

Resignation won't fix VA

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The resignation of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki will not heal the broken Veterans Affairs hospital system — a system whose shortcomings were well documented long before Shinseki, or for that matter, President Obama, took office.

The present state of affairs, brought to light by a series of revelations about long waiting lists and false bookkeeping by VA officials, has its roots in a cascading series of failures decades in the making.

Despite political promises to veterans, Congress and a series of presidents have routinely cut support for VA systems and have failed to ramp up their capacity despite clear warnings that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would overload them.

Even before the current crop of wounded and damaged military personnel flooded into the VA, support for veterans from Vietnam, Korea and World War II was being cut. Military hospitals that had provided care and medicines for retired veterans were closed, health care insurance was privatized, and red tape multiplied.

New forms of disability, including difficult-to-diagnose problems like Gulf War Syndrome, post traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury had been added to the incredible increase in amputations due to improvised explosive devices, had increased the strain on hospitals already filled with aging veterans.

Shinseki was merely a convenient scapegoat for a beleaguered president.

Ironically, Shinseki himself had warned Congress about the future cost of invading Iraq and Afghanistan while he was serving as Army chief of staff. He was fired for telling a congressional committee the truth when his bosses — President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld — wanted him to lie.

He is, by every measure, a dedicated and brave man who comes from a Japanese-American family that rose above its poor treatment by the U.S. during World War II to send his three uncles to fight in the famous 442nd Infantry Regiment in Italy. He went to West Point and earned three Bronze Stars for valor in Vietnam — and lost a foot to a land mine there — and he certainly did not deserve to bear the brunt of a scandal he inherited.

The fact that he was sacrificed for political reasons is as big a disgrace as the treatment of veterans that prompted his move.

The VA, which has 327,000 employees, is dramatically underfunded, according to the Congressional Budget Office — and that's a problem that sits squarely in the lap of both Congress and the administration.

As a recent commentary in Forbes noted, the VA is a highly political creature controlled by Congress — legislators prefer to promise extensive benefits while reducing money spent. As Cato Institute analyst Michael Tanner points out, “VA hospitals with low utilization rates are built or kept open not out of need, but because they reside in the districts of powerful congressional committee leaders. At the same time, other hospitals without political clout are overflowing.”

The agency is hundreds of primary care physicians short of what it needs, pharmaceuticals are limited to about one-third of the drugs available to Medicare patients, and psychiatric services have declined in availability in recent years.

And the enormous bureaucracy seems better suited to creating red tape hurdles than to expediting care.

There are serious problems in this system — and Eric Shinseki's resignation won't fix any of them.