



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 27, 2014

## Iraq, Afghan Wars Created VA Backlog

Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) picked the eve of the Memorial Day weekend to incur the [wrath of veterans' organizations](#) with an "Open letter to America's Veterans."

In the letter, Burr sharply criticized several of the groups for not joining the American Legion's call for "leadership change" at the Department of Veterans Affairs, where Secretary Eric Shinseki has been hearing calls for his resignation following the scandal over falsification of records and the wait time for wounded veterans seeking treatment. In the letter he released and published on his website May 23, Burr, the ranking Republican on the Committee on Veterans Affairs, praised the Legion for its stand but charged spokesmen for the other veterans' groups who testified at a recent hearing on the scandal with being "more interested in defending the status quo within VA, protecting their relationships within the agency, and securing their access to the Secretary and his inner circle."



Before the weekend was over, three of the groups responded with statements Burr probably will not quote in his campaign literature should he run for reelection in 2016.

Burr's charge was a "monumental cheap-shot," Veterans of Foreign Wars commander-in-chief William Thien and John Hamilton, the group's adjutant general, said in their letter to the senator. Calling his statement "one of the most dishonorable and grossly inappropriate acts that we've witnessed in more than forty years of involvement with the veteran community," Thien and Hamilton labeled it "ugly and mean-spirited" and beneath "the standards of the United States Senate."

President Bill Lawson and Executive Director Homer Townsend, Jr. of the Paralyzed Veterans of America charged in their letter that Burr "should be ashamed" and that his letter "clearly displays why the vast majority of the American public puts no faith in their elected officials to do what is right for this country."

A statement on the website of Disabled American Veterans said Burr "shows no interest in pursuing serious policy solutions, preferring instead to launch cheap political attacks on the integrity of leaders of veterans organizations that do not agree with him."

The VA scandal, including reports of veterans dying while waiting for treatment, has sparked understandable outrage in Congress and in various media outlets. Rush Limbaugh has spoken of "a death panel at work," calling it "a preview of life under ObamaCare." He asserted,



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When you have government employees receiving salary bonuses for ostensibly saving money by virtue of shrinking the number of people on the list, how does that happen? How do people end up off the list and not treated? They pass away. And if you're gonna have government employees bonused on that basis, then you would be not that far out of whack to assume there might be some death panel at work here.

"This is what socialism in America looks like," wrote Jeffrey Lord in the *American Spectator*, calling the VA "one long rolling disaster. Veterans untreated, dying, committing suicide, secret lists, lackadaisical care or partial care or no care."

"The election of President Obama ushered in a new era of big government and with it a renewed flurry of mismanagement," said Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, the House Republican whip. "If the president truly did not know about these scandals and mistakes, we should doubt his ability to properly manage the leviathan government that he helped create."

But for all their condemnations of socialism and "big government," most Republicans never seem to recognize that *war* is the biggest big government program there is. And while there is no excuse for fraudulent record-keeping, much of the backlog of 300,000 cases at the VA can be traced to the number of veterans wounded in the Bush administration's "war of choice" in Iraq, brought on by hyped up claims of "weapons of mass destruction" that turned out not to be there. That, together with what became a 14-year war of occupation and nation-building effort in Afghanistan, has produced a greater number of disability claims than have come from any of the nation's previous wars. Many of the patients have required numerous operations. A large number are amputees. A great many have suffered head injuries from Improvised Explosive Devices, the weapon that has caused the most damage to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

"Maybe when we go into war, we should be thinking about its consequences and its ramifications," House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said, noting an increase of two million veterans needing VA assistance in the past five years. Pelosi in 2002 opposed authorizing the use of military force in Iraq, but last year both Pelosi and Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) were in favor of giving President Obama congressional approval for a military strike against Syria over the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Damascus regime against the rebel forces seeking to overthrow it. "Hundreds of children were killed. We must respond," Pelosi said at the time. Previous reports claiming that Syrian rebels had used the sarin gas were either dismissed or ignored.

Polls showed overwhelming opposition to a military strike, however, and Obama withdrew the request for congressional authorization after Syria agreed to submit to international inspection and a dismantling of its stockpile of chemical weapons. But in January of this year, a McClatchy news report shed new light on the chemical weapons issue:

A series of revelations about the rocket believed to have delivered poison sarin gas to a Damascus suburb last summer are challenging American intelligence assumptions about that attack and suggest that the case U.S. officials initially made for retaliatory military action was flawed.

A team of security and arms experts, meeting this week in Washington to discuss the matter, has concluded that the range of the rocket that delivered sarin in the largest attack that night was too short for the device to have been fired from the Syrian government positions where the Obama administration insists they originated.

Yet Obama was prepared to launch — and Boehner and Pelosi and who knows how many other



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members of Congress were ready to support — a military attack based on uncertain claims about chemical weapons. That at least makes it clear that the Veterans Administration is not the only place in Washington where a “leadership change” is needed.

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