives on the line. Obviously, many of our elected representatives cannot see a moral obligation staring them in the face, perhaps because routinely they make promises they cannot keep, or maybe, because of their own notable absence in serving in the armed forces, they do not feel the tug of solidarity with the veteran.

Out of 438 congressional representatives, only 88 served in the armed forces; out of 100 senators, only 18, which explains why the only time they actually show concern for vets is when a veteran's issue comes before the camera. In two weeks, we will be celebrating Memorial Day to remember servicemen lost during war and Congress will take a week long recess. Rather than satisfying their hedonistic inclination for another barbecue and stroke their ego with another patriotic speech, our elected representatives should cut the hypocrisy and fix the VA problem permanently—even if costs will exceed the cost of the wars themselves. After all if we afforded going to war, we can afford the medical care we promised our men and women in uniform.