

The burden of battle

by *Oliver_North*

"To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan."

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs claims this is its "mission." The slogan — extracted from the last paragraph of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address — is inscribed proudly on metal plaques at the entrance of the VA's headquarters in Washington. The Obama administration made a mockery of this pledge by proposing to charge veterans' private insurance companies for treatment of service-connected injuries, wounds or sickness. Had the White House not rescinded this immoral and unethical proposal, the VA could have been sued for false advertising.

The "O-Team" claimed that charging veterans' private insurers for service-connected medical care would have "saved" \$540 million. How they concocted this number is anyone's guess, but the affront offers a window into the kind of "thinking" going on in this administration.

It also started a wildfire among America's vets. Some described the proposal as part of "a conspiracy against our military." Veterans blogs cited administration deliberations on allowing U.S. military personnel to be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court, talk of allowing practicing homosexuals into the armed forces, and deep cuts in defense spending in the midst of a war as part of a pattern of anti-military bias.

Whether it is malevolence, ideology or incompetence that is driving these strategies, none of this helps recruiting or retaining the brightest and best-educated, -trained, -led and -equipped military force the world ever has seen. Had this ploy worked, the new recruiting pitch to some bright young person about to graduate from high school would have to include this warning: If you are wounded in the service to your country, we're going to make you pay for any medical care you receive after we get you off the battlefield.

On the same day that this "private payer for war wounds" travesty was being discussed at the White House, we also learned that \$6.4 million of taxpayer money was given to an AIG executive as a "retention bonus." Apparently, the O-Team's half-baked idea for a military "retention bonus" was to have those wounded in war find private insurers to cover the costs of their service-connected medical care.

The scheme was dead on arrival. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, who should have known better than to defend it, was raked over the coals in a House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing March 10. At a White House meeting Monday, March 16, the O-Team — with the man himself attending — tried to jam the idea down the throats of Veterans Service Organizations.

By Tuesday, members of both houses and both parties on Capitol Hill were paying attention as the blogosphere filled with ire from veterans and their families. On Wednesday, House Republicans sent a letter to the White House denouncing the proposal as a breach of faith in "a solemn obligation to our nation's veterans." A few hours later, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was applauded for announcing that the O-Team had "made the decision that the combat-wounded veterans should not be billed through their insurance policies for combat-related injuries."

Full disclosure here: I'm relieved because, among other things, I had a personal stake in the outcome.

According to the VA, my service-connected wounds and injuries amount to a 40 percent disability. I receive \$541 a month from the VA as "disability compensation." Unlike civilian private-sector or government retirees receiving "disability," my military retired pay is reduced by the same amount.

Like most veterans, I now have a "civilian" job, which pays me a lot more to be shot at than the Marines did. My employer has a private insurance plan in which my wife and I participate. Under existing rules, the VA is required to pay for any medical treatment I receive as a consequence of my service-connected injuries.

The O-Team's proposal unfairly would have made our private insurance company pay for this care, even though neither my present employer nor insurer had anything to do with my being wounded in Vietnam. Like most private insurance policies, ours has a maximum benefit amount, which we could exceed if those old injuries required prolonged care. The prospect of my wife being unable to receive medical treatment because we had "run out of insurance" was too painful to contemplate.

Had the administration's despicable design succeeded, the burden on those wounded in the current war would have been unthinkable. The O-Team rescinded its shameful plot to make veterans pay for combat-related medical treatment, but only because Americans were repulsed by the idea. It remains to be seen whether similar outrage will be provoked by White House plans to burden our children with debt and use the tax code to wage class warfare.

Oliver North is the host of "War Stories" on Fox News Channel, the founder and honorary chairman of Freedom Alliance, and the author of "American Heroes."

