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Subject: Federal Insider: 'Straight-out war' on federal bureaucracy, Gingrich urges Trump

'Straight-out war' on federal bureaucracy, Gingrich urges Trump

By Joe Davidson

Newt Gingrich. (April Greer for The Washington Post)

It might be time for federal agencies to order flak jackets.

If President-elect Donald Trump takes former speaker Newt Gingrich's advice to attack the federal bureaucracy, body armor could be needed.

"It's got to be a straight-out war," Gingrich (R-Ga.) said Friday during a [Washington Post Live interview](#) with my colleague James Hohmann.

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) feds might need helmets, too.

The VA has a bullseye because Gingrich considers it the "archetype of — of disaster."

"You can't fix it unless you change the civil service laws," he said. "You can't change the civil service laws within the normal framework of Washington."

To win over recruits to this crusade, Gingrich said, Trump should keep his message about VA simple and violent: "Do you think people who kill veterans should stay in their jobs ... [should] we make the government union people happy and keep their jobs, people who we know broke the rules and killed veterans?"

Trump's [10-point plan](#) to reform VA includes using "the powers of the presidency to remove and discipline the federal employees and managers who have violated the public's trust." Civil service protections have already been significantly weakened for VA senior executives.

Gingrich's vicious accusations about supposedly homicidal VA employees, many of whom are veterans serving veterans, demonstrates a particularly aggressive attitude toward the workforce. It ignores the noble work of many VA health-care professionals, including whistleblowers who exposed the scandal over the cover-up of long patient wait times.

Yet, his frustration with VA is reasonable, even as his rhetoric and the public policy it implies are not. With justifiable disgust, he spoke about workers "in Los Angeles who deleted 3,000 reservations to make their record look better" and the veteran "laying in the shower, dead, for 24 hours."

Speaking to The Washington Post on Friday, Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called the Department of Veterans Affairs "a disgrace." He cited people who deleted V.A. reservations in California, possibly causing veterans to suffer severe health consequences, as a part of the problem. "It is embarrassing that the senior veterans' organizations endorse the current Secretary because he has failed totally to clean it up," Gingrich said. "And they did it because they'd prefer the current status where they have access to the V.A. offices and they have access, rather than make sure that veterans are taken care of." (Washington Post Live)

To back up the 3,000 figure, Gingrich, in a Sunday email, cited an article from the [conservative Daily Caller website](#) that said the Los Angeles VA hospital would get 3,000 requests for medical exams a month, but could only accommodate 800. The rollover would create a backlog. The article did not say how many requests were cancelled. In 2014, the Los Angeles Times reported that "in the Los Angeles, Long Beach, Loma Linda and San Diego VA systems, 2,667 new patients had been told that no appointments were available within 90 days," according to an inspector general's audit.

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Asked to document the 24-hour allegation, Gingrich acknowledged it was a case involving a [veteran's body left for nine hours](#) in a Pines, Fla., VA facility shower. Still disgraceful. The California and Florida situations occurred before VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald, another Gingrich target, took office.

Big problems remain in VA. No doubt.

But “if he truly wants to see improvements and reform at the VA, Mr. Gingrich should look to empower the working people who care for our veterans and speak out when problems arise, as VA employees have for years,” said J. David Cox Sr., president of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE).

Without civil service laws protecting federal employees, “we would have never known about the serious shortage of mental health professionals at the Wilmington VA Medical Center that was leading to longer-than-usual wait times for veterans,” Cox added, providing one example. “AFGE is proud to represent the brave rank-and-file VA employees who speak up and knowingly risk their jobs and reputation to do what’s right by our veterans. We hope Mr. Gingrich would give them the same courtesy.”

He didn’t, at least not during the interview.

A VA statement defended Obama administration actions, saying they have “resulted in irrefutable progress in one of the largest government agency transformations in history ... VA welcomes the opportunity to brief Mr. Gingrich on the transformation of VA called [myVA](#).”

Pugnacious as ever, Gingrich even lashed out at veterans’ organizations that praised McDonald last week.

Commending McDonald’s leadership, a [letter to Trump from six large veterans organizations](#) said “a close partnership and open rapport between the current administration” and the organizations “were key to bringing about significant changes, such as reducing the claims backlog, improving access to health care, and crafting strategies to eliminate the appeals backlog.” Then [20 veterans-related groups urged Trump to retain McDonald](#). They said his efforts to improve the agency are “showing early signs of success ... we believe they have the potential to eventually make VA a model agency.”

Gingrich, fancying himself more informed about VA health care than veterans organizations, slandered their motives.

“You know, the Veterans Administration (the VA’s former name) is a total disgrace, and it’s embarrassing that the senior veterans organizations endorse the current secretary, because he has failed totally to clean it up. And they did it because they prefer the current status, where they have access to Veterans Administration offices, rather than making sure that veterans are taken care of,” he said Friday.

Garry Augustine, executive director of the Disabled American Veterans, which has [called for McDonald’s retention](#), was comparatively kind in his response. “It is a shame that Newt Gingrich is focused on pushing an ideological agenda instead of taking care of our nation’s heroes,” Augustine said by email. “We suggest Speaker Gingrich learn about the measurable progress VA has made under Secretary McDonald’s leadership and review the recent independent report by Rand which indicated that VA healthcare is as good, and oftentimes better, than private sector systems.”

Augustine is right. Gingrich could learn from disabled vets.

It’s unlikely that the former speaker knows more about VA care than organizations representing veterans, because [he is not one](#).

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