

Statement of The Honorable R. James "Jim" Nicholson Nominee for Secretary of Veterans Affairs Before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Good Morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you so early in the new Congress, and for the many other courtesies you and your staffs have extended me. Your words and actions underscore your commitment to the millions of veterans who look to the Department of Veterans Affairs for the benefits and services they earned?benefits and services that our nation is pledged to gratefully give them.

Let me congratulate you, Senator Craig, and Senator Akaka on your, election to Chairman and Ranking Member, respectively, of this Committee, which oversees the department of our government with the largest civilian workforce, and with one of our highest priorities, to deliver first class, timely medical care and benefits for our veterans; Your selections speak volumes about your colleagues' confidence in your commitment to America's veterans.

I am joined here today by my wife of 37 years, Suzanne. She has always been at my side through thick and thin and I am very grateful to her for her support to accept this honor and challenge from President Bush to lead this great

Department, if confirmed. I am also joined by my son, Nick and his wife Charlotte who live here in the DC area. Our other two children could not be here. Service to our country is a long tradition in my family. My father was an enlisted man in the Navy during WWII. My father-in-law served in both WWII and Korea. My brother, Brigadier General Jack Nicholson, served 30 years in the Army and was, until now, the Undersecretary of the VA for Memorial Affairs, where he did an outstanding job. One of my sons is a veteran; four of my nephews are Colonels in the Army and Air Force. My thirty years of active and reserve service in the Army, coupled with my four years at West Point, have defined my life. I love the Armed Forces of our country - their courage, their integrity, their sense of duty.

That is why I am so honored that President Bush selected me to build upon his Administration's great record of care and compassion for our Nation's veterans of our Armed Forces. And, if confirmed, it would be a privilege for me to follow in the footsteps of Secretary Principi, a man who has provided outstanding leadership and tireless dedication to the welfare of this nation's veterans.

I feel humbled that America's veterans-men and women who served on the front lines for freedom, justice, and peace in democracy's name-might look to me as the faithful steward of their trust, and the leader of VA's 230,000

employees who work so diligently, around the clock, to assure our veterans that we are making good on the nation's debt to her defenders.

Mr. Chairman, I come from the heartland of this great nation - Iowa ? from a boyhood life so far removed from this historic and stately temple of liberty that Washington was barely a dream. It was a hardscrabble life, to be sure, but my family of seven kids was filled by my mom with hope and confidence. She used to say to us, if you will work hard, study hard and pray hard, you can be a success in America, you can have legitimate dreams of a better life and make them come true.

As a teenager, I remember watching young men go oft to the Korean War, following in the wake of World War II - yet another test of freedom's will to defeat an inhumane and evil tyranny. Yet another answered call by our countrymen to go oft to a frozen peninsula that we had never heard of, because their country asked them to go. One of the brothers of a pal of mine never returned. One of my best friends slightly older than I left his leg over there. He also was my first introduction to the VA as they wanted to get his prosthesis right. Now, again, we are at war, and again our country is asking our men and women in uniform, all volunteers, to go to the sound of the bugle.

Those friends and neighbors who stood tall for freedom fifty years ago are now among our most distinguished veterans, and today's heroes will soon join

them. I will, if this Committee so entrusts me, be proud to lead the Department dedicated exclusively to honoring their service and sacrifices, to making good on our country's promises to them.

I have had the privilege of wearing the uniform of the United States Army in combat, so I have seen both the horrors of war and the heroes of America making the greatest sacrifices of military service on behalf of their comrades and our nation.

One cannot leave a battlefield without having profound respect for the courage and cool of all who have served there. One cannot appreciate all the blessings of our freedom without thanking the men and women who serve in war to bring about peace. Their example of unwavering commitment to their mission, no matter how dangerous and uncomfortable; will always reverberate with me and readies me for a mission of service to veterans. I will do my utmost to see that they receive all they have earned, delivered with the dignity, they also deserve.

I do not underestimate the enormity of the responsibilities of Secretary of Veterans Affairs. This Committee knows well that VA is the second largest

Cabinet department, operates the Nation's largest integrated health-care system, and is relied upon by millions of veterans, their dependents, and survivors, not only for health care but for billions of dollars in monetary benefits, life insurance,

education, mortgage insurance and readjustment benefits. The challenge of leading such an organization is daunting, but I am prepared to accept it.

If the Senate confirms my nomination, I will, without hesitation, commit to upholding the following principles:

. Veterans should have access to the best-available health care, in the "most appropriate clinical settings, delivered in a timely manner by caring, compassionate clinicians. And,

. Veterans, their eligible dependents and survivors are entitled to prompt, accurate, equitable and understandable decisions on their claims for benefits. And,

. Veterans should be appropriately honored in death for their service and sacrifices on behalf of a grateful Nation.

Mr. Chairman, the manner in which VA supports the transition of today's service members into veterans, especially those who are injured or become ill as a result of their service in combat areas, will define the Department for them. If confirmed, I will ensure that VA and DoD continue to work collaboratively to provide a seamless transition so that returning service members are timely provided the benefits and services that will enable them to reclaim their rightful places as citizens in our society.

I am aware of recently reported 'concerns of possible regional variations in disability-compensation awards. Veterans' entitlement to Federal benefits is the same regardless of where in this country they may reside, and if confirmed I will ensure that standardized training and sound quality controls support a uniform approach to claims adjudication. Further, to that point, I will, if confirmed, order a prompt study into this whole question of equity and geographic differences in benefits adjudication. No one that I have yet met knows exactly why these differences occur

the way they do, and we need to understand this fully and then take remedial action, as appropriate.

Mr. Chairman, if the Senate will afford me the opportunity, I pledge to work with this Committee and individual members of both houses for the betterment of veterans and their families. I will keep you informed, I will listen to your concerns, and I will respect your oversight responsibilities.

I understand that the success of the Department requires a strong collaboration with the veterans' service organizations, who function both as our ears to the ground on matters of service delivery and as our partners in devising solutions to problems as they arise. If confirmed, I will work closely with the VSO's so that I may both benefit from their counsel and draw upon their willingness to serve their comrades.

I am also deeply committed to earning the respect, trust, and following of the men and women of VA who have made service to veterans their life's calling. The VA workforce represents an enormous reservoir of dedicated, committed talent that must be put to its best possible use. I will hold myself and my leadership team accountable for ensuring and harnessing our employees' best efforts. It will be my job and my privilege to lead and harness this awesome force of talented people so that all of us have the same focus - our veterans.

It is critical that we honor America's debt to those who have served us so faithfully. When President Bush announced my nomination, I quoted America's first Commander in Chief, George Washington, that "[I]t is a debt of honor."

And today, with so many American men and women in uniform stationed around the globe, we give them heart when we keep faith with those who have served before them. They have the right to know we will stand by them as well in their time of need. This is also integral to our nation's ability to be able to continue to attract an all-volunteer force willing to defend us anywhere, anytime.

The armed forces of our country are, in my opinion, the model for what is good and great about America. They are a paragon of integrity; they don't take, they give; they are disciplined, highly trained with a love for their country. They are a unique force in the world and we need to treat them uniquely well.

Our VA, under Secretary Principi, has made terrific strides in serving our veterans. VA provides health care to 860,000 more veterans than it did in 2001, has drastically reduced waiting times for health-care appointments, and opened nearly a hundred new community-based outpatient clinics so that 870/0 percent of the veteran population now lives within 30 minutes of a VA medical facility. As a result of its focus on excellence in health care, VA is now the proven benchmark in preventive health-care quality and chronic disease management.

Since 2001, VA has also dramatically reduced its inventory of pending claims for disability compensation, reduced average processing time of those claims, and, at the same time, substantially improved the quality of claims decisions. Moreover, in 2001, VA embarked upon the largest expansion of the National Cemetery system since the Civil War. When construction of all the new cemeteries is completed, VA will have expanded the National Cemetery system by 85-percent. And, according to the latest American Customers Satisfaction Index, the National Cemetery Administration earned a rating of 95 out of 100 -the best rating ever earned by a federal agency.

I will, if confirmed, strive to move the Department to another level by building on all that has been put in place and improving upon those areas that remain a challenge. The VA is a great American institution created and founded by a country that appreciates that freedom isn't free, and our veterans' lives and limbs are the price that is too often paid.

It falls on the Secretary of the VA, and the men and women he leads, to keep faith with the expectations of all our fallen citizens in uniform - past, present and future -- expectations that they will be cared for, as needed. This too is the mandate of the grateful people of the U.S. I pledge to you, if confirmed by you, that I will do all in my power to see that both the veterans and the citizens of our great nation are pleased by the service of their VA.

This concludes my remarks, Mr. Chairman.