

Will A. Gunn, General Counsel Nominee

Opening Statement of Will A. Gunn  
General Counsel Nominee  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
Before the  
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate  
May 6, 2009

Chairman Akaka, Senator Burr, Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs: Thank you for scheduling this hearing so expeditiously to consider my nomination as General Counsel of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I am honored and humbled by President Obama's appointment to serve as VA's General Counsel and I greatly appreciate the confidence that the President and Secretary Shinseki have in me to help accomplish their vision of transforming VA into a 21st century organization. I consider this a sacred trust.

I believe my professional and life experiences have prepared me well to serve as the Department's general counsel. The military and veterans hold a special place in my heart and in the hearts of my family members. I am named for one of my mother's brothers who died in the Korean War. My wife's father served as an Army enlisted man in World War II, and as an officer in Korea. In addition, many other family members have served this nation through military service. I first put on a United States military uniform in the summer of 1976 when I graduated from high school and entered the Air Force Academy as part of the class of 1980—the Academy's first class with women. Four years later, I graduated with military honors and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. I then served as an admissions advisor in the Academy's Office of Minority Affairs and later spent two years as a contract negotiator. I was then blessed to attend Harvard Law School through the Air Force's Funded Legal Education Program and I graduated cum laude from Harvard in 1986.

After law school, I was proud to spend the next 19 years in a variety of challenging and rewarding assignments as a member of the Air Force JAG Corps. I prosecuted cases, defended military members, represented the Air Force in federal court in military personnel disputes, served as a White House Fellow, taught as a JAG School instructor, and served as a supervising attorney in several settings. I was the staff judge advocate (principal legal advisor and supervising attorney) for Pope AFB in North Carolina, Chief Defense Counsel for Air Force defense counsel over an eleven state area in the center of the country, Executive Officer (Chief of Staff) for the Air Force Judge Advocate General, and in my last military assignment I was asked to serve as the first Chief Defense Counsel in the Office of Military Commissions with the responsibility of establishing a defense function and providing effective representation for Guantanamo detainees brought before military commissions.

Since retiring from the military in 2005, I have served as President and CEO of Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Washington, one of the largest affiliates of Boys and Girls Clubs of America. In addition, last year, I established my own modest law firm to focus on military law and I have

represented members of the military, veterans, and civilians working for or with the federal government.

My first exposure to the Department of Veterans Affairs occurred in 1990 when, as a White House Fellow, working in the White House Office of Cabinet Affairs, I was assigned responsibility to serve as a liaison to the VA's Office of the Secretary. Over the course of that year, I gained an appreciation for a wide range of issues affecting the Department. I have followed many of these issues from afar in recent years and am excited to be considered to serve as the Department's senior lawyer and as the Secretary's chief legal advisor.

If confirmed, I will join President Obama and Secretary Shinseki in their effort to transform VA into a 21st century model of veteran care, a VA that is more people-centric, results-oriented, and forward-looking than ever before. Due to the nature of the General Counsel function, lawyers will be involved in virtually all aspects of the Department's transformation initiatives. Becoming a 21st century Department will take communication and transparency, as well as commitment. In addition to my being a veteran, and my awareness and familiarity with some of the issues affecting veterans, I am also committed to developing leaders—another function that will be critical to transforming the Department. Moreover, I served in the United States Air Force, where the values of integrity, service, and excellence were my guidestars. I long ago adopted these values as my own and will bring them with me to VA.

In conclusion, if I am confirmed, I will, with enthusiasm and sense of purpose, join a Department that has, for more than 75 years, cared for the men and women who have borne the battle. I look forward to working closely with the members and staff of this committee to address issues affecting veterans and their families. I also look forward to working with the Veterans Service Organizations and VA's stakeholders in order to advance the President's and Secretary Shinseki's mission for a 21st century VA.

Thank you.