

TESTIMONY OF MR. JAMES BYRNE
NOMINEE TO BE GENERAL COUNSEL OF THE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

JULY 19, 2017

Good afternoon, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to appear today. I am humbled and honored to have been nominated by President Trump to be the VA General Counsel. It is my highest professional honor, and I am grateful to Secretary Shulkin for his confidence.

I am fortunate to have with me here today my wife Becky, and I am thankful for her unwavering support during more than 30 years of marriage. Our union started three days after my commissioning into the United States Marine Corps, and God has blessed us with six children and four grandchildren, some of whom are here today.

On Induction Day at the U.S. Naval Academy some 35 years ago, having been dispossessed of all my civilian possessions and most of my hair, I stood with 1,300 classmates to take the oath of office – an oath I have taken many times since – to serve something greater than ourselves by supporting and defending the Constitution of the United States. I am honored and excited by the prospect of, if confirmed, taking that oath again.

I have spent the better part of my career in service to this great nation. Indeed, service is in my family DNA. Both my father and father-in-law served in the U.S. Military, and now our two sons and son-in-law proudly serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. Army son Dan is currently stationed in Maryland, while Navy son Mic just completed nuclear power school and serves aboard the USS Alaska home-ported in Kings Bay, Georgia. In addition, our Navy son-in-law Aaron just returned from a six-month deployment aboard the USS Helena and is based in Norfolk, Virginia.

In January of 2004, I was an activated Marine reservist assigned as Officer in Charge of the Marine Liaison Office at the then National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland. It was there that I led a team of dedicated Marines responsible for attending to all of the non-medical needs of our wounded warriors being cared for at Bethesda, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and Malcolm Grow Air Force hospital.

It is well-known especially to this Committee that Servicemembers are supremely loyal to their units. The hearts and minds of men and women who returned home for medical care were of course always with their team members engaged in combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. This loyalty, service, and undying dedication had a profound effect on me, and drove home the profound importance of the mission of supporting these wounded warriors under my command and their families.

Even today it is difficult to describe this most hallowed and emotional period of my military career. Simply stated, it was the most gut-wrenching experience of my life. I am extremely proud of the work accomplished by my liaison team. Alongside the military families and Servicemembers who were assigned as our charges, we shared in the joy of return and recovery and we wept in the despair of loss and sacrifice.

Nothing will ever match that experience. And, if confirmed, I will endeavor to honor the sacrifices of our uniformed Servicemembers through my service at the VA.

This past May, Secretary Shulkin outlined his top priorities in terms of 13 areas of significant risk for VA. One priority in particular – elimination of Veterans' suicide – is for me neither academic nor impersonal. I share Dr. Shulkin's passion in this area, having lost a Marine under my command to suicide and knowing that many more still suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress. I have for the past ten years volunteered on the Board of Directors for the Give an Hour organization, which is dedicated to providing free mental health services to our Servicemembers and their families, and if confirmed I will do all in my power to help Secretary Shulkin end this scourge.

We all acknowledge how busy our nation's military forces are today and how our country remains committed and prepared to serving Veterans as they depart the military - some healthy, some scarred, several fighting for wholeness that combat erodes. All Veterans. All deserving the best we can offer.

I thank the committee members for the support they have provided to the VA and our Veterans in helping to fulfill President Lincoln's promise and our sacred mission "to care for him who shall have borne the battle." There is no nobler mission or higher calling for me, and it would be my distinct honor and privilege to support this effort.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for your consideration of my nomination. I am happy to answer any questions you may have, and I respectfully ask that this statement be entered into the record.