

**Statement  
of  
Anthony J. Principi  
Designee for Nomination as Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
United States Senate  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Hearing on the Proposed Nomination**

January 18, 2001

Mr. Chairman, Senator Specter, members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before you this afternoon. I am honored.

I am honored that President-elect Bush looked to me to embody his commitment to veterans.

I am honored that, if the Senate consents, I will assume leadership over 200,000 VA employees who have chosen careers of service to veterans.

I am honored by the prospect of working, once again, if the Senate is willing, in partnership with our country's veterans service organizations (VSOs).

And most of all, I am honored ----- and humbled, by the prospect that 24 million men and women who answered our nation's call to arms may soon look to me to answer their call for the benefits and services they earned in the service of our country.

I have accepted this challenge for one reason.

I believe deeply in the Department of Veterans Affairs and am fully committed to its mission of service to veterans. If I can make a difference for America's veterans, then my rewards will far outweigh any sacrifice I may make.

And I do intend to make a difference.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is at a critical juncture. Many veterans have lost faith in VA's ability to fairly and promptly decide their claims for benefits.

Not without reason. It takes too long to decide a claim. And the error rate remains too high.

I know that the leadership of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has addressed these problems and I applaud their initiative and innovation. But veterans don't care about process. Veterans are entitled to outcomes.

It doesn't matter what VBA is doing. It matters what VBA does. And what VBA now does remains unsatisfactory in the minds of many veterans.

President-elect Bush promised a top to bottom examination of VA benefits processing. If I am confirmed, I will commission a broad-based and inclusive task force to conduct that examination.

Its charter will be narrow. I am not interested in abstract theories of veterans' benefits. I want hands-on practical solutions. I will not want to hear that problems are intractable because of the language of the law. I will work within the law as the people's representatives in Congress write it.

It will be given a short fuse. If I leave this town with VBA's problems still under study I will count my tour here a failure.

Our history shows that America can solve just about any problem if we are united in a common cause and committed to a victory. I use the word "victory" deliberately. The clearest examples of our country's ability to achieve great ends while overcoming enormous challenges can be found in undertakings such as the Manhattan Project or the creation of entire shipyards out of bare ground in response to World War II's shipping shortage.

It may be necessary for VA to declare its own war on claims processing and bring all of its resources to bear in the campaign to win that war. Success will certainly take bold steps. All of the participants must be willing to unite in the common cause.

I don't want to suggest today that I have a "preferred option" for conducting this campaign. Nothing should be off the table. The members of the task force should be free to propose and discuss any idea, no matter how different it is from the way VBA operated in 1946 or 1972 or even in 1999. VA's challenges are not limited to prompt and accurate decisions on disability claims.

Many veterans are skeptical of VA's ability to provide them with quality healthcare. I believe that, over all, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) does provide high quality healthcare. I commend VHA's leadership for their emphasis on patient safety and quality care. But quality healthcare requires constant attention at every level within the Department. I will keep my eye on that ball.

VHA provides healthcare to the extent that resources are available. That means that the inefficient or ineffective use of limited resources comes at the expense of healthcare for veterans. I will hold VHA'S leadership accountable for their stewardship of the resources entrusted to them -----because sick veterans would pay the price for VHA inefficiency. That would be unacceptable to me.

As Secretary, my bottom line will be access to quality healthcare for veterans. This will be particularly true for veterans who do not have other options, either because they need the specialized services provided by VA or because their circumstances call on them to look to VA as their only healthcare provider.

President-elect Bush has promised a top to bottom review of VA's healthcare system, implementation of the Millennium Health Care Act, and modernization of barriers hindering, veterans' access to health care.

If the Senate confirms my nomination, the President's goals will be my goals. Again, I believe that a broad-based, inclusive, tightly-focused and short-fused task force, drawing on the commitment and knowledge of the VSOs, forward looking VA employees, and VA's partners in healthcare delivery, can help me deliver on that promise by identifying problems and proposing solutions. New technology offers VA new opportunities. It also imposes great challenges. Technology is often expensive, and is almost always complex. Effective application of complex technology to already complex processes, such as VA's, frequently requires rethinking and rebuilding from the ground up. We can't just "pave the cow paths" and expect to improve service.

Information technology can offer a means to break down the bureaucratic barriers that interfere with quick and efficient service to veterans as well as the walls dividing VA from her sister departments in the Federal government and, totally unacceptably to me, barriers within VA itself.

VA has absorbed billions of dollars allocated to improving its ability to collect, process and communicate data. Frankly, I do not see improvements proportional to the resources consumed.

I do not now have a solution to VA's information technology problems. I do know that I intend to find one. And that in my search for a solution I will not be constrained by "how we have always done it." That path is a dead end. It has not worked.

I will not come before you and claim to have in my hip pocket an instant solution to all of the problems faced by VA and by the veterans VA serves. If the solutions were easy they would have been implemented long ago. And while I am blessed with many friends in the veterans community, and can draw

on my experience on the Hill, in the Department and on the Congressional Commission on Veterans and Servicemembers Transition, I am also aware that much has changed over the last eight years. While I have a rich background of experience, I also have much to learn.

If I am confirmed, I expect that my initial months in office will be spent building a foundation of knowledge from which I can create a blueprint for action.

But I do not intend to come to Washington to conduct seminars.

I intend to make decisions and to act on them. Those who know me know that I will be decisive. I will act boldly. But I will not act impulsively. I will work closely with you and with your colleagues in the House. I will ensure that VSOs are enlisted as partners in developing solutions as well as in identifying problems. I will look to forward-thinking VA employees for their experience and knowledge. But study will not be an excuse for delay.

If the Senate blesses me with confirmation, I will make decisions and I will see them implemented. I will hold the individuals entrusted with leadership within the Department accountable for their outcomes, just as I expect to be held accountable.

In short, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I appear before you today not to make a commitment to specific plans or programs. I have enough knowledge of the Department and its problems to know that I still have much to learn before I can unveil detailed plans or promise specific actions.

Rather, I appear before you today to acknowledge my personal debt to the millions of Americans who have served our nation in uniform in the past, and to the millions who stand watch today on the ramparts of freedom.

My debt to them can be satisfied only by a commitment to work with you, and with our partners in the VSOs, as well as the Department's employees, to identify and implement the solutions necessary to ensure that veterans obtain the benefits and healthcare they have earned.

If the Senate consents to my nomination, I intend to satisfy that debt.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator Specter and members of the Committee.

I look forward to your questions.