

Dr. Tommy Sowers

Testimony of Thomas Skerik Sowers II,

Nominee to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs,

Department of Veterans Affairs

Before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

July 18, 2012

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and Distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor to come before you today as President Obama's nominee to serve as the Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Department of Veterans Affairs. It is with deep humility and gratitude to President Obama and Secretary Shinseki for their confidence in my ability to fulfill the responsibilities of this office.

Senator McCaskill, thank you for your kind introduction. You have been a great mentor and friend to me, and a strong supporter of veterans.

I would like to first introduce my wife, Ericka. Thank you so much for being by my side, today and always.

I would also like to recognize my parents, Tom and Chris Sowers. My father was in the National Guard and my mom, a true Army brat, at one point had her father and two brothers serving in Vietnam. The example set by both my father and my wife's father taught me what service to one's country means; and what it is to take part in something bigger than one's self. And it was my family that, in turn, supported me during my three deployments.

We can never forget all of the parents, like mine, who have spent countless nights lying awake and hoping with all their strength that their loved ones can come home safely; and soon. Every person who has served in war understands the importance of family and home. We owe our parents a debt of gratitude that can never be fully paid -- Mom, Dad; I am so honored that you could be here today. Thank you.

My parents drove here from my home state of Missouri, bringing with them two of my nephews, Bo and Mac Wallace. Thanks for being here boys; as promised you are now in the official Congressional Record.

Next, some of my fellow brothers and sisters in arms are here. Fernando Lujan and Paul Patterson, thanks for your service and for standing with me today. I am proud and grateful to have had the privilege to serve with you in uniform.

Over the past few days, I've had the privilege to meet with Members of the Committee and your staff, to listen and understand your ideas, priorities and insights. And I appreciate the chance now to explain a bit about my background, and to let you get a sense of how, if confirmed, I would approach this opportunity.

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee for its service to the veterans' community. This is a very personal thank you. Last Thursday was my official graduation ceremony for my PhD—a degree made possible only through the new GI Bill. I am one of the thousands of veterans whose life has been improved because of your legislation.

My 11 years in the military presented many challenges that helped me grow strong in mind and body. From hiking up Donnelly Dome in Alaska, to leading squads over obstacle courses at Fort Lewis, Washington; to Ranger training in Dahlongega and Fort Benning, Georgia, to Special Forces training in North Carolina's Pineland, to night parachuting into Fort Lee, Virginia, my military training forged in me the values, leadership and qualities of our military.

I also quickly learned that the strength I had gained from those challenges would be tested – in ways that I could never have imagined. Through a peacekeeping deployment to Kosovo and two combat deployments to Iraq, I faced challenges that all Veterans encounter – I was able to put to use what the Army had taught me about leadership, integrity and inner-strength. And this was no simple test. I learned that decisions have consequences. And that my fellow soldiers depended upon me, sometimes with their lives.

Upon coming home, I learned that VA was there for me. As a service-connected disabled veteran, I have been through the claims process and receive my health care through VA. I've experienced world class care, by highly competent professionals. At my last physical, I asked my doctor, Denise Davis, why she left private practice to work at VA. She said it was easy—we have the best patients, and she gets to care for me for life.

In addition to taking care of my body, VA has helped take care of my family as well. A decade ago, I was able to realize the dream of home ownership through VA's home loan program. And more recently, I have benefitted from the new GI Bill, allowing me to achieve my dream of an advanced degree.

VA has given so much to me, and I intend to give back. This is why I am excited at the opportunity to serve, if confirmed, in the role of Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs. You have my commitment that I will advocate every day to ensure more veterans both understand and take advantage of the benefits they have earned - for their health, their education and their future.

I realize there are many organizations already joined in this effort to assist the Nation's veterans. I am thrilled about the intergovernmental aspect of this position and, if confirmed, I look forward to working together with other state, local and federal agencies to help promote a unified effort. Further, I understand that fully engaging and coordinating with Veterans Service Organizations, the media, and others in the private sector will be critical allies needed to accomplish our common goals. Together, we must ensure our veterans are not forgotten even after our wartime deployments end.

I would like to thank the Committee, President Obama and Secretary Shinseki for providing me with this opportunity to serve my country again. I look forward to answering your questions.