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Republican

Perspective

Madder Than Hell

By John Littig

On the campaign trail in August 2007, then-candidate Barack Obama said: “No veteran should have to wait months, even years, to get an appointment at the VA. When we fail to keep faith with our veterans, the bond between our nation and our nation's heroes becomes frayed. When a veteran is denied care, we are all dishonored.”

Then, after his 2008 election victory, President-elect Obama's transition team was briefed by Department of Veterans Affairs officials. Washington Times obtained the briefing materials through the Freedom of Information Act. According to the Times: “The Obama administration received clear notice more than five years ago that VA medical facilities were reporting inaccurate waiting times and experiencing scheduling failures that threatened to deny veterans timely care.” The briefing materials said: “This is not only an integrity issue—it affects quality of care by delaying deserving veterans timely care.”

CBS News corroborated the Washington Times report, saying that VA officials briefed the Obama transition team that its facilities might be concealing the true waiting times.

After the president took office, he and the Congress attempted to reduce waiting times at the VA by throwing money at the problem. But, since the VA has a management problem rather than a resources problem, this didn't work.

The falsification of true wait times was apparently done so that VA officials could report favorable performance statistics. This recently became common knowledge when a whistle-blower in the Phoenix VA facility went public, followed by a second whistle-blower in a West Virginia facility. Worse, the delays have been linked to dozens of preventable deaths while waiting for care. In addition, allegations of similar cover-up schemes have been reported in several other VA locations.

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki was called to testify before a congressional committee, and said he was “mad as hell” about the falsified wait times. Undersecretary Dr. Robert Petzel, who testified alongside Shinseki, resigned the following day.

Since this scandal broke, Obama himself has had little to say about it. But his Chief of Staff Denis McDonough said on Meet the Press that the president was “madder than hell,” thus presumably one-upping Shinseki on the madness scale.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney was asked by a CNN reporter when the president had become aware of the falsified wait times. Carney finessed his answer: “You mean the specific allegations Š reported first by your network Š We learned about them through the reports Š that is when we learned about them and that is when I understand Secretary Shinseki learned about them Š”

Similarly, when the Operation Fast and Furious scandal broke, Obama claimed he first learned of it from television. Also, when news broke that the Justice Department had seized AP journalists' phone records, Carney told reporters that Obama had learned of it “from news reports.” And in a joint news conference with Prime Minister David Cameron, Obama said that he, like the rest of the nation, learned through news reports that the IRS was targeting conservative groups for delayed processing of their applications for tax-exempt status. Are administration officials deliberately keeping their boss in the dark?

Taken together, these incidents create a picture of a president who learns of his administration's activities only while channel surfing. The Daily Show's Jon Stewart said: “I wouldn't be surprised if President Obama learned Osama bin Laden had been killed when he saw himself announce it on television.”

Of course only the most nave or willfully blind observer would believe the president learned of important administration activities by reading the newspaper or watching TV. And in the case of the VA falsification of veterans' wait times, there's pretty good evidence (the transition briefing materials obtained by the Washington Times) that he knew five years ago.

One possible reason the president is “madder than hell” is that this entire VA situation exposes what can happen when bureaucrats run health care. And if veterans can be treated this badly, what could government health care have in store for the rest of us?