

VA Scandal Stinks From the Top

Driven out by whistleblowers, Veterans Affairs Acting Inspector General Richard Griffin finally resigned last week. Good riddance. Griffin had whitewashed and concealed information about inadequate care and phony waiting lists and tried to retaliate against truth-tellers.

But don't expect real improvement at the VA. Griffin's successor is another bureaucratic lifer, Lin Halliday. She's been collecting a paycheck from the VA inspector general's office since 1992, while the deadly problems festered. President Obama seems to like that approach.

On July 2, as Obama descended from Air Force One at a Wisconsin stop, whistleblower Ryan Honl, a Gulf War Veteran, seized a moment on the tarmac to urge the president to appoint an independent inspector general: "If they just pick someone new from inside the agency, it will be business as usual and the problems will continue," Honl warned. But the president brushed Honl off, saying VA Secretary Robert McDonald "had it covered."

Sorry. That's not true.

Only the president can appoint an Inspector General. Federal law requires that the Department of Veterans Affairs, and other departments, have outside inspector's general to guard against corruption and mismanagement. Obama simply refuses to appoint them, allowing the vacant offices to be filled instead by "acting" IGs like Griffin and Halliday. These are lap dogs instead of watchdogs, compliant temporary placeholders from inside the system.

The VA needs a real watchdog to clean up. Vet advocates say the president refuses to appoint one because he fears the political consequences of more VA scandals coming to light. Better to keep the problems hidden.

On June 3, Senator Ron Johnson, R. Wis., held a hearing on the president's refusal to appoint IGs. The White House essentially told Johnson to pound salt, that is, no one from the White House would testify. Johnson tried to get a former White House staffer, Jonathan McBride, who is now at BlackRock, to testify. But the White House directed McBride and BlackRock not to cooperate.

Refusing to appoint inspectors general and then stonewalling Congress. That suggests more than a smidgeon of corruption. Daniel Epstein, executive director of Cause of Action, a good- government group, said for Hillary Clinton's entire tenure at the State Department, Obama refused to appoint a permanent IG.

Consequently, "oversight" at State was in the hands of an ultimate insider, acting IG Harold Geisel, who had served as an ambassador under former President Bill Clinton and remains close friends of the Clintons. The definition of a lap dog.

It's unlikely Hillary would have gotten away with using private emails year after year "had there been a real watchdog in place," Danielle Brian, executive director of Project on Government Oversight told Congress.

That's true of the deadly mischief at the VA also. Obama has refused to fill the inspector general's job at the VA since December 2013. Until last week, Griffin was the placeholder. Instead of monitoring VA performance, he did just the opposite, covering up and punishing whistleblowers.

Pressured by the White House, Griffin actually changed the wording in a draft report on vets dying at the Phoenix VA in 2014 to understate fatalities.

When the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and POGO put up a website asking VA workers with first-hand knowledge of problems to come forward, some 800 did. Within weeks, Griffin tried to subpoena their names. "It had a chilling effect," said Brian.

These are typical tricks from acting IGs, who tend to hide bad news rather than report it. Apparently, that's what Obama wants.

But it leaves vets out in the cold, like two I spoke with last week. Earl Figgeroa called me about the whopping bill he's stuck paying for a civilian cardiologist, while the VA bureaucracy gives him the runaround. Donald Schultz, a Vietnam vet whose VA doctor told him on March 6 he needed emergency surgery for a hernia, complained to me that he's still in constant pain and waiting. Despite what Obama says, no one's got these vets covered. Or millions like them.

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