

VA scandal reveals weakness of big government

By Cynthia M. Allen

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Proponents of big government require a no more salient example of its inherent weakness than the scandal that has recently consumed the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The burgeoning facts are like a bomb that keeps exploding.

It seems that every day a new allegation is made, a new angle revealed.

Now 42 facilities in states from Arizona to South Carolina to Texas have been implicated, as whistle-blowers in the federal agency with the second-largest budget have begun to share disturbingly similar accounts about excessive wait times for medical appointments and claims that VA officials falsified hospital records to disguise their failures.

The ink has not dried on the latest inspector general report — which unsurprisingly found these problems to be systemic — and outraged officials on both sides of the aisle have shown no hesitation in accusing the agency of conspiracy.

Yet in an era of oversight, these “gaming strategies,” according to department officials and veterans groups, are far from novel. Indeed, multiple reviews have shown that they were just part of how one of the federal government’s largest bureaucracies has conducted its business for years.

In the wake of such incriminating revelations, critics will search for larger patterns of government failure, which are becoming easier and easier to identify.

Some commentators have been quick to draw parallels between the VA failures and those expected under the Affordable Care Act, the most controversial government expansion of healthcare in decades.

[John Fund](#), writing in the National Review, argued that “Obamacare will dramatically expand access to the healthcare system at the same time that many surveys show doctors are likely to retire or cut back their hours. It is almost inevitable that we’ll see more waiting-list scandals as the need to ration care grows.”

Rationing is a phenomenon not unusual in nations that employ socialized healthcare programs. Fears that it might lead to scandals are far from unfounded; they may even be prescient.

But the implications of the VA scandal are much bigger than those implied by comparing the agency's failures to those anticipated under Obamacare. They hint at a problem well beyond the scope of this president or any of his administration's far-reaching policies.

Instead, they speak to the much greater doubt about the ability of the federal government to effectively execute its current responsibilities at a time when progressives are perpetually seeking to expand those responsibilities.

"Modern liberalism," columnist [Michael Gerson](#) wrote, "involves centralized, bureaucratic authority and therefore presupposes administrative competence" — a virtue absent in many sectors of government.

Competence requires not only effective leadership; it demands that leaders remove those who are ineffective. But government has become increasingly less accountable as its agencies have become immune from any semblance of competition and too bloated and clumsy to effectively manage themselves.

As the [The Washington Post](#) editorialized, the "cumbersome" personnel system employed by the VA and other federal agencies "can't recruit or compete for talent and doesn't reward top performers or punish poor ones," rendering it largely ineffectual and making it susceptible to error and ripe for wrongdoing.

But instead of reform and efforts to improve efficiency, the typical response is to inject more money into failing systems. According to [Michael Tanner](#) of the Cato Institute, enrollment in VA services rose 13 percent from 2007 to 2012, and its expenditures increased 76 percent over that period. Yet it still suffers from chronic budget problems.

For liberals in particular, who see government as a solution to the problems of modern society, the VA scandal exposes the fragility of such an ideology.

And it reminds us that however well-intended, the government's ability to do good is not directly proportionate to the size of its bureaucracy.

In his 2011 State of the Union address, President Obama thrice repeated the phrase, "We do big things."

In America, we hope that will always be true. But we do not require big government to do them.