

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Hearing on the Presumptive Nomination of General Eric K. Shinseki,
to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs

January 14, 2009

Today's hearing is to consider the nomination of Eric Shinseki to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs. I have known General Shinseki and his family for many years. Indeed, I had the honor and privilege of participating in his promotion ceremony to Colonel. I look forward to working with him in the latest chapter of his notable career, as Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

I am delighted to welcome, with much aloha, this distinguished native of Hawaii, his wife Patty, daughter Lori, and her husband Tim.

Following the Inauguration next week, President Obama intends to formally nominate those individuals he has selected for cabinet positions, including General Shinseki. The plan is for most, if not all of those nominations to go directly on the Executive Calendar and to be voted on later that day. Thus, it is my hope that General Shinseki will be confirmed by the Senate on January 20th. This is the same process that was followed in connection with the nominees to head VA during the last two changes in Administrations.

My friends Senator Inouye and former Senator Bob Dole will elaborate on General Shinseki's long and distinguished career in the Army, which culminated with his service as the Army's 34th Chief of Staff. I will simply note that he graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1965 and that he served two combat tours in Vietnam, where he was wounded twice in combat. It was the second injury that could have ended his promising Army career.

It did not end, because then-Captain Shinseki fought to remain on active duty, and in an inspired decision, the Army agreed. Throughout his 38-years of service in uniform, he gave his personal best, serving with great pride and dignity.

This distinguished and decorated soldier set a new standard for the Army. He transformed the Army into an agile, lean, flexible, and lethal fighting force. He set a higher standard for others to follow, while keeping the spirit of aloha. With his pride and dedication to service, he made our Army stronger.

General Shinseki, you will have tremendous challenges facing you. Heading VA is a challenging job and that is even more true in a time of war. VA must not only meet the needs of those from prior conflicts, but also quickly adapt to address the needs of those newly injured or disabled. Each war brings different challenges, different demands.

With Iraq and Afghanistan, VA is responding to new challenges: veterans needing state-of-the-art prosthetics or age-appropriate long-term care for injuries that will last a lifetime. The Department must also confront less obvious invisible wounds, such as PTSD and TBI.

Another area that needs prompt attention is the system for compensating servicemembers and veterans for in-service injury. The frustrating lack of timeliness, and the challenge of coordinating DoD and VA's systems, are some of the areas that must be addressed quickly. This Committee stands ready to work with the Administration on this effort. If you are confirmed, this must be one of your highest priorities.

You will also need to focus on the transition for injured service members from active duty to veterans status. A lot of work has been done over the last two years, and I am hopeful that your long experience in the Army will enable you to continue those efforts. For returning

servicemembers, especially those who are seriously injured, there must be truly seamless transition from DoD to VA.

VA has a strong and dedicated workforce, employees who seek to do what is right. The Secretary, with the backing of the Congress, must give those employees the leadership, the tools, and especially the resources, they need to carry out their jobs. If confirmed, one of your first responsibilities will be to ensure that the 2010 budget is adequate for the coming fiscal year. When VA is doing its best, few notice. But things are not perfect within VA; few human endeavors are. If a veteran receives less than what is expected, it can lead to an indictment of the entire VA system. Complaints must be investigated and problems must be fixed. But individual failings should not lead to the indictment of the entire system.

In closing, I am confident that you have a strong sense of empathy for those served by VA and a deep commitment to VA's missions. This will serve you well as Secretary.

I applaud your effort to avoid even the appearance of any conflict of interest in connection with your stock portfolio, your private consulting firm, and the boards on which you serve. I trust that all fair minded individuals will appreciate the steps you have taken to preclude even an appearance of any conflict of interest.

With respect to the rest of your team, this Committee has a strong history of bipartisanship and this is especially true with respect to nominations. As quickly as the Administration can send forward other advice-and-consent positions for VA, I promise that the Committee will take action.

I look forward to your testimony, your responses to questions from Committee members, and to any post-hearing questions. It is vitally important that the position of Secretary of Veterans Affairs be confirmed as soon as possible.

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