

NATIONAL REVIEW

Accountability for Thee But Not for Me

President Obama loves to hold the private sector accountable.
Government? Not So much.

By Michael Tanner
May 28, 2014

When it comes to business and the private sector, President Obama and top Democrats are all about accountability.

Banks: “When we learn that a major bank has serious problems, we will hold accountable those responsible,” President Obama says.

Oil companies: “The person who makes the mistake ought to be responsible,” according to Florida senator Ben Nelson.

Auto makers: “Manufacturers [are] on notice that they will be held accountable if they fail to quickly report and address safety-related defects,” said transportation secretary Anthony Foxx.

Food processors: “Anyone who knowingly and willingly put American families at risk should be held responsible to the fullest extent of the law,” declared Representative Rosa DeLauro, after a series of beef recalls.

Don’t get me wrong, accountability is a good thing. Especially when criminality or willful negligence is involved, there may well be a role for the government in holding business accountable. More important, when businesses screw up, the market itself extracts a price: Share prices drop. Market share shrinks. People lose their jobs. Just ask former Target CEO Gregg Steinhafel.

But when it comes to the government itself, there is precious little accountability.

Take the ongoing scandal in the VA health system. In Phoenix, where news of secret waiting lists first broke, up to 40 veterans reportedly died while awaiting care. There is now evidence of wrongdoing at 26 facilities in seven states. One can only imagine how outraged President Obama would be if some private company acted half so irresponsibly. Democrats would be lined up at the microphone to demand action; Harry Reid would probably blame the Koch brothers.

Yet, the VA scandal has generated no such response. No one has been fired. General Eric Shinseki, who has run the department for the last six years, but who — like the president himself

— apparently learned about the scandal from the newspapers, is still in charge. When the House voted last week 330–33 for legislation that would make it easier for the VA secretary to fire people, Shinseki opposed it. Exactly one person, an undersecretary, has resigned so far, and he had already announced that he was leaving. Not only do the administrators in the Phoenix hospital where the whole thing began still have their jobs, they actually got bonuses this year — a move that was only reversed after the media raised an outcry.

This is hardly an isolated case. Who can forget the debacle that was — and continues to be — HealthCare.gov? The chief information officer at the bureaucracy that produced it, Tony Trenkle, resigned, but the administration repeatedly refused to say if he was asked to step down. Trenkle may or may not have served as a fall guy, but HHS secretary Kathleen Sebelius, who oversaw the entire disastrous project, was kept on.

If the IRS targeting of tea-party groups wasn't outright criminal, it was at least massively incompetent. But so far, the only IRS official to lose their job over the scandal has been Lois Lerner — and she had to plead the Fifth before she did. The woman who headed the tax-exempt groups office from 2009 to 2012, Sarah Hall Ingram, is still at the IRS. She now directs the part of the IRS that oversees compliance with Mr. Obama's Affordable Care Act.

And one doesn't have to indulge in conspiracy theories to recognize that something went seriously wrong in Benghazi. At the very least our diplomats were sent into harm's way without proper security. Accountability? As Hilary Clinton would say, "What difference does it make now?" Very little, it appears, since the four diplomats put on temporary leave after an investigation have merely been "reassigned" elsewhere at State.

This is not just a partisan problem or the incompetence of a single presidency. After all, the Bush presidency was not exactly a model of accountability. (Who lost their job over "weapons of mass destruction?") Rather, it is endemic to government.

Just consider government programs themselves. No matter how badly they fail or how much they exceed cost estimates, they are almost never terminated. In fact, failure is usually seen as a reason to increase funding.

Perhaps, before we put too much faith in government, we should have a little less talk about accountability . . . and a little bit more, well, accountability.

— *Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#) and the author of [Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution](#).*