



# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Time Column Unfair to Veterans Secretary**

In its current edition, Time Magazine has featured an opinion piece (“Ten Years After: A National Disgrace,” Mar. 25) demanding the ouster of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki. Time’s columnist, Joe Klein, opines that Secretary Shinseki has failed veterans miserably, especially those who served and are still serving in our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

DAV (Disabled American Veterans), an organization of 1.2 million wounded and injured war veterans, respectfully disagrees.

The VA Secretary occupies probably the most thankless job in Washington. On the one hand the Secretary is expected to seamlessly provide the plethora of benefits and services a grateful nation offers veterans who have sacrificed body and mind in military service, and to those who need transition services. On the other, the Secretary must strictly obey all laws and follow all Administration policies, but also deal with an ever-divided, conflicted Congress. These forces are often at odds.

Among his charges, Mr. Klein makes the assertion that VA does not distinguish between the claims of a new, catastrophically disabled veteran during his or her transition, versus an older veteran with a claim for increased ratings. This allegation is uninformed and factually untrue.

Also, Mr. Klein’s statement that “research shows” voluntary organizations, not VA, can best help veterans with PTSD is dangerous, misleading and flat wrong. Yes, voluntary efforts such as those mentioned by Klein can be helpful to reduce stress and rebuild confidence—but can they be solely depended upon to provide access to their healing services to all who need them nationwide? Can they deal with the veterans who are the most seriously challenged with PTSD and other problems? No.

This Secretary, a wounded and decorated Army combat veteran of the Vietnam War who dedicated his life to military service, took on some truly difficult tasks as his personal priorities.

He is determined to eradicate the conundrum of homelessness in the veteran population by 2015. Under his quiet leadership, VA is making great progress against this stubborn, shameful problem. At last count, homeless levels had fallen to their lowest ever.

He was confronted with rapidly implementing the massive undertaking of a new post-9/11 education act Congress mandated to modernize veterans’ higher education benefits along the lines of the World War II GI Bill of Rights. In mere months, VA achieved that goal for hundreds of thousands (soon to be millions) of student veterans, and did it with minimal disruption.

He demanded that VA create better programs for the health care of women veterans, especially those in their childbearing years, who are serving in today's military in rising numbers and afterward. These programs are now taking shape, and women veterans seem to appreciate greater access to gender-specific treatment and a more welcoming environment.

As mandated by Congress, he successfully implemented an unprecedented program to provide supports and benefits to thousands of family caregivers of seriously wounded veterans of our current wars, a godsend to those families in need.

Of utmost importance to DAV, Secretary Shinseki has set in place a plan to reform VA disability compensation processing to ensure that veterans' disability claims are decided correctly, efficiently, and with compassion. That new program will be in full operation by 2014, and we are optimistic that it will bring great improvement. Amazingly, this transformation is happening as VA processes record numbers of claims (more than 1 million annually, while VA receives 1.3 million claims a year). The claims backlog is the product of years of inadequate resources, lack of organization, outdated paper-based processing, the Secretary's decision to grant new benefits to Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange, and numerous other factors, including VA's more intensified outreach efforts to a connected generation of young veterans who are more aware of the benefits they've earned than previous generations.

The Secretary and VA's Under Secretary for Benefits, Allison Hickey, are trying to address these and other challenges while orchestrating an unprecedented, aggressive transformation plan that holds promise. Change cannot happen overnight.

It should be remembered that clearing the backlog alone is not necessarily the same as reforming the claims processing system; nor would it guarantee that veterans are better served. "The VA must focus on creating a veterans benefits claims system designed to get each claim done right the first time," said DAV National Commander Larry Polzin. "Only when the VA has adopted a culture of quality, accuracy, and accountability will true reform in the claims process occur."

The Secretary's accomplishments in these diverse areas of importance are laudable, especially in politically turbulent and uncertain times. The Secretary doesn't do it all by himself, of course, but he is leading the charge at VA.

In this complex environment, change comes at a steep cost. But we at DAV believe VA is making progress against all these goals and many more, under the leadership of General Eric Shinseki. That assessment is based on DAV's long experience with the system, as the organization assists more than 300,000 individuals a year with their VA claims.

Like Mr. Klein, we are disappointed that VA and the Defense Department have not been able to figure out how to combine their electronic medical records. But he doesn't understand that this huge and complicated goal, originally established over thirty years ago by the late G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery (the long-time Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee), has eluded all previous VA Administrators and Secretaries. We do not believe it's fair to blame only the current incumbent for this chronic failure. Mr. Klein acknowledges most of the accountability lies at the reluctant feet of DOD officials and the closed military culture of the Army, Navy and Air Force. We agree.

DAV is not happy about all the Secretary's decisions; nor of the Administration in which he serves, and we become as alarmed as anyone when VA fails. And make no mistake about it, VA does make mistakes. In an agency of 311,000 people working in 1,500 locations, and providing myriad human and social services to millions, mistakes and missteps are inevitable. Unlike private business, VA's missteps are public information, and they are often sensationalized by the media and editorial writers. As opposed to Mr. Klein's view demanding the guillotine, we prefer to work constructively with the Secretary and VA to correct errors when they happen, rather than demand the boss' head as a way to fix things.

A significant and growing number of our DAV members are veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the earlier Persian Gulf War. The vast majority of them are receiving efficient and effective VA benefits and services, including world-class health care, futuristic prosthetics, effective rehabilitation, monthly payments for education and compensation, housing benefits, life insurance, and numerous other VA services and benefits. Most are happy with those arrangements, even when they are not perfect. We hasten to note newer veterans are waiting too long for VA to make their claims decisions, but we believe improvements are on the way.

DAV is not in the business of defending the VA or its leadership. We are in the business of fulfilling our promises to the men and women who have served, and in this case, that's exactly what we're doing by defending and working with Secretary Shinseki to solve the VA's challenges.

According to DAV Commander Polzin, "Secretary Shinseki has focused a great deal of attention on breaking the claims backlog. He has set ambitious long-term goals in other areas. There is little reason to ask him to step down when his replacement will lack the knowledge and experience he has gained to address these problems."

We should not listen to a columnist's bias, one who thinks lopping off the head of this crucial organization could somehow improve the services it delivers to America's veterans. It won't.

DAV empowers veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. It is dedicated to a single purpose: fulfilling our promises to the men and women who served. DAV does this by ensuring that veterans and their families can access the full range of benefits available to them; fighting for the interests of America's injured heroes on Capitol Hill; and educating the public about the great sacrifices and needs of veterans transitioning back to civilian life. DAV, a non-profit organization with 1.2 million members, was founded in 1920 and chartered by the U. S. Congress in 1932. Learn more at [www.dav.org](http://www.dav.org).

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