

## Golden Eagle Awards Dinner Speech by VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, March 19, 2010

Van, thanks for that kind introduction.

I am most honored by this presentation of the Society's Golden Eagle Award. You have conferred the Golden Eagle upon some of my personal heroes—Soldiers like Generals Andy Goodpaster, Barry McCaffrey, and Julius Becton—men who led Soldiers the way they lived their own lives: with integrity, honor, and devotion to country. Patty and I are exceedingly grateful for your generosity and hospitality this evening.

Let me also congratulate the Academy for its wisdom in recognizing your distinguished colleague, Bill Brown, not only for his many engineering accomplishments, but also for his outstanding leadership as a federal senior executive, as a Presidential Rank Award recipient, and as a mentor to young African-Americans who are modeling themselves after him. They have chosen well. Once again, Bill, congratulations. I am honored to share this dais with you.

On 5 March 1776, 234 years ago, a true miracle of engineering was wrought on Dorchester Heights, overlooking enemy-occupied Boston. The sun rose that day to reveal a feat, unprecedented in its time—and to the great chagrin and dismay of the British in Boston Harbor.

During the previous night, under a full moon, more than 4,000 men with picks and shovels toiled at the direction of Colonel Henry Knox to build a fortification of multiple redoubts, sheltering the 20 cannon that had been brought south from Fort Ticonderoga. At sunrise, the completed works loomed over the British, who were awakening to a new dawn.

According to historian David McCullough, "It was an utterly phenomenal achievement." General Howe, the British commander, was said to have remarked, "My God, these fellows have done more work in one night than I could make my army do in three months."

The determination of the American Soldier is legendary—it is the stuff of the Soldier's Creed. Regardless of which uniform or which nation, most every professional who hears these lines nods in understanding at their significance—these oft-repeated lines of the Soldier's Creed:

- I will always place the mission first.
- I will never accept defeat.
- I will never quit.
- I will never leave a fallen comrade.

Four simple declaratory statements that constitute promises from one warrior to others—about being able to be counted upon during the most dangerous and painful moments in battle. It is foundational to the trust that must be nurtured amongst them for those days when only they can make the difference—whether at Dorchester Heights, Antietam, Normandy, Tarawa, Chosin, the Ia Drang, or the Shah-e-Kot.

Our 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, laid the framework for VA's mission when he promised, during his Second Inaugural Address in 1865, that the Nation would, ". . . Care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphan."

A year ago, President Obama, the 44th president of the United States, offered me the opportunity to help fulfill Lincoln's promise. Today, VA still has two children of Civil War Veterans on our rolls—obligations from the 16th president of the United States.

VA is seen, primarily, as a large health care system; and for the most part, that is true. It is the largest integrated health care system in this country: 153 medical centers affiliated with 107 of the best medical schools in the Nation; 783 community-based outpatient clinics; 232 Vet Centers; and a number of outreach and mobile clinics, which we activate as needed to reach out into rural America where Veterans live. But, here is what is also true about VA:

- 300,000 people come to work at the department every day.
- It is second only to the Department of Education in providing educational benefits of \$9 billion annually. VA is the Nation's eighth-largest life insurance enterprise with \$1.3 trillion in coverage, 7.2 million clients, and a 96 percent customer satisfaction rating.
- VA guarantees nearly 1.3 million individual home loans, with an unpaid balance of \$175 billion. Our VA foreclosure rate is the lowest among all categories of mortgage loans.
- VA operates the country's largest National Cemetery system with 131 cemeteries.

These responsibilities require a vast physical plant of over 5,500 buildings, 1,400 leased facilities, covering 163 million square feet on 34,000 acres of land, much of it prime real estate. But the average age of our buildings is approaching 60 years, and we've accumulated over \$9 billion in backlogged maintenance. So, we are strategically reviewing our capital investments to look out through the next 10 years to try to see the horizon 20 years from now.

To manage our inventory and transform our footprint, we've proposed legislation to create an assistant secretary for Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction. This is more than wise for an organization that acquires nearly \$15 billion in goods and services each year. With this reorganization, we intend to seek a reduction of \$2 billion in our contracting costs annually.

We take our victories as they come. To this point, they have been few, but the needle is beginning to move on VA's transformation. We have implemented the new Post-9/11 GI Bill and the 200,000 Veterans in school under this program—a portion of the 565,000 total Veterans in school under all VA programs—are a tremendous investment in the future of our country. We have granted Vietnam Veterans a presumption of service-connection to Agent Orange exposure for three additional diseases, and have recently stood up a Gulf War Veterans Illness Task Force to investigate the connection between a series of undiagnosed, chronic, unexplained, multi-symptom illnesses and service during Operation Desert Storm. We recently granted nine diseases presumption of service-connection to Gulf War I and Afghanistan.

We must and will transform VA into the high-performing, well-disciplined, transparent, and accountable organization, we all know it's capable of being. We must and will advocate on behalf of the Veterans we serve. The need to transform VA is, in part, to harmonize two very distinct images of men and women who have served our Nation—two incongruent images, I might add.

The first image is this—and it is one most familiar to everyone in this audience: Each year, something around 60 percent of all high school graduates go on to universities, colleges, community colleges—some version of higher education. Of the remaining 40 percent or so, some undergo vocational training,

and some immediately enter the workforce. Fewer others still join the less than one-percent of Americans who volunteer to serve in our Nation's armed forces.

After basic training and arrival at their first units, they quickly become valued and trusted members of high-performing teams—tough, motivated, and extremely dedicated. With excellent leadership, they go forward, each and every day, to perform the complex, the difficult, and the dangerous missions. On some days, they are asked to do the impossible. Think of what they've been asked to do, and what they've accomplished, with unwavering commitment and without complaint, these last eight years in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But there is a second image: Veterans suffer disproportionately from homelessness, depression, substance abuse, and suicide, and they are well up there in joblessness as well. 107,000 of them sleep on the streets of our Nation each night. Another 40,000 Veterans are released from prison each year.

What's wrong with these disparate images? To be sure, there are far fewer Veterans in the second image than in the first, but they are the same youngsters. How did we fail to continue the kinds of successes they achieved while in uniform? How do we keep them from entering that downward spiral of joblessness, depression, and substance abuse that often leads to homelessness and, sometimes, to suicide? It's not about them; it's about us.

I willingly accepted President Obama's invitation to serve Veterans as his Secretary of Veterans Affairs because it provides me an opportunity to give back—to those youngsters with whom I went to war 44 years ago in Vietnam; those I sent to war as Army Chief of Staff; and those giants, from World War II and Korea, on whose shoulders I, and my generation, stood as we grew up in the profession of arms.

At VA, our goal is to never allow those youngsters in image number-one to become part of image number-two, and to return those in image number-two to lives as productive as possible. If you wonder where we will focus for the next several years, this is it.

I am proud to have the Society of American Military Engineers helping VA transform for our 21st century requirements. Once again, thank you for honoring Patty and me this evening. God bless our men and women in harm's way, God bless our Veterans, and may God continue to bless this great Nation of ours.

Thank you.