

Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2017

Remarks on Signing the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017

June 23, 2017

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you very much, everybody. That's really greatly appreciated.

And thank you to Secretary Shulkin for that introduction and for your really tireless efforts, David, to protect those who have really been protecting all of us for so long. These are great, great people. And you know who I'm talking about, right? Congratulations.

In just a short time, we've already achieved transformative change at the VA, and believe me, we're just getting started. We have so many people that have been so helpful right here in the room and Tom and all my friends. It's been fantastic. The enthusiasm for the Veterans Administration and for making it right for our great veterans has been incredible. And I want to thank all of them.

One of my greatest honors and joys during the Presidential campaign was the time I spent going all across the country with our Nation's really and truly incredible veterans. In their courage, their dignity, and their selfless sacrifice, they represent the very best of us. Our veterans have fulfilled their duty to this Nation, and now we must fulfill our duty to them.

So to every veteran who is here with us today, I just want to say two very simple words: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You are the warriors and heroes who have won our freedom, and we will never forget what you have done for all of us, ever.

As you all know all too well, for many years, the Government failed to keep its promises to our veterans. We all remember the nightmare that veterans suffered during the VA scandals that were exposed a few years ago. Veterans were put on secret wait lists, given the wrong medication, given the bad treatments, and ignored in moments of crisis for them. Many veterans died waiting for a simple doctor's appointment. What happened was a national disgrace.

And yet some of the employees involved in these scandals remained on the payrolls. Outdated laws kept the Government from holding those who failed our veterans accountable. Today we are finally changing those laws—it wasn't easy, but we did have some fantastic help—to make sure that the scandal of what we suffered so recently never, ever happens again and that our veterans can get the care they so richly deserve.

So you just heard from Sergeant Michael Verardo. Great. I didn't get to shake your hand, Michael. Huh? Get up, Michael. He gets up better than I do. [*Laughter*] Thank you, Michael.

Michael lost two limbs in defending our country, and yet he had to wait 57 days to get his prosthetic leg repaired—that's a long time, Michael—and over 3½ years for modifications to make his house more accessible. What happened to Michael is happening to many, but it's rarely happening under our leadership and David's leadership anymore. That I can tell you.

Our wounded warriors have given everything they have to this Nation, and we owe them everything we have in return. And we're taking care of it. Today we are taking a very historic action to transform the VA by enacting the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection

Act. This was not easy. This was not an easy one. And it's one that they wanted to do—Michael, you know—for a long time. For many years, couldn't get it done. We got it done.

This is one of the largest reforms to the VA in its history. It's a reform that I campaigned on, and now I am thrilled to be able to sign that promise into law. VA accountability is essential to making sure that our veterans are treated with the respect they have so richly earned through their blood, sweat, and tears. This law will finally give the VA Secretary—who is, by the way, just doing some job, and he's doing it with this and with the heart, believe me.

It gives the Secretary the authority to remove Federal employees who fail and endanger our veterans and to do so quickly and effectively. It's been a long time since you've heard those words. Those entrusted with the sacred duty of serving our veterans will be held accountable for the care they provide. It's a big statement.

At the same time, this bill protects whistleblowers who do the right thing. We want to reward, cherish, and promote the many dedicated employees at the VA. This legislation also gives the VA Secretary the authority to appoint new Medical Directors at VA hospitals—something which was almost impossible to do in the past. And these are going to be talented, talented people.

I applaud Chairman Phil Roe and the Members of Congress here with us today—which we have many—who fought so hard for this legislation. And I want them up here when I sign. And I just want to thank the Members of Congress. They have been really dedicated to getting this done. It was not easy for them either. *[Applause]* Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Thank you. Thank you.

And our very sincere gratitude as well to the veteran service organizations who have joined us for this tremendous occasion and for everything they do for the veterans and for so long. They've been fighting for this and other things so long. And by the way, other things are happening. We've done a lot. This is a big one. We have a lot of good ones coming.

I also want to express our appreciation for Secretary Shulkin, who is implementing the dramatic reform throughout the VA. It's got to be implemented. If it's not properly implemented, it will never mean the same thing. But I have no doubt it will be properly implemented. Right, David?

Secretary of Veterans Affairs David J. Shulkin. Absolutely.

The President. It'd better be, David.

[At this point, the President gestured with his finger in mock anger and mouthed the words "You're fired."]

Oh, we'll never have to use those words. *[Laughter]* We'll never have to use those words on our David. *[Laughter]* We will never use those words on you, that's for sure. *[Laughter]*

That one never fails, does it, Tom? *[Laughter]*

Since my first day in office, we've taken one action after another to ensure our veterans—and make sure, we have to make sure—that they get world-class care and the kind of care that they've been promised by so many different people for so many years. We've created a new Office of Accountability at the VA, which will empower—and really has been empowered—by this legislation. We've launched a new website that publishes wait times at every VA hospital. We've delivered same-day mental health service at all 168 VA medical centers. That's a big operation when you think of it.

We've announced that the VA will finally solve a problem that has plagued our Government for decades: seamlessly transferring veterans' medical records from the Department of Defense to the Department of Veteran Affairs.

Now, that doesn't sound like such a big deal. It is, believe me. That was a big one. We thought this would be easy, but the people, like David and all that have been here and understand the system, he said that's going to be a tough one. We got it done. So that was a good one. But it is something we're very proud to have been able to do it this quickly.

I've also signed the Veterans Choice Improvement Act so that more veterans can see the doctor of their choice. Already this year, using the Choice Program, veterans have received nearly double the number of approvals to see the doctor of their choosing.

And this is only the beginning. We will not rest until the job is 100 percent complete for our great veterans. *[Applause]* Thank you. We can all be inspired by the story of a retired Air Force veteran, named Earl Morse, who served as a physician's assistant at the VA centers in Ohio and Indiana.

Thirteen years ago, Earl began asking his patients if they planned to visit new World War II Memorial—which is beautiful—right here in Washington, DC. Nearly all said they planned to visit. But when he saw these patients at their next appointment, almost none of them had made the trip.

One day, he had an idea. Earl is a private pilot. He asked one of his patients, who was a World War II veteran, if he could fly with him to the memorial. He was so honored to do it. The 80-year-old veteran wept, openly cried. He never imagined he would see that beautiful monument to his service. That is how first Honor Flight was born. Honor Flight, it's a very beautiful thing.

Since then, over 100,000 veterans have been greeted with cheers of gratitude as they arrive in our Nation's Capital. We want all of American veterans—all of them, every one of them—to experience and to at least have the opportunity to experience that same gratitude every time they walk into the VA.

That's what today is all about: keeping our promises to those who have kept us free, kept us happy, saved our lives, and saved our families.

So I just want to thank you, our incredible veterans. We stand with you. We salute you. And with this new legislation, we strive to better support and serve you every single day.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless our veterans. And God bless America. Thank you very much. Thank you. Come on up, folks.

Secretary Shulkin. That was great.

[The President moved to the signing desk.]

The President. So this is something that we are all very proud to be signing. It's a tremendous honor for me. It's a tremendous honor for everybody on stage. And we're taking care of our veterans, and we're taking care of them properly.

So this is something that we are all very proud to be signing. It's a tremendous honor for me; it's a tremendous honor for everybody on stage. And we're taking care of our veterans, and we're taking care of them properly. Thank you. David, congratulations. Thank you again. Michael, congratulations.

Secretary Shulkin. And that's Sarah.

The President. Nice to see you.

[*The President signed the bill.*]

Okay. Phil, Tom, and everybody, who should get this pen?

Participant. Michael.

The President. I have a feeling it's Michael. What do you think? Right?

Secretary Shulkin. Absolutely, absolutely. Definitely.

[*The President handed the pen to Army veteran Michael Verardo and shook his hand.*]

The President. We're going to get some others for you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:57 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sen. Thomas B. Cotton; and Earl Morse, cofounder and board member, Honor Flight Network. Secretary Shulkin referred to Sarah Verardo, wife of Mr. Verardo. S. 1094, approved June 23, was assigned Public Law No. 115–41.

Categories: Bill Signings and Vetoes : Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017, signing remarks.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Cotton, Thomas B.; Morse, Earl; Roe, D. Phillip; Shulkin, David J.; Verardo, Michael.

Subjects: Government organization and employees : Accountability and transparency, strengthening efforts; Legislation, enacted : Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017; Veterans : Health and medical care; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Medical records system, modernization efforts; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Veterans Health Administration; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Whistleblower protections, strengthening efforts.

DCPD Number: DCPD201700426.