

May 25, 2014

Kevin Williamson has written an long essay that seeks to answer a question raised by the Veterans Administration's failures. It is a question everyone should ask. But, it is a most important question for liberals who believe in using government force to address problems. (Problems most likely caused by earlier state compulsions.). Here's the question; "How is it possible that the government of the United States of America — arguably the most powerful organization of any sort in the history of the human race, in possession of a navy, a nuclear arsenal, and a vast police apparatus — cannot ensure that its own employees and contractors do not negligently kill its other employees and former employees? Never mind providing veterans with world-class medical care — the federal government cannot even prevent bureaucratic homicide."

Politics is not always about somebody getting his way and somebody else failing to get his way. Consider the case of the Veterans Affairs hospitals: Nobody wanted this outcome. That outcome, recall, is a great many dead veterans, the result of medical and managerial malpractice. Democrats did not want the hospitals that care for our veterans to be catastrophically mismanaged while administrators set about systematically destroying the evidence of their incompetence, and Republicans did not want that, either. Independents are firmly opposed to negligently killing veterans. It doesn't poll well. Everybody is so opposed to that outcome that we created a cabinet-level secretariat to prevent it and installed as its boss Eric Shinseki, a highly regarded former Army general. We spent very large sums of money, billions of dollars, to prevent this outcome, almost trebling VA spending from 2000 to 2013 even as the total number of veterans declined by several million.

Nobody wanted these veterans dead, but dead they are. ...

... There will be plenty of personal culpability to go around as this mess all comes to light, beginning with President Obama, who offered himself to the American people as, among other things, a competent authority on the management of health care. He promised the country openness and transparency but has worked assiduously against those qualities, which carry not only ethical weight but practical value as well: Open and transparent arrangements are much less prone to abuse, especially abuse of the sort that results in death, because observation is linked to accountability, which is why police officers make so many wrongful arrests and destroy so much evidence in response to the perfectly legal act of videotaping them at work. (E.g.) The right thing to do, in response to 40 and counting veterans killed through negligence on his watch, is for President Obama to resign. A man with any self-respect would do it; a country with any self-respect would demand it. But that of course is not what is going to happen. ...

... Politics is mostly words about words, but it has real-world consequences, and death is not an uncommon one. The truth, which in Washington is an unspeakable truth, is that almost the entirety of our conversation about politics is predicated on a fundamental error in our understanding of reality. Unlike a certain Entity with Whom presidents and senators sometimes seem to confuse themselves, politicians cannot speak reality into being. ("Let there be . . . health care.") The situation at the VA should not surprise us; what did we expect, having no way of even knowing what we should have expected? This outcome was at least as likely as any other, and certainly more likely than one in which reality matched policy through some obscure divine office unknown to us.

If you want to blame somebody, blame Democritus.

Democritus was the Greek philosopher who first imagined the atom, some time around 460 b.c. He thought that if you broke a rock in half, broke one of those halves into even smaller pieces, and kept on going, eventually you would arrive at an indivisible unit of matter, which he called the atom (ἄτομος, “indivisible”). He had a great many ideas about atoms: They are everywhere, eternal, indivisible, always in motion, etc. And the Greek world yawned, and the entire world continued yawning for about 2,000 years. Nobody gave a fig about his atoms.

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*The unspoken promise is that of reduction: To understand the whole, understand its parts. Understand the atom and you can build an explanation of the universe. **Those ideas could be seductive to scientists, but they were practically opiates for politicians.** We still hear the unhappy echo of the early-20th-century hymns to totalitarianism in our political campaigns — “How shall we govern? With science!” Copernicus’s neat solar system, Rutherford’s neat atom — with a world that simple, how difficult could it be to shape it to our own desires? ...*

... How confident should we be that our policies will produce the desired outcomes? That will depend in some part on how complex the system is that you are attempting to influence. Housing and mortgage markets are very complex, and politicians’ efforts to turn them to their own ends went very badly in 2008, and will go very badly again in the future. Health-insurance markets and medicine are both very complex, and we see how political efforts to manage those have been going.

Operating hospitals is a complex business, too. Consider a counterexample: Our food-stamp program has many problems, but imagine what a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare it would be if, instead of the current practice of giving poor people vouchers for food, we applied the VA model and attempted to have the government deliver the service itself rather than simply paying for it. That would mean federally operated farms, ranches, and slaughterhouses, government grocery stores, warehouses, distribution centers, transportation networks, etc., all managed with the competence and decency exhibited by the VA. Rather than trying to politically steer the extraordinarily complex system of producing and distributing food — rather than biting off way more than we can cognitively chew — we instead chose the relatively simple method, giving poor people vouchers for food. Of course that has its problems and unintended consequences, but they are milder than, say, national famine, which is probably what would come of government-run agriculture. We let the complex problem of food production meet the complex solution of the market.

Not every regulation or government program is doomed to fail. But we might consider the slightly terrifying possibility that when government does get something right, it does so by accident, temporarily, and for reasons that it cannot understand or replicate. ...

... Another feature of complex systems is that some of them are very sensitive to initial conditions, as expressed by the butterfly effect. It may be the case that things have gone as well as they have for us in the United States not because of any current policy or because of the unique genius and saintliness of our national leadership as currently constituted, but simply because the right people with the right prejudices did the right things for a relatively short period of time in the 18th century, and what we have now is very little more than the compounded returns on that cultural windfall. That seems to me a more likely explanation for our relatively happy and secure place in the world than that we were led to this point by the kind of thinking, and the kind of men, who brought us the VA hospitals and those dead veterans.

Roger Simon posts on the VA scandal.

Many have wondered about Barack Obama's prolonged silence concerning the disastrous situation at the Veterans Administration hospitals and then his odd detached demeanor (well, maybe not that odd for him) when he finally did discuss it at a press conference.

The answer is simple. His lifetime dream of a free public (single payer) healthcare system for all just disintegrated in front of him. Forget the wildly ambitious and pervasive "Affordable Care Act," the government couldn't even handle the health of our wounded servicemen, acknowledged for years to be by far the group most deserving of medical attention in our country. With veterans dying while waiting lists are falsified, it's hard to see government healthcare as anything but incompetent, disgraceful and quite possibly criminal.

Government has failed utterly. Does anyone have any doubt that Halliburton or even the dreaded Koch brothers could have better handled the health of our wounded warriors? ...

Ben Shapiro asks why the left is no longer claiming the VA is proof government run health care will be so wonderful.

As the fallout from the Veterans Administration cooking of the books and the related deaths of over three dozen veterans continues, President Obama took to the podium on Wednesday to explain that problems at the VA are nothing new. On Wednesday, President Obama took to the podium to first express his tremendous anger – VA Secretary Eric Shinseki was "mad as hell" but President Obama was "madder than hell," thus winning the rage sweepstakes – and then explained that the VA's issues go back years:

[A]ll of us, whether here in Washington or all across the country, have to stay focused on the larger mission, which is upholding our sacred trust to all of our veterans, bringing the VA system into the 21st century, which is not an easy task.... caring for our veterans is not an issue that popped up in recent weeks. Some of the problems with respect to how veterans are able to access the benefits that they've earned, that's not a new issue.

Obama's statement, however, was remarkably short on actual solutions for the VA. Throwing money at the problem hasn't fixed it: using 2011 dollars, America spent \$88.8 billion on the VA in 2007, and \$125.3 billion on the VA in 2012.

And herein lies the problem for the left: the failures at the VA, including its bureaucratic incompetence, its waiting lists, and its deaths, all debunk the notion that a government-run healthcare system will work. It's a fresh slap in the face to all those commentators who, in pushing Obamacare, endorsed the VA as a model.

There are some pretty big names on that list. Paul Krugman in 2011 wrote of the VA's "huge success story": ...

Power Line has more in this vein. As you can see, Paul Krugman has been a flack for left wing causes for a long time.

At the Wall Street Journal, James Taranto pulls together liberals' endorsements of Veterans Administration health care. It goes beyond just claiming that VA medicine was top notch; liberals often claimed that the supposed success of the VA is proof that government is superior to the private sector. Taranto titles his post "Socialist Supermodel." You should read it all, but here are a few highlights:

[I]n January 2006, ... former Enron adviser Paul Krugman wrote this:

I know about a health care system that has been highly successful in containing costs, yet provides excellent care. And the story of this system's success provides a helpful corrective to anti-government ideology. For the government doesn't just pay the bills in this system—it runs the hospitals and clinics.

No, I'm not talking about some faraway country. The system in question is our very own Veterans Health Administration, whose success story is one of the best-kept secrets in the American policy debate.

Jonathan Tobin notes the faux outrage of the president.

... Nor is there any indication that Obama or anyone else in this administration is capable of seeing that perhaps the reason for the systemic problems at the VA is the reliance on government health-care institutions burdened by bloated bureaucracies. Given Obama's almost religious devotion to big government, don't expect that this president can wrap his brain around the right fix to a problem that may require a complete reform of this system and a switch to a vouchers scheme that would end the spectacle of veterans waiting weeks or months for the health care they need.

For the president to emerge from a meeting about this controversy praising the good services millions get from the VA and speaking of how much Shinseki cares about veterans does nothing to divert the American people from understanding how much Obama has failed as a leader. Nothing said today will enhance the confidence of the public or of veterans that this situation is being handled properly or that the president has the ability to act to stem a crisis in the making. It took him five and a half years to realize that he had to do something more than talk about the

need to help veterans. In the meantime, more than 40 died. There's no telling how many more will suffer and how many other scandals will pop up in the two and a half years he has left in office. But no matter what the total turns out to be, no one should expect anything more than lip service and belated concern from an absentee president.

Jennifer Rubin speculates on what conservative reform of the failed liberal state might look like.

Whether it is the Department of Veterans Affairs, Medicaid, student loans or any other mismanaged and excessively expensive aspect of the liberal welfare state, the left's answer to any reform proposal is invariably, "No, you're trying to destroy it!" To try to reform these programs is, in the left's eyes, an attempt to hurt the poor, sick, disadvantaged and powerless. The recipients in the current system may not get good care or students may be weighed down with huge debt and no useful degree, but liberals are content so long as more and more taxpayer money is poured into failing programs. Likewise, Medicare and Social Security can crowd out all other domestic programs and be on the road to bankruptcy, but reformers who attempt to make it sustainable for the long haul are accused of throwing Granny over the cliff.

The collapse of the welfare state and the instinctive liberal reaction to defend ferociously the status quo are part of the motivation for the reform conservative movement that is shifting the GOP's agenda from indiscriminately cutting government to rethinking government. At a panel at the [American Enterprise Institute](#) (a prior panel and speech by the Senate minority leader are described [here](#)), a set of conservative scholars discussed a new policy initiative, "[Room to Grow: Conservative Reforms for Limited Government and a Thriving Middle Class](#)."

One of its authors, Yuval Levin, explains in the book's introduction: "The fundamentally prescriptive, technocratic approach to American society inherent in the logic of the Left's policy thinking is a poor fit for American life at any scale. The liberal welfare state ultimately cannot be had at an affordable price. It is not the architecture of one or another particular program that makes it unsustainable. It is unsustainable because the system as a whole must feed off of the innovative, decentralized vitality of American life, yet it undermines both the moral and the economic foundations of that vitality." In other words, it's bound to fail. ...

Victor Davis Hanson posts on the ethically challenged administration.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki cannot get a handle on the recent scandalous treatment of veterans in VA hospitals, where more than 40 sick men were allowed to die without proper follow-up treatment. A cover-up allegedly followed. When the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal broke under the George W. Bush administration, heads rolled. So far, Shinseki seems immune from similar accountability.

Almost nothing that former secretary of health and human services Kathleen Sebelius promised before, during, or after the implementation of the ill-starred Affordable Care Act came true. She was also cited by the U.S. Office of Special Counsel for violating the Hatch Act, as she improperly campaigned for Obama's reelection while serving as a cabinet secretary.

Former IRS official Lois Lerner used the federal tax-collection agency to go after groups deemed too conservative. She invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid telling Congress the whole truth.

Susan Rice, former U.N. ambassador and now national-security adviser, flat-out deceived the public in five television appearances about the Benghazi catastrophe. She insisted that the deaths of four Americans were due to a spontaneous riot induced by a reactionary video maker — even though she had access to intelligence fingering al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists as the culprits who planned the attack on the anniversary of 9/11. ...

National Review

[The Cloud in the Machine](#)

Or, you can never have the same traffic-jam twice.

by Kevin Williamson

Politics is not always about somebody getting his way and somebody else failing to get his way. Consider the case of the Veterans Affairs hospitals: Nobody wanted this outcome. That outcome, recall, is a great many dead veterans, the result of medical and managerial malpractice. Democrats did not want the hospitals that care for our veterans to be catastrophically mismanaged while administrators [set about systematically destroying the evidence of their incompetence](#), and Republicans did not want that, either. Independents are firmly opposed to negligently killing veterans. It doesn't poll well. Everybody is so opposed to that outcome that we created a cabinet-level secretariat to prevent it and installed as its boss Eric Shinseki, a highly regarded former Army general. We spent very large sums of money, billions of dollars, to prevent this outcome, [almost trebling VA spending](#) from 2000 to 2013 even as the total number of veterans declined by several million.

Nobody wanted these veterans dead, but dead they are. How is it possible that the government of the United States of America — arguably the most powerful organization of any sort in the history of the human race, in possession of a navy, a nuclear arsenal, and a vast police apparatus — cannot ensure that its own employees and contractors do not negligently kill its other employees and former employees? Never mind providing veterans with world-class medical care — the federal government cannot even prevent bureaucratic homicide. All of the political will is behind having a decent VA, and there is nothing to be gained politically from having a horrific one. How can it be that, with everybody free to vote as he pleases and to propose such policies as please him, we end up with what nobody wants?

There will be plenty of personal culpability to go around as this mess all comes to light, beginning with President Obama, who offered himself to the American people as, among other things, a competent authority on the management of health care. He promised the country openness and transparency but has worked assiduously against those qualities, which carry not only ethical weight but practical value as well: Open and transparent arrangements are much less prone to abuse, especially abuse of the sort that results in death, because observation is linked to accountability, which is why police officers make so many wrongful arrests and destroy so much evidence in response to the perfectly legal act of videotaping them at work. ([E.g.](#)) The right thing to do, in response to 40 and counting veterans killed through negligence on his watch, is for President Obama to resign. A man with any self-respect would do it; a country with any self-respect would demand it. But that of course is not what is going to happen.

What is going to happen is an epic episode of blame-dodging, evasion, angry accusations, outright lies, indignant harrumphing by [mind-killed partisans](#), etc. At some point, there will be a series of exchanges that can be summarized: “Republicans endorse x policy for Veterans Affairs, while Democrats endorse y policy.” People will have very strong feelings about x vs. y. They will feel so strongly, in fact, that they will forget that nobody endorsed the state of affairs at the VA that preceded x or y, that it was nobody’s policy for the organization to be mired in incompetency and indifference so cruel that it borders on the psychotic. (Gangrene deaths — 150 years after Middleton Goldsmith figured out how to treat gangrene in army hospitals, and our veterans are still dying from it.) It will not occur to very many of the people with a strong emotional stake in that debate that it does not matter whether we choose x or y if that is the beginning and end of the conversation. There is a prior conversation that must take precedence, one in which we answer a more fundamental question: How confident should we be that our policies will produce the desired outcomes?

Our political discourse assumes, sometimes implicitly but often explicitly, that there exists a predictable, linear, straightforward relationship between the formal enactment of a given policy and the real-world outcomes that will be experienced as a result of it. This is a convenient fiction, and sometimes even the authors of that fiction roll their eyes at their own work, as when the Congressional Budget Office scored the Affordable Care Act and then added the caveat that its analysts did not believe that the policy would be implemented the way the law’s authors intended and the White House promised, thereby communicating that its report should be consumed only in saline solution.

Politics is mostly words about words, but it has real-world consequences, and death is not an uncommon one. The truth, which in Washington is an unspeakable truth, is that almost the entirety of our conversation about politics is predicated on a fundamental error in our understanding of reality. Unlike a certain Entity with Whom presidents and senators sometimes seem to confuse themselves, politicians cannot speak reality into being. (“Let there be . . . health care.”) The situation at the VA should not surprise us; what did we expect, having no way of even knowing what we should have expected? This outcome was at least as likely as any other, and certainly more likely than one in which reality matched policy through some obscure divine office unknown to us.

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Democritus was the Greek philosopher who first imagined the atom, some time around 460 b.c. He thought that if you broke a rock in half, broke one of those halves into even smaller pieces, and kept on going, eventually you would arrive at an indivisible unit of matter, which he called the atom (ἄτομος, “indivisible”). He had a great many ideas about atoms: They are everywhere, eternal, indivisible, always in motion, etc. And the Greek world yawned, and the entire world continued yawning for about 2,000 years. Nobody gave a fig about his atoms.

Then, in the 19th century, a couple of Englishmen went hunting for them. First was John Dalton, who was the first to produce experimental evidence for the existence of the atom, and then came J. J. Thomson, who discovered the electron and described the structure of the atom, which he theorized was something like a plum pudding. And then followed a remarkable period: Just a few years after Thomson found the electron, Max Planck discovered the quantum, and five years after that, Albert Einstein published his work on the photoelectric effect. Just a few years later, Ernest Rutherford performed his famous gold-foil experiment and described the

atom you know from high-school chemistry class: electrons orbiting a nucleus like planets orbiting the sun in Nicolaus Copernicus's model of the universe.

That similarity was not lost on Rutherford or on those who came after, and most of us, when we think of an atom, think of Rutherford's miniature solar system. The macro-micro universe is interesting to the philosophically inclined and deeply compelling to a [certain class of stoner](#). It is very appealing, this infinitely scalable model of the universe. In the false belief that we can comprehend it all at once, we feel a little like that Entity with Whom politicians confuse themselves. There is a reason that the orrery (**scale model of the solar system**) is so arresting to the imagination of a certain kind of man — it is the very image of what the politician imagines the universe to be like:



The unspoken promise is that of reduction: To understand the whole, understand its parts. Understand the atom and you can build an explanation of the universe. Those ideas could be seductive to scientists, but they were practically opiates for politicians. We still hear the unhappy echo of the early-20th-century hymns to totalitarianism in our political campaigns — “How shall we govern? With science!” Copernicus's neat solar system, Rutherford's neat atom — with a world that simple, how difficult could it be to shape it to our own desires?

But the universe, as it turns out, is not like that, and an atom is not like that, as Niels Bohr set about demonstrating just after Rutherford published his work. It is not a miniature clockwork universe at all, but a fuzzy, not-quite-there, not-quite-not-there proposition, and, adding insult to poor Democritus's neglect, it's not even indivisible. Pretty soon you're into the world of

probability clouds and quarks and fermions and other things that will make your head hurt. If your intellectual inclination tilts more heavily toward poetry than physics, you will soon find yourself longing for that clockwork atom and that clockwork universe, neat little non-elliptical orbits and all.

And that is precisely why we all have the simple, false model of the atom in our heads. (Or, in the case of Doctor Manhattan, [on our heads](#).) It is the reason we have a simple, false model of the universe in our heads, too.

We look at clouds. We dream of machines.

The simple, machine-like models of the atom and the solar system are good enough for most non-physics purposes. And even physicists do not have to account for the entire complexity of a given system for every end. If you want to know what a hydrogen atom is up to in a water molecule, you don't necessarily have to look at it on the subatomic level. You know those subatomic particles are there, but you don't have to worry about them. For some purposes, and on some level, an atom does behave like a simple, mechanical thing. The behavior of a water molecule is fairly predictable and mechanical; the behavior of a bunch of water molecules in an individual cloud is not; the behavior of clouds in large-scale weather systems is fairly predictable; the behavior of any given rainstorm is not; it gets cold in the winter like clockwork, but any individual blizzard is unpredictable. And that simple mechanical hydrogen atom looks more like a cloud the more closely you look at it. Whether it looks like a cloud or like a machine depends on the level at which you wish to examine the phenomenon. That cumulonimbus creeping across the skyline, and the water molecules that make it up, and the atoms that make those up, and the global weather of which it is a part: a cloud in a machine in a cloud in a machine . . .

Put another way, the weather is a product of a complex mix of predictable and unpredictable phenomena. As Neil Johnson puts it in his 2007 book *Two's Company, Three Is Complexity*, complex systems share a number of common features: The system has many interacting agents, their behavior is influenced by feedback and they can adapt, the system is open to environmental influence, the system evolves in a way that gives it a sense of being alive, it exhibits emergent phenomena that often are surprising and extreme, it has no controller, and "the system shows a complicated mix of ordered and disordered behavior." Professor Johnson, a complexity scholar and a physicist by training, has studied everything from financial-market behavior and quantum behavior to insurgency warfare. He describes complexity, perhaps too cutely, as "the science of all sciences," one that represents a slap in the face for traditional reductionist approaches to understanding the world. For example, even a detailed knowledge of the specifications of a car's engine, colour, and shape is useless when trying to predict where and when traffic jams will arise in a new road system. Likewise, understanding individuals' personalities in a crowded bar would give little indication as to what large-scale brawls might develop. Within medical science, it is likely that no amount of understanding of an individual brain cell is likely to help us understand how to prevent or cure Alzheimer's disease.

Which is to say, it is showing that the orrery is still only a toy, the clockwork universe an error in understanding.

If it seems that we have wandered pretty far afield of the VA hospitals and those dead veterans, we haven't, really. We're coming back around to them.

In his Philosophical Essay on Probabilities, the early-19th-century philosopher Pierre-Simon Laplace considered the question of what it would take to understand the clockwork universe then regnant in the minds of intellectuals. The imaginary intelligence, which came to be known as “Laplace’s Demon,” would simply need to know the position and momentum ([yeah, yeah](#)) of every particle in the universe at a given time, and from there it could extrapolate the future in its entirety:

We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.

“Similarly,” Stephen Hawking writes, “if you knew it in the future, you could calculate what it must have been in the past. The advent of quantum theory in the 1920s reduced the amount one could predict by half,” and it’s been going down since. Around the same time as quantum theory was being developed, in the field of economics Ludwig von Mises was developing a complexity-based theory of his own, the famous socialist calculation problem — arguing that, without the information communicated by market prices, economic calculation is not inefficient but impossible, and that the so-called scientific socialists, looking down at their five-year plans and their model villages like an archduke playing with his orrery, could not, in fact, actually do what they purported to want to do: rationally manage industries and national economies.

Markets, the brain, and weather are among the textbook examples of complex systems, and they have something in common: Their behavior cannot be calculated beforehand. There is no Laplace’s Demon, especially not for human systems. You never have the same party twice, or the same traffic jam. “The behavior of some simple, deterministic systems can be impossible, even in principle, to predict in the long term,” writes computer scientist Melanie Mitchell of the Santa Fe Institute.

So, back to my original question: How confident should we be that our policies will produce the desired outcomes? That will depend in some part on how complex the system is that you are attempting to influence. Housing and mortgage markets are very complex, and politicians’ efforts to turn them to their own ends went very badly in 2008, and will go very badly again in the future. Health-insurance markets and medicine are both very complex, and we see how political efforts to manage those have been going.

Operating hospitals is a complex business, too. Consider a counterexample: Our food-stamp program has many problems, but imagine what a Hieronymus Bosch nightmare it would be if, instead of the current practice of giving poor people vouchers for food, we applied the VA model and attempted to have the government deliver the service itself rather than simply paying for it. That would mean federally operated farms, ranches, and slaughterhouses, government grocery stores, warehouses, distribution centers, transportation networks, etc., all managed with the competence and decency exhibited by the VA. Rather than trying to politically steer the extraordinarily complex system of producing and distributing food — rather than biting off way more than we can cognitively chew — we instead chose the relatively simple method, giving poor people vouchers for food. Of course that has [its problems and unintended consequences](#), but they are milder than, say, national famine, which is probably what would come of government-run agriculture. We let the complex problem of food production meet the complex solution of the market.

Not every regulation or government program is doomed to fail. But we might consider the slightly terrifying possibility that when government does get something right, it does so by accident, temporarily, and for reasons that it cannot understand or replicate. This may be why the sheer volume of law and regulation has been climbing so rapidly: Intuiting its own inefficacy, Washington is throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks. The Entity with Whom politicians sometimes confuse themselves needed only ten commandments, not the ten thousand a year that Washington produces. Some of those coming down in the near future will be intended to reform the VA. The rational thing to do would be to abolish it. We'd be far better off paying veterans' medical bills out of the Treasury than trying to operate a network of hospitals and clinics. And no matter what Washington promises to do to solve this problem, it is a good bet that the policy enacted will not produce the result intended. Reform is a random walk.

Another feature of complex systems is that some of them are very sensitive to initial conditions, as expressed by the butterfly effect. It may be the case that things have gone as well as they have for us in the United States not because of any current policy or because of the unique genius and saintliness of our national leadership as currently constituted, but simply because the right people with the right prejudices did the right things for a relatively short period of time in the 18th century, and what we have now is very little more than the compounded returns on that cultural windfall. That seems to me a more likely explanation for our relatively happy and secure place in the world than that we were led to this point by the kind of thinking, and the kind of men, who brought us the VA hospitals and those dead veterans.

Kevin D. Williamson is roving correspondent for National Review.

Roger L. Simon

[The Veterans Scandal: Socialized Medicine on Trial](#)

Many have wondered about Barack Obama's prolonged silence concerning the disastrous situation at the Veterans Administration hospitals and then his odd detached demeanor (well, maybe not that odd for him) when he finally did discuss it at a press conference.

The answer is simple. His lifetime dream of a free public (single payer) healthcare system for all just disintegrated in front of him. Forget the wildly ambitious and pervasive "Affordable Care Act," the government couldn't even handle the health of our wounded servicemen, acknowledged for years to be by far the group most deserving of medical attention in our country. With veterans dying while waiting lists are falsified, it's hard to see government healthcare as anything but incompetent, disgraceful and quite possibly criminal.

Government [has failed utterly](#). Does anyone have any doubt that Halliburton or even the dreaded Koch brothers could have better handled the health of our wounded warriors? Probably almost any business would have. There at least would have been some accountability. (It's interesting to see the quaint Bernie Sanders, the one self-described socialist in the Congress, as opposed to the closeted ones, being the most outspoken defender of VA malfeasance and urging us not to "rush to judgement" on a three page bill.)

But it's not just healthcare, although it's certainly prominent, important and symbolic. The Obama administration has been the best advertisement for libertarianism across the board in recent memory. Government can't handle anything, not even the one thing it *should* handle, the common defense. (It better get it together on that one with Russia and China making a new alliance that might be stronger and more powerful than ever.)

So this VA scandal may call to question a lot of things about our society, if we pay attention and then reach out to others. It should be remembered that many of the veterans who have been mistreated, possibly killed, are members of minorities that traditionally, indeed reflexively, vote Democratic. The Democratic Party's exploitation of black people has been one of the great, virtually unconscionable, tragedies of our time. This may be an opportunity to reach out, a teaching moment, as they say.

People do change (occasionally). When I was kid, I used to fight with my doctor father (a Hubert Humphrey Democrat) about socialized medicine. He had spent time in England and told me that it didn't work even then. A young idealist, I didn't believe him. I came around. Others will. We are in an interesting moment with so much of the liberal-left ethic disintegrating around them. The next couple of years will be historical — one way or the other.

I would be remiss not to point out that both Rand Paul and Andrea Tantaros said substantially the same thing I did — making the analogy between socialized medicine and the VA debacle — on Fox Thursday night.

Truth Revolt

[Left's VA-Worship Comes Back to Bite](#)

It's all fun and games until we discover the secret waiting lists.

by Ben Shapiro

As the fallout from the Veterans Administration cooking of the books and the related deaths of over three dozen veterans continues, President Obama took to the podium on Wednesday to explain that problems at the VA are nothing new. On Wednesday, President Obama took to the podium to first express his tremendous anger – VA Secretary Eric Shinseki was “mad as hell” but President Obama was “madder than hell,” thus winning the rage sweepstakes – and then explained that the VA's issues go back years:

[A]ll of us, whether here in Washington or all across the country, have to stay focused on the larger mission, which is upholding our sacred trust to all of our veterans, bringing the VA system into the 21st century, which is not an easy task.... caring for our veterans is not an issue that popped up in recent weeks. Some of the problems with respect to how veterans are able to access the benefits that they've earned, that's not a new issue.

Obama's statement, however, was remarkably short on actual solutions for the VA. Throwing money at the problem hasn't fixed it: using 2011 dollars, America spent \$88.8 billion on the VA in 2007, and \$125.3 billion on the VA in 2012.

And herein lies the problem for the left: the failures at the VA, including its bureaucratic incompetence, its waiting lists, and its deaths, all debunk the notion that a government-run

healthcare system will work. It's a fresh slap in the face to all those commentators who, in pushing Obamacare, endorsed the VA as a model.

There are some pretty big names on that list. [Paul Krugman in 2011](#) wrote of the VA's "huge success story":

Multiple surveys have found the VHA providing better care than most Americans receive, even as the agency has held cost increases well below those facing Medicare and private insurers...the VHA is an integrated system, which provides health care as well as paying for it. So it's free from the perverse incentives created when doctors and hospitals profit from expensive tests and procedures, whether or not those procedures actually make medical sense.

Krugman added, "Yes, this is 'socialized medicine'...But it works, and suggests what it will take to solve the troubles of US health care more broadly."

Similarly, Nicholas Kristof of the *Times* [wrote in 2009](#):

Take the hospital system run by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the largest integrated health system in the United States. It is fully government run, much more "socialized medicine" than is Canadian health care with its private doctors and hospitals. And the system for veterans is by all accounts one of the [best-performing and most cost-effective](#) elements in the American medical establishment.

Just last year, Uwe Reinhardt of Princeton wrote in the pages of the *Times*:

Remarkably, Americans of all political stripes have long reserved for our veterans the purest form of socialized medicine, the vast health system operated by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (generally known as the [V.A. health system](#)). If socialized medicine is as bad as so many on this side of the Atlantic claim, why have both political parties ruling this land deemed socialized medicine the best health system for military veterans? Or do they just not care about them?

Or try the [RAND Corporation](#): "If other health care providers followed the V.A.'s lead, it would be a major step toward improving the quality of care across the U.S. health care system."

Then there's Voxsplainer Ezra Klein, who [wrote](#) in the *Washington Post* in 2009 that "expanding the Veterans Health Administration to non-veterans" was "one of my favorite ideas."

Jonathan Golob of *The Seattle Stranger* has written in the same vein: "Every time I read about a Teabagger ranting about how socialized medicine will destroy this country I think of the VA system. There it is, a huge and vastly important universal healthcare system—government run, single payer and therefore *socialist*—right here in the brave and privatized United States: The Veterans Affairs hospitals."

The left has routinely used the VA as a club to wield in favor of socialized medicine. No wonder they're running scared from the current VA scandal – which, as President Obama rightly notes, has been under way for decades.

Power Line

[Down Memory Lane: Remember When Liberals Said the VA Was Proof that Socialism Works?](#)

by John Hinderaker

At the [Wall Street Journal](#), James Taranto pulls together liberals' endorsements of Veterans Administration health care. It goes beyond just claiming that VA medicine was top notch; liberals often claimed that the supposed success of the VA is proof that government is superior to the private sector. Taranto titles his post "Socialist Supermodel." You should read it all, but here are a few highlights:

[I]n January 2006, ... former Enron adviser Paul Krugman wrote this:

I know about a health care system that has been highly successful in containing costs, yet provides excellent care. And the story of this system's success provides a helpful corrective to anti-government ideology. For the government doesn't just pay the bills in this system—it runs the hospitals and clinics.

No, I'm not talking about some faraway country. The system in question is our very own Veterans Health Administration, whose success story is one of the best-kept secrets in the American policy debate.

The "secret" of the VA's "success," Krugman argued, "is the fact that it's a universal, integrated system."

Timothy Noah, then with Slate.com, proclaimed in 2005: "Socialized medicine has been tried in the United States, and it has proven superior to health care supplied by the private sector. . . . The socialized medicine to which I refer is the complex of hospitals managed by the Veterans Administration." His post, "The Triumph of Socialized Medicine," was based on a Washington Monthly article by Phillip Longman, which carried the slightly more modest headline "The Best Care Anywhere." And in 2009, Ezra Klein revealed that "one of my favorite ideas" is "expanding the Veterans Health Administration to non-veterans."

Do you suppose these liberals, and others, will acknowledge how wrong they were about the VA, and consider what the implications might be for their government-knows-best philosophy?

Just kidding.

Contentions

[The Record Versus Obama's VA Outrage](#)

by Jonathan S. Tobin

President Obama spoke to the nation this morning to address the scandal at the Veterans Administration. Adopting a stern and authoritative tone, Obama expressed outrage about the mistreatment of veterans and determination to get to the bottom of the problem. This was entirely appropriate, but coming weeks after the news about widespread misconduct began to seep into the headlines and more than a year after the chair of the House Veterans Affairs

Committee wrote to him to bring this issue to his attention, the president's actions must still be considered too little and too late.

The president's decision to wait for the Inspector General's report before making policy decisions is probably wise. Nobody knows just how widespread the cooking of the books at VA institutions has been or how many executives have been gaming the system to generate bonuses for themselves and others or how many wounded or ill veterans have been harmed by being forced to wait because of this misconduct. But we do already know a few salient facts about the way the administration has handled the VA and the scandal. As with every other scandal or catastrophe that has occurred in the last five and a half years, Obama was an absentee head of government who let things slide here despite warnings until the political consequences became clear to him.

We know that despite flaunting his supposed concern for veterans since his first presidential campaign in 2008, this commander-in-chief has allowed the agency tasked with their care to be driven into a ditch. We also know that the president seems incapable of holding Cabinet officials or anyone close to him accountable for their incompetence. That Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki is, even now, still holding on to his job despite presiding over this mess for years gives the lie to any talk of accountability coming from the president. The fact that the agency attempted to get off the hook by merely firing one of Shinseki's subordinates was not only proof of how tone deaf the administration is about the importance of this scandal but demonstrated how resistant it is to hold political appointees responsible for their actions.

Even more outrageous was the president's concern today that no one should use the VA as a "political football." Using straw men to bolster his rhetorical position is nothing new for this president. But in this instance it is particularly off key since Democrats and Republicans have been lining up this week to express anger about the VA. But the talk of keeping politics out of the discussion isn't an appeal for bipartisanship so much as it is one focused on avoiding accountability for the man at the top of the government food chain.

Nor is there any indication that Obama or anyone else in this administration is capable of seeing that perhaps the reason for the systemic problems at the VA is the reliance on government health-care institutions burdened by bloated bureaucracies. Given Obama's almost religious devotion to big government, don't expect that this president can wrap his brain around the right fix to a problem that may require a complete reform of this system and a switch to a vouchers scheme that would end the spectacle of veterans waiting weeks or months for the health care they need.

For the president to emerge from a meeting about this controversy praising the good services millions get from the VA and speaking of how much Shinseki cares about veterans does nothing to divert the American people from understanding how much Obama has failed as a leader. Nothing said today will enhance the confidence of the public or of veterans that this situation is being handled properly or that the president has the ability to act to stem a crisis in the making. It took him five and a half years to realize that he had to do something more than talk about the need to help veterans. In the meantime, more than 40 died. There's no telling how many more will suffer and how many other scandals will pop up in the two and a half years he has left in office. But no matter what the total turns out to be, no one should expect anything more than lip service and belated concern from an absentee president.

Right Turn

Reform conservatives tackle the failed liberal welfare state

by Jennifer Rubin

Whether it is the Department of Veterans Affairs, Medicaid, student loans or any other mismanaged and excessively expensive aspect of the liberal welfare state, the left's answer to any reform proposal is invariably, "*No, you're trying to destroy it!*" To try to reform these programs is, in the left's eyes, an attempt to hurt the poor, sick, disadvantaged and powerless. The recipients in the current system may not get good care or students may be weighed down with huge debt and no useful degree, but liberals are content so long as more and more taxpayer money is poured into failing programs. Likewise, Medicare and Social Security can crowd out all other domestic programs and be on the road to bankruptcy, but reformers who attempt to make it sustainable for the long haul are accused of throwing Granny over the cliff.

The collapse of the welfare state and the instinctive liberal reaction to defend ferociously the status quo are part of the motivation for the reform conservative movement that is shifting the GOP's agenda from indiscriminately cutting government to rethinking government. At a panel at the [American Enterprise Institute](#) (a prior panel and speech by the Senate minority leader are described [here](#)), a set of conservative scholars discussed a new policy initiative, "[Room to Grow: Conservative Reforms for Limited Government and a Thriving Middle Class](#)."

One of its authors, Yuval Levin, explains in the book's introduction: "The fundamentally prescriptive, technocratic approach to American society inherent in the logic of the Left's policy thinking is a poor fit for American life at any scale. The liberal welfare state ultimately cannot be had at an affordable price. It is not the architecture of one or another particular program that makes it unsustainable. It is unsustainable because the system as a whole must feed off of the innovative, decentralized vitality of American life, yet it undermines both the moral and the economic foundations of that vitality." In other words, it's bound to fail.

Examples of the problem abound. The VA is close to a European, socialized medicine program as you are going to see in the U.S., and it is killing people. Medicaid is rife with fraud and offers care much worse than non-Medicaid patients receive (in part because the rates don't attract the best physicians). We've spent hundreds of billions on education and our kids do worse in math than do children in Poland and Vietnam. The libertarian would say: "*Get rid of it all, and everything will be better!*" The reform conservative says, "*Let's see if we can do these things better, or better yet, move more people off Medicaid, for example, and into good-paying jobs.*" A good example of the latter mindset is Medicare Part D, a GOP reform that used market forces to keep costs down and make drugs accessible to the elderly. Liberals and libertarians fought it tooth and nail, but it works and people like it.

Liberals hate this sort of conservative talk and would rather spend more money for worse results. Why? We can be cynical and say they have a political dependence on civil servants and want those people to stay employed. Levin instead suggests that it is inherent in their vision of government: "The Left tends to champion public programs that consolidate the application of technical expertise: that try to take on social problems by managing large portions of society as if they were systems in need of better organization and direction. Again, it views government as organizing the interactions of individuals."

Hand in hand with this go a few liberal habits of mind. First, it's all about inputs. How many dollars, how many meetings, how many people served. When the dollars in a budget go down

(or merely fail to rise), liberals holler that you are hurting the poor, without regard to whether the current programs are doing the job. The outputs — people out of poverty, people in paying jobs — aren't even measured in many instances. (This isn't just in domestic policy. Ask a State Department employee what he has "accomplished," and he'll reel off a list of memos, meetings and trips.) Second, it imagines that the smartest technocrats can figure it all out and micromanage a vast, diverse and complex country. You get Obamacare, which has federal bureaucrats telling you what an "acceptable" insurance policy is and what is, as the president put it, a "crap" plan that shouldn't be sold.

The result of all this is a very big liberal welfare state that does a very bad job of addressing people's problems. Oh, and it drives us into deeper and deeper debt. That is the bad news that contributes to the sense that government doesn't work for anyone who really needs it. The good news is that the exhaustion of the liberal welfare state, a victim of its own flawed organizing principles, offers the opportunity for a vision of government that is better, more effective and more limited (at least at the federal level).

That, one hopes is the conservative discussion — along with the collapse of American credibility in the world — for the next couple of years and throughout the presidential campaign. As Levin argues, "This involves not a return to some fabled past but a modernization of our antiquated, lumbering, bureaucratic, mid-twentieth century governing institutions that enables a leaner and more responsive twenty-first-century government to help a complex and diverse twenty-first-century society solve its problems. By recovering the animating principles of American government, we can overcome the flabby lethargy of the progressive welfare state." It requires that the right give up pining for a pre-New-Deal-sized government and recognize that markets and private charity can't do *everything*.

It might also convince a majority of Americans that Republicans don't hate the poor. In fact, if they love their fellow Americans enough to fix government in order to improve their lives and aid in their pursuit of success, people might actually vote for them.

National Review

[The Obama Administration's Ethics Problem](#)

The executive branch continues to be plagued by scandal after scandal.

by Victor Davis Hanson

Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki cannot get a handle on the recent scandalous treatment of veterans in VA hospitals, where more than 40 sick men were allowed to die without proper follow-up treatment. A cover-up allegedly followed. When the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal broke under the George W. Bush administration, heads rolled. So far, Shinseki seems immune from similar accountability.

Almost nothing that former secretary of health and human services Kathleen Sebelius promised before, during, or after the implementation of the ill-starred Affordable Care Act came true. She was also cited by the U.S. Office of Special Counsel for violating the Hatch Act, as she improperly campaigned for Obama's reelection while serving as a cabinet secretary.

Former IRS official Lois Lerner used the federal tax-collection agency to go after groups deemed too conservative. She invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid telling Congress the whole truth.

Susan Rice, former U.N. ambassador and now national-security adviser, flat-out deceived the public in five television appearances about the Benghazi catastrophe. She insisted that the deaths of four Americans were due to a spontaneous riot induced by a reactionary video maker — even though she had access to intelligence fingering al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists as the culprits who planned the attack on the anniversary of 9/11.

Rice recently blamed Obama foreign-policy failures on domestic political polarization. But that is best described as the give and take of democracy and was once thought to be our foreign-policy strength.

Rice also knows little history. In 2007, in the midst of the surge, when Americans were fighting for their lives to stabilize Iraq, then-senator Hillary Clinton implied that the commanding general in Iraq, General David Petraeus, was a veritable liar. Senate majority leader Harry Reid agreed and declared that the war was already lost. Then-presidential candidate Barack Obama prematurely wrote off the politically inconvenient surge as a failure. Was Rice then shocked that “polarization” affected foreign policy?

Former secretary of state Hillary Clinton left office with American foreign policy in shambles. She has been unable to make the argument that a single initiative — reset with Russia, lead from behind in Libya, red lines on Syria, deadlines to Iran, complete withdrawal from Iraq, pressure on the Israelis, outreach to radical Islam and Latin American Communist dictatorships — had met with success.

Clinton infamously dismissed the lingering mysteries surrounding the Benghazi deaths with “What difference at this point does it make?” She also refused, despite numerous entreaties, to place the now-infamous Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram on a State Department terrorist watch list.

Eric Holder is the first attorney general to have been held in contempt of Congress. Aside from his divisive language (he called America “a nation of cowards” and referred to African Americans as “my people”), Holder always seems to find himself at the center of scandals. He permitted the federal monitoring of Associated Press journalists. He green-lighted the “Fast and Furious” gun-running scam. He has failed to bring to account rogue IRS officials. Holder is the most morally compromised attorney general since Nixon appointee John Mitchell.

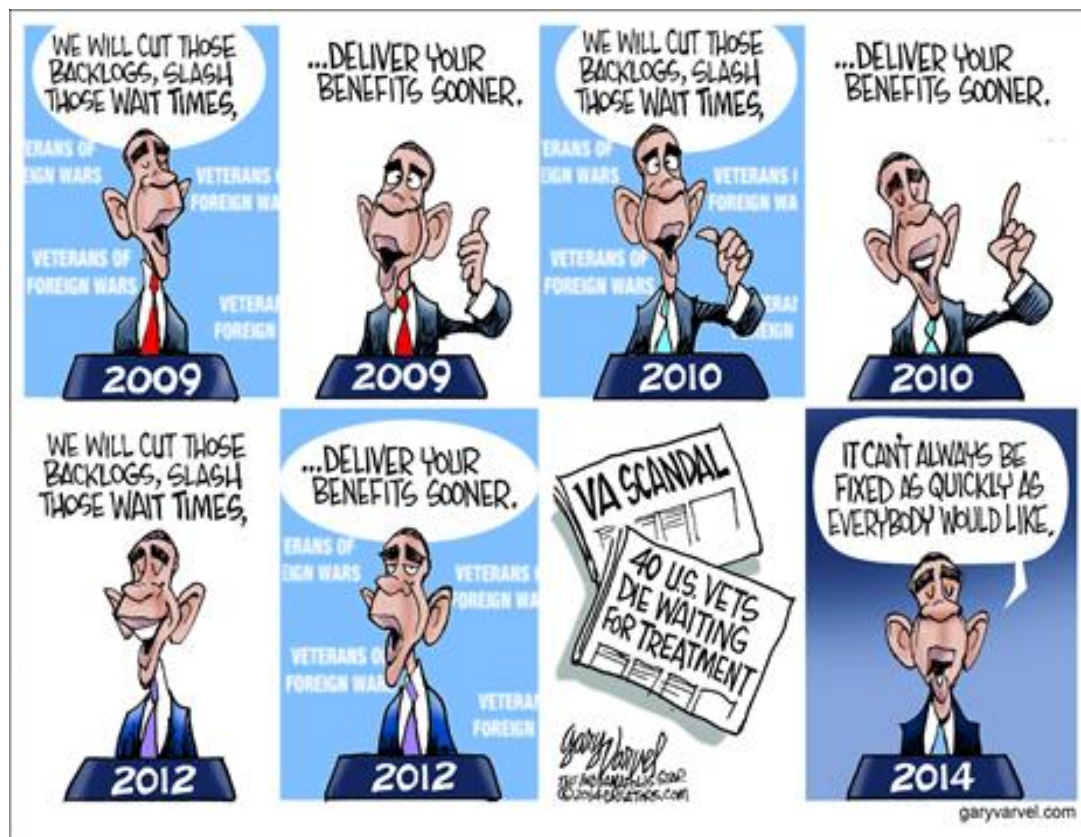
Do we remember former EPA administrator Lisa Jackson? Her case was as unprofessional as it was surreal. Jackson fabricated for herself an alternate identity as a mid-level EPA employee. In communications, she used a fake e-mail address and name, and then unethically honored her own alter ego (“Richard Windsor”) as a “scholar of ethical behavior.” Who could have dreamed up such an unethical caper?

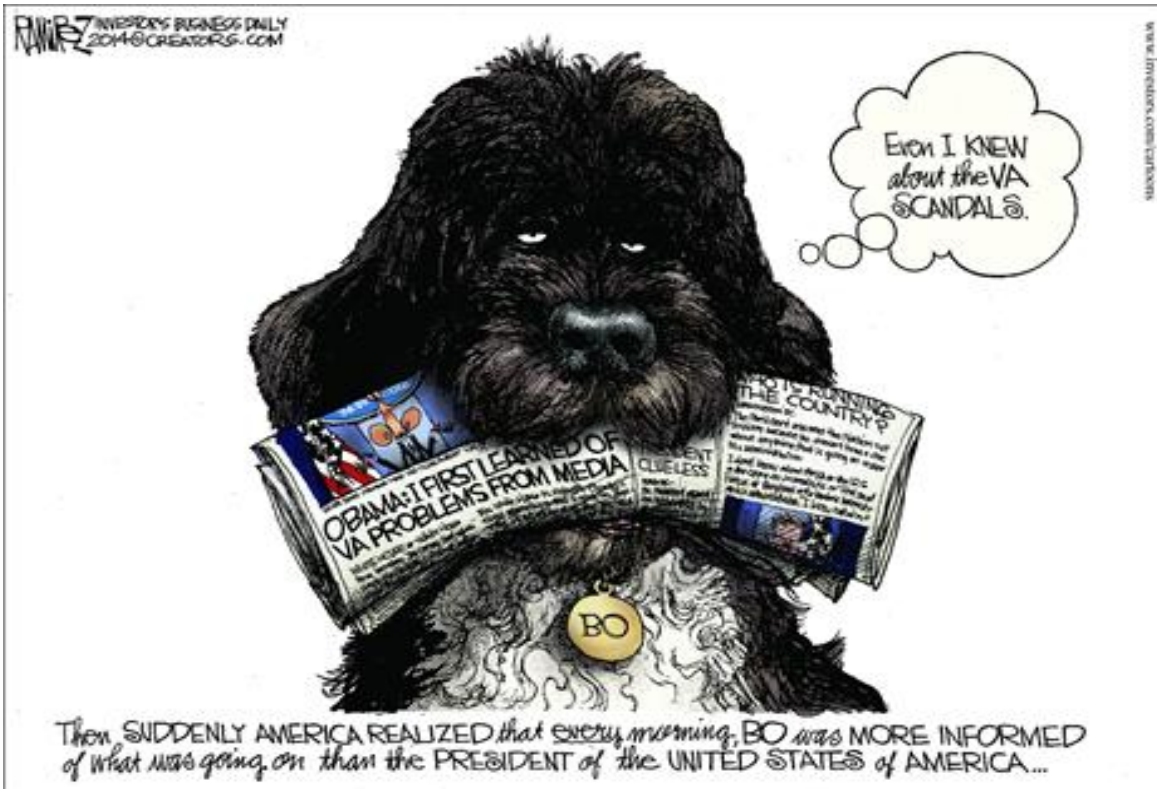
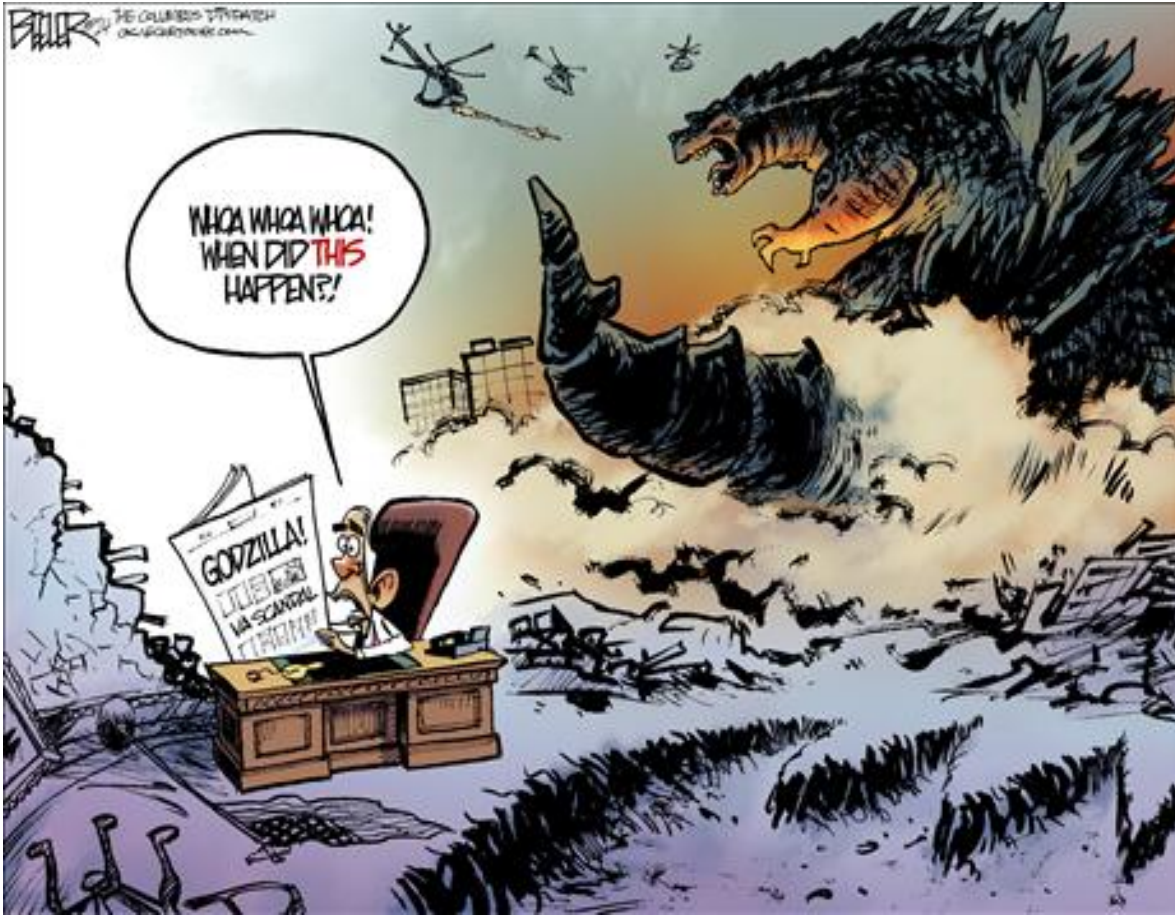
What has happened to NASA? We are currently trying to isolate Vladimir Putin for his territorial aggressions and yet beseeching the Russians to send our astronauts into space. Perhaps NASA administrator Charles Bolden should not have boasted that one of NASA’s “foremost” goals was “to reach out to the Muslim world” and “to help them feel good about their historic contribution to science, math, and engineering.” Americans might have preferred Bolden to stick with rockets.

Former secretary of energy Steven Chu left under a cloud of controversy involving crony capitalists' getting millions of dollars in green loans that produced nothing but failed companies. Former labor secretary Hilda Solis slipped out of office, battling accusations of Hatch Act violations and freebie rides on private jets from insider union friends. Former top officials such as Timothy Geithner, Peter Orszag, and Larry Summers have given new meaning to the revolving door between Wall Street and the White House.

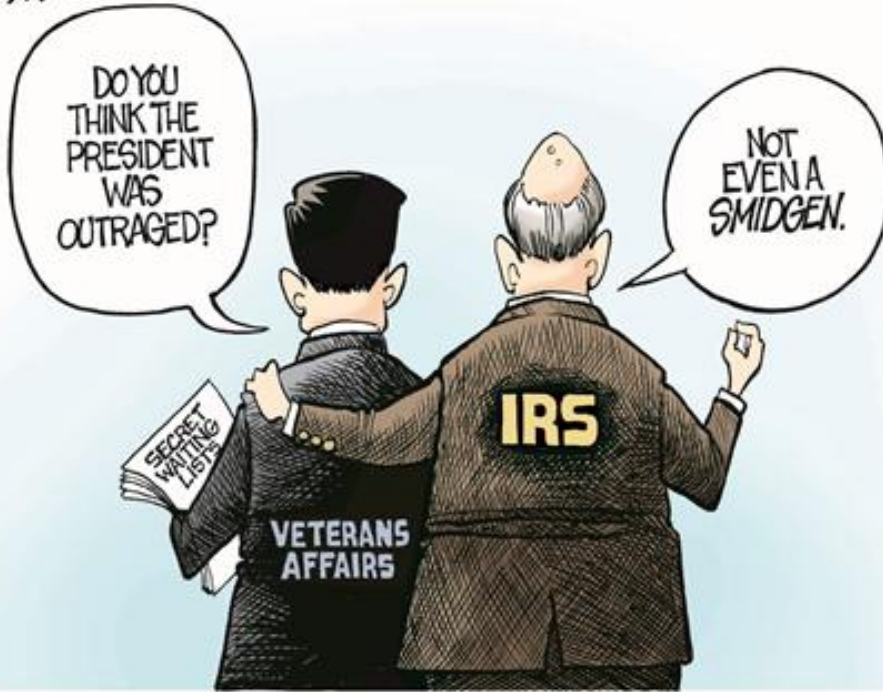
The common denominator?

In all of these cases, politics trumped ethics. Because Obama professed that he was on the side of the proverbial people, administrators assumed that they had a blank check to do or say what they wished without much media audit. The mystery is not whether some administration officials were incompetent or unethical or both, but whether there are any left who are not.

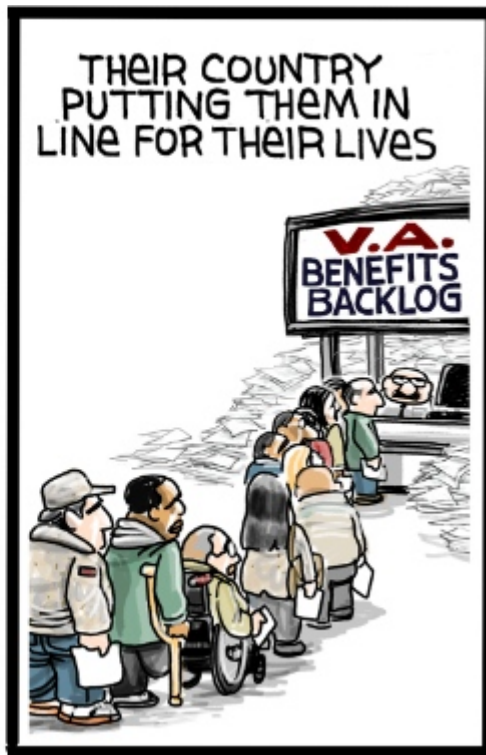




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There are 7,367 employees of the U.S. Veterans Administration whose salaries exceed \$100,000 per year.

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