

OPENING STATEMENT

**Dr. Leo S. Mackay, Jr.
Nominee, Deputy Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
May 16, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, I am honored to appear before you and the members of the committee today as President Bush's designee to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Military service is an honored tradition in my family. My father made a career of service in the Air Force, and my two older brothers served in the Army – one made it a career. I was proud to serve in our nation's Navy for twelve years. Through uncles and cousins, my family also includes a doughboy who saw duty in France in World War I, a soldier with Patton's Third Army in WWII, and veterans of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. Our nation's veterans are not an abstraction for me, they are an integral part of my family and a vital part of my being.

I am especially indebted to President Bush for the opportunity to serve in his administration. I think the President has signaled very clearly the high priority he places on the well being of this country's veterans. All veterans, and all those who serve and care about them, will benefit from his clear and steady leadership.

Veterans will also benefit from the leadership of Secretary Principi. He is a man who has, in the short time I have known him, deeply impressed me with his

dynamic energy, encyclopedic knowledge, and all-embracing passion for veterans and the institution that exists to serve them. We have already struck up a healthy working relationship and established a close rapport. He has made it clear that the only filter for all decisions is the greater good of veterans – that’s a good standard. The Secretary has also begun to lay out and pursue a clear and concise agenda. I look forward to serving alongside him on behalf of America’s veterans.

Perhaps the greatest debt I owe, however, is to my wife Heather and our children, Sarah and Josiah. Without their support, warmth, and love it would be impossible to accept this challenge. I want to thank them for their willingness to move from the paradise we call Texas back to the D.C. area, and to put up with the demands of public service. Like all husbands in my position, I can never repay nor scarcely acknowledge the true dimensions of the debt I owe to my wife for gracing my life. I do hope, however, that the mere mention of that fact, in this setting, will tell her again of my devotion and love. I also hope that my nomination will serve as an inspiration to my children: to spur them into episodes, if not a life, of public service.

The Department of Veterans Affairs finds its most eloquent mission statement in the words of President Lincoln, “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan.” It is a testament to the generosity and largeness of spirit of the American people that this great organization exists to

provide benefits and services to those who have served all of us so well. I am beginning to get to know the people of the Department...and I like what I see very much. There are many able, eager, and knowledgeable professionals. I look forward to the day when I may be privileged to call them colleagues.

The Department is also supported by an invaluable network of Veterans Service Organizations that are an integral part of a team dedicated to the well being of our veterans. I look forward especially, should the Senate consent to the judgment of the President, to working with the fine professionals and volunteers of these organizations.

Finally, I recognize the critical oversight role of both this committee and the House Veterans Affairs Committee. They have provided leadership and support to VA and veterans programs. You have my commitment that I will work with you to achieve a common goal of serving veterans in a prompt, efficient and dedicated manner. Together we must tackle a diverse set of issues: reducing the large backlog of benefits claims; defining a clear overarching information technology architecture with uniform standards and metrics; coordinating with the DoD healthcare system to deliver ever-greater efficiencies and savings while maintaining the distinctive character of the VA system; rationalizing and updating the capital infrastructure and physical plant; attracting and retaining a quality workforce imbued with 21st century skills and motivated for career service. All of these, and so many more, are pressing needs of the Department.

I am not a long-service veteran of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I do not have great detailed knowledge of the Department's programs, people, and culture. But, I will learn...and quickly. I do have, however, the perspective of the outsider and the experience of having been in a number of organizational and cultural settings. Secretary Principi and I will undoubtedly have to make some very tough decisions, and quickly. I commit to you that we will make those decisions with alacrity, but also with judiciousness. And, I will further commit to you that we will make those decisions with one, and only one question in mind: "what is best for America's veterans?"

In closing, let me say again what an honor it is for me to appear before this committee as the designee of the President. I stand ready to serve and I look forward to any questions you may have.