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“We’ve Been Betrayed!:)” Who’s Fighting Back (and Not) Against Trump’s Cuts in VA Jobs and Services



Photo by Kadir Celep

Among the Republican voters experiencing buyer’s remorse are more than a few military veterans who chose Trump over Harris by a margin of 65 to 34%, according to some exit polls.

Their shock and dismay surfaced in DC this month during the legislative conference of the reliably conservative and hawkish Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), which has 1.4 million members.

In the run-up to that annual event, VFW national commander Al Lipphardt, urged his members to “march forth” and “engage with lawmakers” to “stop the bleeding” at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Thanks to Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) , the VA now faces disruption of its benefit claims handling, healthcare delivery, data security, critical medical research, and stable employment for 100,000 former service members.

The VFW's resulting Capitol Hill visit on March 4 was not exactly the second coming of the militant march on Washington, in 1932, by 30,000 jobless World War 1 vets. During that confrontation, leaders of the VFW and American Legion provided political cover for Herbert Hoover, the conservative Republican president who ignored veteran unemployment (and, like Trump, championed small government).

Now, the VFW's condemnation of Trump's mass firing of vets is such a welcome break with past Veteran Service Organization (VSO) subservience to the White House that even VSO critics are impressed. Iraq war vet and VFW life member Kris Goldsmith calls it "historic" and "nothing short of extraordinary."

Bleeding Gets Worse, Not Better

Nevertheless, as Goldsmith argues, it will take a lot more than issuing press statements, presenting hearing testimony, and politely lobbying legislators to stop the further "bleeding" that will result from a VA "reorganization" first reported March 5.

According to an internal memo, Trump's new VA Secretary Doug Collins intends to cut 80,000 more jobs—contrary to his confirmation hearing testimony before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee (SVAC) on Jan. 21.

On that occasion, the ex-Congressman from Georgia assured his former Capitol Hill colleagues that "we're not going to sacrifice veterans' benefits to do a budget." This helped the right-wing Air Force Reserve chaplain get confirmed, with virtually no SVAC opposition, and by a 77 to 23 Senate vote in his favor.

Despite the leaked document from VA headquarters, President Trump insists that he will still "take good care of our veterans" and wants to keep the total number losing their federal jobs "as small as possible." Meanwhile, he boasted of "having great success at slimming down our government," which was a major focus of his State of the Union address.

During that 100-minute rant and ramble, Trump didn't mention veterans or Collins even once, despite his various shout-outs to cops, fire-fighters, border patrol officers and other cabinet members.

As part of the Democrats' response to what Senator Tim Kane calls a "war on veterans," Kane and others in Trump's audience brought along guests who served in the military. All were just fired by the VA and other federal agencies, where vets comprise about 30% of the workforce.

When one dismissed Forest Service worker, Iraq war vet Jacob Bushno, approached his Congressman back home for help—he got no response from Mike Bost, the Republican chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. Instead, Bushno heard from the office of Senator

Tammy Duckworth, the Illinois Democrat and former Army helicopter pilot who became a double amputee when she was shot down in Iraq.

Noting that Republicans like Bost always wrap themselves in the flag, Bushno told *The Times* that “he hadn’t seen any patriotism out of them since this has been going down.”

“Why Is This Happening to Us?”

This emerging rift between right-wing Republicans and one part of their electoral base can be further deepened through more grassroots activism by veterans and their organizations, VA care givers and their patients, federal worker unions, and even their often unreliable Democratic allies.

On February 19, there was plenty of blue state outrage on display when members and friends of the Federal Unionists Network (FUN) protested DOGE in rallies from the Left Coast to New York City, where 1,000 people gathered in Lower Manhattan’s Foley Square to hear speakers like longtime VA defender, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Outside a Tesla dealership in San Francisco, Army veteran and VA patient Ricardo Ortiz told a crowd of 300 about the struggle of working-class vets to create a healthcare system, based on public provision of care, not for-profit medical treatment. That achievement is now at risk, he warned, because of bi-partisan efforts to privatize the VA-run Veterans Health Administration.

Now many red state victims of the Trump-Musk purge are speaking out as well, taking their personal stories to media outlets and public meetings around the country. Army veteran Nelson Feliz, Sr. lost his job in the first wave of VA lay-offs, which Collins claimed would “not negatively impact VA healthcare, benefits, or beneficiaries.”

“We’ve been betrayed,” Feliz told Channel 2 News in Atlanta. “I was a first sergeant. My job was to take care of troops, making sure they were paid, fed, and slept. Why is this happening to us? I’ve been here too long for this to be happening.”

Both Bushno, the now unemployed National Forest Service worker in Illinois, and Feliz were among the 6,000 vets affected by the dismissal of 20,000 federal workers still in probationary status. In Bushno’s case, he was let go seven days before his one-year probationary period ended, a decision he is appealing. Feliz was fired despite having been a VA employee for more than 12 years!

He recently started a new position but had not completed the required probationary period for that. The “Notice of Termination” he received, via email, stated that “the agency finds, based on your performance, you have not demonstrated that your further employment would be in the public interest.” This and other indiscriminate dismissals have been the subject of an on-

going legal challenge by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the progressive veterans' group, Common Defense, and other plaintiffs.

Town Hall Confrontations

AFGE local union leaders like Rebecca Reinhold, vice-president of Local 85 at the VA in Leavenworth, Kansas, have been taking the fight directly to Republican members of Congress—when they dare to show up for constituent meetings in their districts. This is already a risky decision, for many, due to growing popular anger about impending Medicaid and/or Medicare cuts.

In Reinhold's recent video-taped confrontation with U.S. Rep. Mark Alford at a town hall gathering, she reminded Alford that her 1,200 members provide critical services. "We make sure veterans are cared for from the moment they become a veteran," she said. "But you want to cut my job." In response, Alford insisted there would be "appropriate funds for veterans" and that any VA cuts "would not affect services" because "we're going to make sure veterans are supported."

In Oakley, Kansas, U.S. Senator Roger Marshall abruptly ended an already contentious town hall meeting when local resident Chuck Nunn questioned the wisdom of laying off so many veterans. His concern was shared by another member of the crowd who declared, "I'm not a Democrat, but I'm worried about the veterans." Marshall did not respond to either comment and left the room hurriedly, amid jeers and boos.

In other House member encounters with voters in the southwest recently, it was the same story. Veteran Louis Smith drew approving applause from an East Texas audience when he warned Congressman Pete Sessions that "the guy from South Africa is not doing you any good — he's hurting you more than he's helping."

U.S. Rep Stephanie Bice from Oklahoma heard, during a telephone town hall, from a self-identified Republican and former Army officer, who demanded to know how "some college whiz kids with a computer terminal in Washington, D.C.... have determined that it's OK to cut veterans benefits?"

"Get Used To It?"

And those skirmishes were before Secretary Collins doubled down on the bad news contained in the leaked memo from his chief of staff, Christopher Syrek, who comes to the VA from KPMG, a corporate consulting firm specializing in out-sourcing strategies.

In a March 5 video statement, Collins pledged his fealty to further elimination of "waste and bureaucracy." He claimed, of course, that VA healthcare delivery would not be disrupted

because no “mission critical positions” would be impacted. “We’ll be making major changes, so get used to it,” he said.

In response, SVAC Ranking Member, Senator Richard Blumenthal, displayed some buyer’s remorse of his own. He accused Collins of planning job cuts to “roll back the PACT Act”—which expanded health care access to nearly a million post-9/11 veterans—and impeding the agency’s “ability to meet increased demand in order to justify privatizing VA”

Just two months ago, Blumenthal and his fellow veteran on the committee, Ruben Gallego from Arizona, were among the 22 Senate Democrats voting to confirm Collins, along with longtime VA privatization foe Bernie Sanders (I-VT.) As their penance for that misguided display of VA-related bi-partisanship on Capitol Hill, they will hopefully be holding their own town meetings soon to rally their own distressed constituents, who once donned military uniforms but are now feeling very double-crossed by Chaplain Collins.

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