



## SCUTTLEBUTT STACK – JUNE 4 2014

### HOW THE VA FOSTERED A CULTURE OF GAMING THE SYSTEM

About two years ago, Brian Turner took a job as a scheduling clerk at a Veterans Affairs health clinic in Austin, Texas. A few weeks later, he said, a supervisor came by to instruct him how to cook the books.

"The first time I heard it was actually at my desk. They said, 'You gotta zero out the date. The wait time has to be zeroed out,'" Turner recalled in a phone interview. He said "zeroing out" was a trick to fool the VA's own accountability system, which the bosses up in Washington used to monitor how long patients waited to see the doctor.

This is how it worked: A patient asked for an appointment on a specific day. Turner found the next available time slot. But, often, it was many days later than the patient had wanted.

Would that later date work? If the patient said yes, Turner canceled the whole process and started over. This time, he typed in that the patient had wanted that later date all along. So now, the official wait time was ... a perfect zero days.

It was a lie, of course. But it seemed to be a very important lie, one that the system depended on. "Two to three times a month, you would hear something about it," Turner said — another reminder from supervisors to "zero out." "It wasn't a secret at all."

But all this was apparently a secret to Secretary Eric Shinseki, perched 12 levels above Turner in the VA's towering bureaucracy. Somewhere underneath Shinseki — among the undersecretaries and deputy undersecretaries and bosses and sub-bosses — the fact that clerks were cheating the system was lost.

On Friday, Shinseki resigned and was replaced by his deputy.

But his departure is unlikely to solve the VA's broader problem — a bureaucracy that had been taught, over time, to hide its problems from Washington. Indeed, as President Barack Obama said, one of the agency's key failings was that bad news did not reach Shinseki's level at all.

This is an ironic development: Until recently, the VA had been seen as a Washington success story. In the 1990s, reformers had cut back on its middle management and started using performance data so managers at the top could keep abreast of problems at the bottom.

Then that success began to unravel.

As the VA's caseload increased during two wars, the agency grew thick around the middle again. And then, when the people at the bottom started sending in fiction, the people at the top took it as fact.

"Shinseki goes up to Capitol Hill, and says, 'I didn't know anything.' I find it perfectly believable," said Paul Light, a professor at New York University who has studied the bureaucracy of the VA and others in Washington. "And that's a real problem."

For decades, the VA was a byword for bureaucracy itself, seen as Washington's ultimate paper-pushing, mind-bending hierarchy. That reputation was rooted in the VA's history: It came about because the agency's first leader was an audacious crook.

Charles Forbes was chosen to head the Veterans Bureau by his poker buddy, President Warren Harding, in 1921. He was a poor choice. Forbes took kickbacks. He sold off federal supplies. He wildly misspent taxpayer money — once buying a 100-year supply of floor wax, enough to polish a floor the size of Indiana, for 25 times the regular price (apparently as a favor to a floor wax company).

Eventually, Forbes was caught. The president was unhappy. In 1923, a White House visitor opened the wrong door and found Harding choking Forbes with his bare hands.

"You yellow rat! You double-crossing bastard!" Harding was saying, according to historians. When he noticed the visitor, he let go of Forbes' neck.

Forbes was eventually convicted of bribery and conspiracy. But afterward, the VA's next leaders built in layers of bureaucracy and paperwork — to be sure that nobody would ever have the same freedom to steal.

Seventy years after Forbes was gone, the place was still wrapped in that red tape.

That was clear on the day that Kenneth Kizer — a reformer appointed by President Bill Clinton — arrived at the VA's health service.

"I had to approve reimbursement of a secretary ... purchasing a cable for her computer. I think it was something like \$11 or \$12," Kizer said. There was a form. He had to sign it personally. "Here I'm running this multibillion-dollar organization with — at that time — 200,000 employees. And I'm having to approve reimbursements for somebody."

Kizer set out to change that. He cut back on staffing at VA headquarters in Washington and at regional headquarters. He cut out layers in the chain of command. And he embraced the idea that statistics could allow the agency's leaders to peer around those middlemen and see the bottom from the top.

If patients at a certain hospital were waiting too long for appointments, they wouldn't have to wait for the news to travel from a scheduling clerk to a supervisor, from the supervisor to a chief, from the chief to the hospital director, from the hospital director to the region, and from the region to Washington.

Instead, Washington could just watch the numbers and see for itself.

In theory.

Today, 15 years after he left the VA, Kizer said he's frustrated to see that one of his solutions — that numbers-based system — become the problem itself. Instead of alerting the bosses to problems in the field, it has been perverted to cover them up.

"The measures have become the end," Kizer said in a phone interview from California, "As opposed to a means to an end."

### **Failing to deliver the bad news**

Today, even after a massive influx of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans that increased the number of VA patients by nearly 2 million, the VA health system still does many things well. The satisfaction rate for patients who have been treated by the VA is over 80 percent.

But in many places, veterans were waiting too long to get the care they need.

"When you actually get in the room with a doctor, it's OK. But it's what it takes to get to that point that I think is the problem," said Stewart Hickey, national executive director of the veterans service group AMVETS. "You're sick today. Three weeks from now, you're either cured or you're dead."

One great test of any bureaucracy is whether it can effectively deliver bad news to the top of its chain of command.

In recent years, the VA health system started to fail that test.

"That's what, to me, makes this event so shocking," said Scott Gould, who spent four years as Shinseki's second-in command. Gould left the VA last year. Gould said that Shinseki tried hard to show he was open to bad news. Three times a year, in fact, Shinseki spent a solid week meeting with regional VA medical directors.

That was 63 separate four-hour interviews, every year. But, apparently, his message of openness wasn't enough: In those hours of meetings, nobody told Shinseki what so many people in his system apparently knew.

"I find it shocking that anyone could believe that they were expected to dissemble" about performance measures, Gould said.

This is how the system was failing: As the VA's patient load grew, new layers of middle management slowly reappeared. And all the way at the bottom of the VA's 12-level chain of command were the schedulers — the ones who had to match veterans with doctors.

There were too many veterans. There were too few doctors.

So what should they do?

One choice was to tell the truth — tell the computer how long veterans were waiting for an appointment. That was what Shinseki said he wanted, 12 levels up and miles away in Washington.

But, according to people with experience in scheduling, it was often the opposite of what lower-level bureaucrats wanted. In some cases, local officials' bonuses depended on the numbers looking good. So, at some point years ago, they began asking clerks to change the numbers — with practices like "zeroing it out." Cheating was made easier by the VA's ancient computer systems, designed decades ago.

For many clerks, the choice between the bureaucrats they knew and the secretary they didn't was obvious.

"They would say, 'Change the "desired date" to the date of the appointment,'" said one employee knowledgeable about scheduling practices at a VA medical center. The employee, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation, decided to go along with those requests. Fighting the order to lie wasn't worth it.

"You know, in the end, the veteran got the appointment that was available anyway," the employee said. "It didn't affect the veteran's care."

## **No feedback loop**

Way back in 2005, federal auditors found evidence that clerks were not entering the numbers correctly. By 2010, the problem seemed to be widespread, the VA health service sent out a memo listing 17 different "work-arounds," including the one that Turner was taught in Texas. Stop it, the VA said.

They didn't. By 2012, in fact, one VA official told Congress he wasn't sure how to force people to send in the real numbers.

"Because of the fact that the gaming is so prevalent, as soon as something is put out, it is torn apart to look to see what the work-around is," said William Schoenhard, who was then the deputy undersecretary for health for operations and management, an upper mid-level official that VA employees call the "dushom." "There's no feedback loop."

That was the key. There was no feedback loop. The system that had been set up to let the top of the VA's bureaucracy watch the bottom was no longer working. It was sending back science fiction, and the VA's top brass seemed either ignorant of the deceptions or powerless to stop them.

This week, federal auditors provided stark evidence of the problem that VA's leaders had missed. The auditors had studied 226 veterans who got appointments at the VA medical center in Phoenix. The official data showed they waited an average of 24 days for an appointment. In reality, the average wait was 115 days.

Afterward, Shinseki called that finding "reprehensible."

But, to the doctor who used to run the VA's Phoenix emergency room, the findings were no surprise. Katherine Mitchell said that the ER was often overburdened by patients with non-urgent problems, who simply couldn't get an appointment with their regular doctors.

Mitchell said she's been shifted to another job at the VA after complaining about inadequate staffing and other problems with care in Phoenix. She said Shinseki's long experience in the U.S. Army had not prepared him well for the VA.

"In the military, if you say, 'Do something,' it's done," said Mitchell, who has spent 16 years at the VA. "I suspect that he wasn't aware that in VA, it's not like that. If you say, 'Do something,' it's covered up. It's fixed by covering it up."

Now, VA's leaders have been faced with a startling failure. The bureaucracy below them wasn't telling them the truth about wait times. The numbers system they set up to go around the bureaucracy wasn't, either.

The only answer, now, has been to send people out to VA clinics to talk to schedulers, face to face. Before the auditors went out, they were warned they might hear evidence that clerks had been cheating the system.

"If this occurs, remain calm," the VA counseled auditors in a memo. It suggested follow-up questions. "Have you brought this to anyone's attention? If needed, follow up with: What has been the response?"

Source: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

**IG: INAPPROPRIATE SCHEDULING 'SYSTEMIC' THROUGHOUT VA HOSPITALS NATIONWIDE**

The Department of Veterans Affairs inspector general said Wednesday that an ongoing investigation into long wait times, falsified records and veteran deaths has so far confirmed that “inappropriate scheduling practices are systemic throughout” the agency’s health care system.

Specifically, the IG found that 1,700 veterans — 54 percent — who were waiting for primary care at the Phoenix VA hospital at the center of a national scandal had actually not been added to official electronic wait lists, according to [an interim report](#) published on the agency’s website.

By not adding the patients to the wait list, the staff at the hospital significantly understated wait times and boosted job performance evaluations, which was connected to employee awards and salary increases, the IG reported.

The VA is now engulfed by a scandal that began in April when a whistleblower alleged the Phoenix VA hospital had an off-the-books waiting list that might have led to 40 patient deaths. Similar reports have surfaced in at least 10 other states, angering veterans and triggering a string of bills in Congress aimed at punishing VA wrongdoing.

“Most importantly, these veterans were and continue to be at risk of being forgotten or lost in Phoenix HCS’s convoluted scheduling process,” the report noted. “As a result, these veterans may never obtain a requested or required clinical appointment.”

The IG examined a sample of 226 veterans at the Phoenix facility and found they waited on average 115 days for their first primary care appointment — 84 percent waited more than the 14 days required by the a recently enacted VA rule, which was meant to improve access to care and reduce wait times.

However, it is not yet clear whether the wait times and irregularities in the Phoenix hospital electronic wait list led to veteran deaths in Phoenix, as a whistleblowing doctor has claimed.

The IG said it is also looking into allegations of improper hiring practices, sexual harassment and bullying at the Arizona facility.

Meanwhile, its investigation has expanded to various other VA facilities, which constitute the largest integrated health care system in the United States, serving 200,000 veterans each day.

“To date, we have ongoing or scheduled work at 42 VA medical facilities and have identified instances of manipulation of VA data that distort the legitimacy of reported waiting times,” according to the interim report, which was issued after urging from Congress. A final report is expected to be completed by August.

The interim report came hours before VA executives were scheduled to testify before the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, which has criticized the agency’s response to its subpoena of records related to the Phoenix scheduling irregularities.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the VA committee, said the IG has now confirmed the allegations and suspicions of wrongdoing that have swirled for the past month.

“Today the inspector general confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt what was becoming more obvious by the day: wait time schemes and data manipulation are systemic throughout VA and are putting veterans at risk in Phoenix and across the country,” he said in a released statement.

Miller called for a criminal probe into the VA scandal and the resignation of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, who has been harshly criticized for severe problems in veterans’ health care.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., had stood by Shinseki while the IG report was being conducted. But by Wednesday afternoon, McCain's position evolved.

"This keeps piling up, and it can't be just an isolated — the Phoenix VA is not an island," McCain said on CNN. "I think it's time for Gen. Shinseki to move on."

"General Shinseki has given his life to serving this country and for that, we are in his debt," added House Armed Services Committee Chairman Howard P. "Buck" McKeon.

"However, the problems at the Department of Veterans Affairs have grown beyond what this nation can bear. ...It would be best if General Shinseki stepped down as Secretary, both as an example for other VA leaders and to lay the groundwork for new leadership to meet with success."

And the founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Paul Rieckhoff, who had declined to join the American Legion in calling for Shinseki to step down, sent out a new release:

"The new IG report on the Phoenix VA is damning and outrageous. It also reveals the need for a criminal investigation. Each day we learn how awful things are in Phoenix and across the country. The VA's problems are broad and deep - and President Obama and his team haven't demonstrated they can fix it."

Source: [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com)

## **VA SECRETARY ERIC SHINSEKI RESIGNS**

President Barack Obama on Friday accepted the resignation of Veteran Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki.

The move comes two days after the [inspector general](#) found VA officials throughout the system had been aware of records falsified to hide long delays before veterans could receive care.

Earlier Friday, Shinseki said senior leadership at the Phoenix VA will be fired and executive pay bonuses frozen as punishment for systemic scheduling abuses in the nationwide health care system.

The moves were among a series of initiatives, also including the removal of wait times in employee evaluations and support of legislation that removes administrative roadblocks to firing executives, unveiled by Shinseki during a rare public appearance amid increasing calls for his resignation.

Congress has called for firings and bold moves by VA leadership. On Friday, Shinseki offered an apology for what he called a "systemic totally unacceptable lack of integrity" in his department.

"I can't explain the lack of integrity among some of the leaders of our health care facilities. This is something I rarely encountered in 38 years in uniform," Shinseki said. "So, I will not defend it because it is indefensible. But I can take responsibility for it, and I do."

The embattled secretary, a four-star general who was wounded in Vietnam and appointed by the Obama Administration to head the VA in 2009, said he was misled by staff who told him scheduling abuses were isolated to Phoenix.

"I no longer believe it. It is systemic," said Shinseki, who spoke at a veteran homelessness conference. "I was too trusting of some."

The problems in Phoenix came to light in April after whistleblowers revealed to media outlets that hospital staff at the VA hospital there were using secret, off-the-books waiting lists to hide the long waits that veterans

seeking care were experiencing. The scheme was an effort to boost job performance evaluations, which affected employee awards and salary increases. Dozens of veterans reportedly died while awaiting care. The shocking revelations led VA to launch a wide-ranging probe to see if the problem was more widespread.

During its investigation, the IG discovered that 1,700 veterans — 54 percent — seeking primary care in Phoenix were not added to official electronic waiting lists until shortly before they could be seen by medical staff. It also found that 84 percent of veterans surveyed waited on average 115 days for their first primary care appointment — far longer than the 14 days required by a recently enacted VA rule, which was meant to improve access to care and reduce wait times. The probe revealed that the deceptive scheduling practice was occurring at other VA facilities across the country.

Last week, White House spokesman Jay Carney said that Obama still had “confidence” in Shinseki’s leadership, despite the scandal.

But following the release Wednesday of the damning IG report, a growing chorus of lawmakers on Capitol Hill called for Shinseki to step down.

Shinseki has defended his record as head of the VA, saying he was kept in the dark about the VA’s practices until the scandal broke.

“It is alarming that Secretary Shinseki either wasn’t aware of these systemic problems, or wasn’t forthcoming in his communications with Congress about them. Either way, it is clear to me that new leadership is needed at the VA,” Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said in a press release after the report was released.

The American Legion called on him to resign, although most major veterans’ service organizations have stood by Shinseki following the embarrassing disclosures. A poll conducted by CBS News last week before the IG report was released, suggested 42 percent of veterans believed he should resign.

On Thursday, as the political tide turned against Shinseki, Carney dodged reporters’ questions about whether Obama still had confidence in the VA chief. On Friday, the ax came down, despite Shinseki indicating earlier in the day that he wanted to stay on as head of the department.

Shinseki took over the VA in 2009 at the beginning of the Obama administration, following a 38-year career as an Army officer. Shinseki is a Vietnam combat veteran who had to have part of his foot amputated after he stepped on a land mine. Shinseki retired from the military in 2003 as a four-star general after serving as Army Chief of Staff — the service’s top position.

Obama praised Shinseki’s career of public service, including his leadership of the VA.

“Under his leadership, we have seen more progress on more fronts at the VA and a bigger investment in the VA than just about any other VA secretary,” Obama said.

He noted that under Shinseki’s watch, the VA enrolled 2 million new veterans in health care; provided disability pay to Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange; made it easier for veterans with post-traumatic stress, mental health issues and traumatic brain injury to get treatment; helped cut veteran homelessness by 24 percent; and made sure that there were facilities for women veterans to receive the specialized services that they needed.

Sloan Gibson, who was serving as deputy secretary of the VA, has been named interim secretary. Gibson graduated from West Point and served as an infantry officer. Before joining the VA, he was president and CEO of the USO. Obama acknowledged that political pressure influenced his decision to replace Shinseki.

“We occupy not just an environment that calls for management fixes. We’ve also got to deal with Congress and [the press]. And I think it’s Ric’s judgment that he could not carry out the next stages of reform without being a

distraction himself ... My assessment was, unfortunately, that he was right," Obama said during a press conference when he announced the resignation.

"We don't have time for distractions," Obama said. "We need to fix the problem."

Source: [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com)

## **SEARCH FOR NEW VA LEADER SHOULD LOOK BEYOND EX-MILITARY, EXPERTS SAY**

President Barack Obama may want to look beyond the military community for someone with solid management experience to fix the Veterans Administration after retired Gen. Eric Shinseki resigned as head of the troubled department.

Shinseki, a decorated Vietnam veteran and former Army chief of staff, stepped down Friday after a preliminary investigation confirmed reports of widespread mismanagement and delays in scheduling appointments for veterans in VA hospitals.

Obama praised Shinseki but said the VA "needs new leadership" to address the mounting claims of malfeasance that allowed executives to cash in on bonuses even as veterans with serious health issues languished on secret waiting lists.

The search for that new leadership should be "less about having someone with a military background and more about someone with a management background," said Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the CATO Institute.

Tanner said many retired generals move from the Pentagon to the VA but "we're not talking about combat or an army. We're talking about bureaucracy."

Tanner said veterans can identify with other veterans, but "they're not dealing with the veterans, ultimately."

"They're dealing with a lot of people who aren't impressed by how many stars the guy wore," he said, adding that a better candidate might be someone with solid business credentials, "ideally someone who's helped turn around a company."

Shinseki himself alluded to the problem just before his resignation was announced. In a speech to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, Shinseki said he had initially thought the delays in scheduling appointments for veterans were isolated cases.

Now, he thinks such delays are systemic and that he was misled by other managers within the VA system.

"I can't explain the lack of integrity among some of the leaders of our health care facilities," he said. "This is something I rarely encountered during 38 years in uniform."

Phillip Carter, a former Army officer and current director of the military, veterans and society program at the Center for a New American Security, said Obama should "cast a wide net" as he searches for someone capable of repairing the damage.

"The next VA secretary should be familiar with the culture of the VA, but that does not mean that he or she needs to be a veteran, let alone a retired general or admiral," Carter said.

With a department employing more than 312,000 people and a budget of more than \$150 billion, any VA secretary must be “very politically astute... capable of balancing competing interests and priorities,” Carter said.

John Raughter, spokesman for the American Legion, said the key is to find a reformer, “someone who will make monumental changes to the structure of how the VA is operating now, someone who will hold the administrators accountable if they abuse their customers.”

He also said the new secretary must change the “culture of fear” that seems to have kept many employees from reporting problems.

“It’s going to take a reform-minded individual,” Raughter said.

In a written statement, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America urged Obama to choose a new secretary who would make “bold changes and work quickly and aggressively to change the VA system.”

The organization also called on the president to look for a veteran of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Dr. Sam Foote, a retired VA doctor who helped expose scheduling abuses in the Phoenix VA, said someone with considerable administrative experience would be ideal, though a top-level hospital administrator would likely have to accept a significant pay cut to take the job.

Ex-military commanders would face culture shock, Foote said. They are accustomed to working with trained subordinates who follow orders — habits less widespread in the VA culture, Foote said.

“Superman would be good, if he’s available,” Foote said.

Source: [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com)

## **OBAMA: SHINSEKI’S PHOENIX FIRINGS, PAY FREEZES WILL STAND**

Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki said Friday that senior leadership at the Phoenix VA will be fired and executive pay bonuses will be frozen as punishment for systemic scheduling abuses in the nationwide health care system.

In his opening remarks when announcing Shinseki’s resignation later Friday morning, President Barack Obama listed all the changes the secretary had set in motion.

The moves were among a series of initiatives, also including the removal of wait times in employee evaluations and support of legislation that makes it easier to fire executives, unveiled by Shinseki as calls for his resignation spread through Congress over the past two days.

There is widespread frustration on Capitol Hill and among veteran groups that the VA has not done enough after it was revealed the department gamed its health care system by keeping kept off-the-books patient wait lists, which have been blamed for 40 veteran deaths in Phoenix.

Shinseki offered an apology for the deep problems in his department, saying he was misled by staff when he said publicly several months ago that scheduling abuses were isolated to Phoenix.

"I no longer believe it. It is systemic," said Shinseki, who spoke at a veteran homelessness conference. "I was too trusting of some."

But the retired four-star general — who received a standing ovation from veteran service groups at the conference — indicated he is not ready to resign his position despite pressure from Congress.

"I also know this leadership and integrity problems can and must be fixed, and now," he said.

Shinseki said he has started the process of removing senior leadership at the Phoenix facility, which is the epicenter of the widening department scandal, and looking at leadership elsewhere.

Bonuses paid to executives partly based on meeting two-week patient wait times will be suspending through 2014 and the number of days veterans wait for care will no longer be used to evaluate employee performance, he said.

An interim report issued this week by the VA inspector general found that executives manipulated scheduling to meet the department's wait-list goals, which boosts performance evaluations and led to awards and bonuses.

Besides ousting senior leadership at Phoenix and freezing bonuses, Shinseki said the VA will now support legislation in Congress that would allow the secretary to fire senior executives at will. Currently firings and demotions must be based on formal performance reviews.

Source: [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com)

## **DEBATE STIRS OVER US-TALIBAN CAPTIVE SWAP**

Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl can expect a buoyant homecoming after five years in Taliban hands, but those in the government who worked for his release face mounting questions over the prisoner swap that won his freedom.

Even in the first hours of Bergdahl's handoff to U.S. special forces in eastern Afghanistan, it was clear this would not be an uncomplicated yellow-ribbon celebration. Five terrorist suspects also walked free, stirring a debate in Washington over whether the exchange will heighten the risk of other Americans being snatched as bargaining chips and whether the released detainees -- several senior Taliban figures among them -- would find their way back to the fight.

U.S. officials said Sunday that Bergdahl's health and safety appeared in jeopardy, prompting rapid action to secure his release. "Had we waited and lost him," said national security adviser Susan Rice, "I don't think anybody would have forgiven the United States government."

Republicans said the deal could set a troubling precedent -- one called it "shocking." Arizona Sen. John McCain said of the five Guantanamo detainees, "These are the hardest of the hard core."

Tireless campaigners for their son's freedom, Bob and Jani Bergdahl thanked all who were behind the effort to retrieve him. "You were not left behind," Bob Bergdahl told reporters, as if speaking to his son. "We are so proud of the way this was carried out." He spoke in Boise, Idaho, wearing a long bushy beard he'd grown to honor his son, as residents in the sergeant's hometown of Hailey prepared for a homecoming celebration.

The five detainees left Guantanamo aboard a U.S. military aircraft flying to Qatar, which served as go-between in the negotiations. They are to be banned from leaving Qatar for at least a year. Among the five: a Taliban deputy intelligence minister, a former Taliban interior minister with ties to al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and a figure linked by human rights monitors to mass killings of Shiite Muslims in Afghanistan in 2000 and 2001.

Bergdahl, 28, was being treated at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. Officials did not offer details about Bergdahl's health to support their contention that his release had to be arranged without delay. Rice on one hand said he had lost considerable weight and faced an "acute" situation. Yet she said he appeared to be "in good physical condition" and "is said to be walking."

Questions persisted, too, about the circumstances of Bergdahl's 2009 capture. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel declined to comment on earlier reports that the sergeant had walked away from his unit, disillusioned with the war. Such matters "will be dealt with later," Hagel said.

Hagel, visiting troops in Afghanistan, was met with silence when he told a group of them in a Bagram Air Field hangar: "This is a happy day. We got one of our own back." It was unclear whether the absence of cheers and applause came from a reluctance to display emotion in front of the Pentagon chief or from any doubts among the troops about Bergdahl.

In weighing the swap, U.S. officials decided that it could help the effort to reach reconciliation with the Taliban, which the U.S. sees as key to more security in Afghanistan. But they acknowledged the risk that the deal would embolden insurgents.

Republicans pressed that point. "Have we just put a price on other U.S. soldiers?" asked Senator Ted Cruz of Texas. "What does this tell terrorists, that if you capture a U.S. soldier, you can trade that soldier for five terrorists?"

Republican Representative Adam Kinzinger of Illinois said, "I'm going to celebrate him coming home," but added that the release of "five mid- to high-level Taliban is shocking to me, especially without coming to Congress."

Source: [www.military.com](http://www.military.com)

### **CRITICS ROUSE AS US DEFENDS SWAP WITH TALIBAN**

Nearly five years after his capture by insurgents, Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl climbed into an American helicopter. He took out a pen and wrote on a paper plate, "SF?" -- asking the troops who had come to find him in eastern Afghanistan if they were U.S. special operations forces.

Over the roar of the rotors, one of them shouted to Bergdahl: "Yes, we've been looking for you for a long time."

The only American prisoner of the Afghan war, Bergdahl broke down in tears.

The emotional moment was described by a defense official, one of several U.S. officials who detailed Bergdahl's release Saturday. In exchange for the 28-year-old American, President Barack Obama agreed to release five high-level Afghan detainees from the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"While Bowe was gone, he was never forgotten," Obama said in a statement from the White House Rose Garden, where he was joined by Bergdahl's parents. "The United States of America does not ever leave our men and women in uniform behind."

Two top Republican lawmakers said that Obama violated U.S. laws when he approved the exchange.

Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon of California and Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma said the law required Obama to notify Congress 30 days before any transfer of terrorists from Guantanamo. In response, the White House said that officials considered what they called "unique and exigent circumstances" and decided to go ahead with the transfer in spite of the legal requirement.

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said the operation to free Bergdahl was not relayed to Congress because officials believed the soldier's life was in danger and the military had to move quickly to get him safely out of Afghanistan.

In his first extensive public comments about Saturday's operation, Hagel, who was traveling to Afghanistan to meet with U.S. troops, said intelligence the U.S. had gathered suggested that Bergdahl's "safety and health were both in jeopardy, and in particular his health was deteriorating."

At Bagram Air Field, Hagel met Sunday with about a dozen of the special operations forces that participated in the rescue and thanked them for their work.

Gen. Joseph Dunford said there was a sense of excitement in the headquarters as the news spread

"You almost got choked up," he said. "It was pretty extraordinary. It has been almost five years and he is home."

Bergdahl's parents, Bob and Jani, led a tireless campaign to keep their son's story in the public eye. They were expected to hold a news conference Sunday in their hometown of Hailey, Idaho, where residents were planning a homecoming celebration for the soldier.

Bergdahl, in good condition and able to walk, was handed over to U.S. special operations forces by the Taliban in an area of eastern Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border, U.S. officials said. In a statement on its website, the Taliban put the location on the outskirts of Khost province.

The handover followed indirect negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban, with the government of Qatar serving as the go-between. Qatar is taking custody of the five Afghan detainees who were held at Guantanamo.

Some U.S. officials said this type of exchange is somewhat unprecedented during the last 13 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. In weighing the swap, U.S. officials decided that it could help further the effort to reach reconciliation with the Taliban, something the U.S. sees as key to reaching a level of security in Afghanistan.

But they acknowledged that there was a risk of emboldening other insurgent groups who might grab U.S. troops or citizens in an effort to secure the release of others prisoners.

Several dozen U.S. special operations forces, backed by multiple helicopters and surveillance aircraft, were involved in securing Bergdahl's transfer that evening from about 18 Taliban members. Officials said the commandos were on the ground for a short time before lifting off with Bergdahl.

Bergdahl is believed to have been held by the Haqqani network since June 30, 2009. Haqqani operates in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and claims allegiance to the Afghan Taliban, but operates with some degree of autonomy.

The U.S. believes Bergdahl was held for the bulk of his captivity in Pakistan, but officials said it was not clear when he was transported to eastern Afghanistan.

Officials said Bergdahl was taken to Bagram Air Field, the main U.S. base in Afghanistan, for medical evaluations, then transferred to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, a military facility in Germany, before he's returned to the U.S. An official said Bergdahl was tentatively scheduled to go to the San Antonio Military Medical Center where he would be reunited with his family.

Bergdahl's parents had been in Washington on a previously planned visit when they received a call Saturday from Obama informing them that their son had been freed.

As they stood with Obama in the Rose Garden hours after their son's release, Bob Bergdahl, who grew a long, thick beard to honor his son, said Bowe Bergdahl was having trouble speaking English after his rescue. The

elder Bergdahl had worked to learn Pashto, the language spoken by his son's captors, and delivered a message to him in that language.

Switching back to English, the elder Bergdahl said "the complicated nature of this recovery will never really be comprehended."

The circumstances surrounding Bergdahl's capture remain murky. There has been some speculation that he willingly walked away from his unit, raising the question of whether he could be charged with being absent without leave or desertion.

In 2012, Rolling Stone magazine quoted emails Bergdahl is said to have sent to his parents that suggest he was disillusioned with America's mission in Afghanistan, had lost faith in the U.S. Army and was considering desertion. Bergdahl told his parents he was "ashamed to even be American." The Associated Press could not independently authenticate the emails.

Hagel, speaking with reporters traveling with him in Asia, declined to say whether he believes Bergdahl was attempting to desert the Army or go AWOL when he walked away from his unit and disappeared.

"Our first priority is assuring his well-being and his health and getting him reunited with his family," Hagel said. "Other circumstances that may develop and questions -- those will be dealt with later."

A senior U.S. official told The Associated Press that the Army would make the decision on any charges but that the feeling at the moment was that Bergdahl had suffered enough in his ordeal. All the officials who discussed details of Bergdahl's transfer insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to be identified.

The U.S. has long been seeking Bergdahl's release, but there was renewed interest in his case as Obama finalized plans to pull nearly all American forces out of Afghanistan by the end of 2016.

Officials said the Taliban signaled to the U.S. in November that they were ready to start fresh talks on the issue of detainees. After the U.S. received proof that Bergdahl was still alive, indirect talks began, with Qatar sending messages back and forth between the two parties. The talks intensified about a week ago, officials said.

The five Guantanamo detainees departed the base on a U.S. military aircraft Saturday afternoon. Under the conditions of their release, they will be banned from traveling outside of Qatar for at least one year.

Obama and the emir of Qatar spoke last week about the conditions of the release, which have been codified in a memorandum of understanding between the two countries, officials said.

The detainees were among the most senior Afghans still held at the prison:

-- Abdul Haq Wasiq, who served as the Taliban deputy minister of intelligence

-- Mullah Norullah Nori, a senior Taliban commander in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif when the Taliban fought U.S. forces in late 2001

-- Khairullah Khairkhwa, who served in various Taliban positions including interior minister and had direct ties to Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden

-- Mohammed Nabi, who served as chief of security for the Taliban in Qalat, Afghanistan, and later worked as a radio operator for the Taliban's communications office in Kabul

-- Mohammad Fazl, whom Human Rights Watch says could be prosecuted for war crimes for presiding over the mass killing of Shiite Muslims in Afghanistan in 2000 and 2001 as the Taliban sought to consolidate their control over the country.

In a statement on the Taliban website that was translated by the Washington-based SITE Intelligence Group, the Taliban announced the exchange with "great happiness and joy" and said it "was and has been for a long time attempting to free all the imprisoned Afghan prisoners inside and outside the country, and restoring the right of freedom to them quickly."

The Taliban said it was seeking the release of additional prisoners but offered no specifics. It also said the five freed detainees would be received by members of its political office in Qatar. That office was reportedly closed last year after a dispute with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and its role in the exchange may be an indication that it is functioning.

In Pakistan, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam said her government was "not aware of" Bergdahl's release or the negotiations leading up to it. She declined to comment further.

Source: [www.military.com](http://www.military.com)

## **OBAMA ANNOUNCES PLAN TO KEEP 9,800 US TROOPS IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER 2014**

President Obama announced Tuesday that he aims to keep 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan after the war formally ends later this year, while pledging a near-total withdrawal by the end of 2016.

"This year, we will bring America's longest war to a responsible end," Obama said, in remarks from the Rose Garden.

The long-anticipated withdrawal plan is largely in line with what military commanders have been seeking and would allow the president to fully end the American-led military effort by the time he leaves office.

The plan would shrink the U.S. troop presence from its current force of 32,000 to 9,800 by the start of next year, and to roughly half that size by the end of 2015. Nearly all those forces are to be out by the end of 2016, as Obama finishes his second term.

"It's time to turn the page," Obama said. If the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan indeed lasts through 2016, that would bring the length of the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan to 15 years. Afghanistan is already the longest U.S. war.

The president, though, faced criticism from Republicans on Tuesday for setting a firm withdrawal table.

Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz.; Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.; and Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., warned that success in Afghanistan would be difficult if the U.S. is giving its enemies a "date certain" when troops will leave.

"The president's decision to set an arbitrary date for the full withdrawal of U.S. troops in Afghanistan is a monumental mistake and a triumph of politics over strategy. This is a short-sighted decision that will make it harder to end the war in Afghanistan responsibly," the senators said in a joint statement.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon, R-Calif., praised Obama Tuesday for honoring the military's request to keep some forces in Afghanistan -- but also questioned whether a strict timetable should be set.

"Holding this mission to an arbitrary egg-timer doesn't make a lick of sense strategically," McKeon said in a statement, suggesting this would "replicate" the mistakes from Iraq.

In Iraq, the administration failed to strike a broader security agreement with Baghdad and pulled out nearly all U.S. troops, which some blame for chaos in the country now. "We are in Afghanistan because it was the

spawning ground of Al Qaeda and the devastating attack on American soil. Those threats still exist," McKeon said. "We leave when the Afghans can manage that threat, rather than on convenient political deadlines that favor poll numbers over our security."

In pointed terms, however, Obama said Tuesday that "this is how wars end in the 21st century."

He said the U.S. will stay "committed" to a stable and secure Afghanistan, but added: "Afghanistan will not be a perfect place, and it is not America's responsibility to make it one."

The two-year plan is contingent on the Afghan government signing a bilateral security agreement with the U.S. While current Afghan President Hamid Karzai has refused to sign the agreement, U.S. officials are confident that either of the candidates seeking to replace him will give his approval.

Over the course of next year, the number of troops would be cut in half and consolidated in the capital of Kabul and at Bagram Air Field, the main U.S. base in Afghanistan. Those remaining forces would largely be withdrawn by the end of 2016, with fewer than 1,000 remaining behind to staff a security office in Kabul.

Obama revealed the plans after returning from a surprise weekend trip to Afghanistan where he met with U.S. commanders and American forces serving in the closing months of the nation's longest war.

The administration was also dealing with a potential security problem that arose from that visit, after his press office inadvertently revealed the name of the CIA station chief in Afghanistan. The name was included Sunday in a list of senior officials who met with the president -- the White House later sent out a corrected list without the CIA official's name, but the list had already been circulated at that point. It's unclear whether the administration will have to take any additional security precautions over the incident.

Ahead of his remarks on Tuesday, Obama spoke with Karzai, who has had a tumultuous relationship with the White House. The two leaders did not see each other while Obama was in Afghanistan, but they did speak by phone as Air Force One was returning to Washington. They spoke again Tuesday morning.

Obama has also discussed his plans with several European leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

Source: [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com)

## **WHITE HOUSE MISTAKENLY IDENTIFIES CIA CHIEF IN AFGHANISTAN**

The CIA's top officer in Kabul was exposed Saturday by the White House when his name was inadvertently included on a list provided to news organizations of senior U.S. officials participating in President Obama's surprise visit with U.S. troops.

The White House recognized the mistake and quickly issued a revised list that did not include the individual, who had been identified on the initial release as the "Chief of Station" in Kabul, a designation used by the CIA for its highest-ranking spy in a country.

The disclosure marked a rare instance in which a CIA officer working overseas had his cover — the secrecy meant to protect his actual identity — pierced by his own government. The only other recent case came under significantly different circumstances, when former CIA operative Valerie Plame was exposed as officials of the George W. Bush administration sought to discredit her husband, a former ambassador and fierce critic of the decision to invade Iraq.

The CIA officer was one of 15 senior U.S. officials identified as taking part in a military briefing for Obama at Bagram air base, a sprawling military compound north of Kabul. Others included U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan James B. Cunningham and Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., the commander of U.S. and coalition forces in the country.

Their names were included on a list of participants in the briefing provided by U.S. military officials to the White House press office.

The list was circulated by e-mail to reporters who traveled to Afghanistan with Obama, and disseminated further when it was included in a "pool report," or summary of the event meant to be shared with other news organizations, including foreign media, not taking part in the trip.

In this case, the pool report was filed by Washington Post White House bureau chief Scott Wilson. Wilson said he had copied the list from the e-mail provided by White House press officials. He sent his pool report to the press officials, who then distributed it to a list of more than 6,000 recipients.

Wilson said that after the report was distributed, he noticed the unusual reference to the station chief and asked White House press officials in Afghanistan whether they had intended to include that name.

Initially, the press office raised no objection, apparently because military officials had provided the list to distribute to news organizations. But senior White House officials realized the mistake and scrambled to issue an updated list without the CIA officer's name. The mistake, however, already was being noted on Twitter, although without the station chief's name.

It is unclear whether the disclosure will force the CIA to pull the officer out of Afghanistan. As the top officer in one of the agency's largest overseas posts, with hundreds of officers, analysts and other subordinates, the station chief in Kabul probably has been identified to senior Afghan government officials and would not ordinarily take part in clandestine missions beyond the U.S. Embassy compound.

The identities of at least three CIA station chiefs in Pakistan have been exposed in recent years. In one case, a CIA officer became a target of death threats after his cover was blown, forcing the agency to rush him out of the country.

Source: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

### **PETITION FOR MARINE IN MEXICO PRISON HITS 100K**

A petition on the White House website asking President Obama to demand the release of a Marine sergeant in a Mexico prison has garnered more than 100,000 online signatures -- a threshold that typically elicits an administration response.

"The effect of this unjust incarceration on a decorated combat Marine is despairing," says the petition, which as of Saturday afternoon had 116,051 signatures.

Marine Sgt. Andrew Tahmooressi was arrested March 31 after crossing the Mexican border with three guns in his truck.

Tahmooressi said he accidentally crossed the border and immediately told Mexican authorities that he had three guns in his possession and that he was unable to make a U-turn.

He said he was handcuffed and taken to prison and that his treatment worsened when he tried to escape.

Tahmooressi, who suffers from post traumatic stress disorder, said guards hit him so many times in face that he felt his jaw fall out of place.

He also said he was stripped naked and chained to a bed, with his feet on one end and his hands on another.

A State Department official, in a letter on Friday to Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., who has been pushing for the Marine's release, said consular officers have visited Tahmooressi 12 times.

The State Department said last week they have raised concerns with Mexican authorities about his treatment.

"We've been very engaged," said department spokeswoman Jen Psaki. "We'll continue to press the case."

She also said Secretary of State John Kerry has been involved in the situation.

The White House describes the online petition effort as "a new way to petition the Obama administration to take action on a range of important issues."

Some administration responses are messages posted on the site, which now has 82 petitions.

Source: [www.military.com](http://www.military.com)