

Veterans Administration head ousted amid push for privatization

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30 March 2018

After several months of political infighting within the Department of Veterans Affairs, President Trump fired Secretary David Shulkin Wednesday, and immediately nominated his personal military physician, Dr. Ronny L. Jackson, for the post.

Shulkin had served as the VA Under Secretary for Veterans Affairs for Health under President Obama and was the sole holdover from the Democratic administration. He was confirmed by the Senate in a unanimous vote. Shulkin was removed due to a campaign by right-wing forces, financed largely by the Koch brothers, to privatize the VA. His ouster will now clear the way for private interests to profit off of the \$186 billion spent annually by the department.

Much of the coverage in the mainstream media has focused on an inspector general's report from February that showed Shulkin had improperly used government funds to finance a 10-day European trip for himself and his wife, ostensibly for business purposes, where he spent little more than three days in meetings while spending the rest vacationing. This included accepting tickets to Wimbledon, the annual tennis tournament in Britain. Though Shulkin criticized the report at the time as politically driven by his enemies within the administration, he ultimately agreed to reimburse the government some \$4,000 dollars for his wife's travel expenses.

If the same standard was applied to the rest of the Trump administration, however, there would be few people left in the cabinet. Steve Mnuchin, the Treasury secretary, used military aircraft last year for travel to the tune of \$800,000. Scott Pruitt, head of the EPA, spent some \$58,000 on chartered flights, Ryan Zinke, the Secretary of the Interior spent \$12,000 on a single chartered flight to Las Vegas to give a speech in honor of a new hockey team. Tom Price, Trump's former

Secretary of Health and Human Services, is the only member of his cabinet to be fired after revelations that he had run up a bill of more than \$400,000 in government funds for private and chartered flights.

In the months leading up to his removal, multiple reports emerged of vicious infighting between senior officials at the VA, who had largely been appointed by Trump following recommendations from his far-right backers, and Shulkin, their nominal leader.

Like Obama and other Democratic party politicians, Shulkin favors a more gradual approach to the privatization of the VA, so as not to inflame political opposition among veterans groups. This approach was exemplified in legislation passed in 2014 and co-sponsored by Republican Senator John McCain and "independent" Senator Bernie Sanders, which allocated \$10 billion of the agency's annual budget to reimburse private health care providers for services to veterans who could not receive an appointment from the VA in a prompt manner.

The scandal created by Shulkin's misuse of public funds was seen as a useful pretext to push for his removal by forces within the Trump administration who felt that he had not sufficiently promoted privatization. A report February 15 in the *New York Times* detailed efforts by several Trump appointees within the VA to use the scandal as leverage against Shulkin.

According to the *Times*, Jake Leinenkugel, the senior White House adviser on veterans affairs sent an email in December to Camilo Sandoval, a former Trump campaign staffer and appointee to the VA detailing various actions that could be taken to either remove Shulkin or bring him into compliance with their agenda. This included "using a continuing investigation of the secretary's travel to remove Dr. Shulkin's chief

of staff, Viveca Wright Simpson; replacing the deputy secretary, Thomas G. Bowman, with Mr. Leinenkugel; and replacing Dr. Shulkin with a ‘strong political candidate.’”

The article goes on to state that Leinenkugel’s preferred replacement for Shulkin would be Michael J. Kussman, who is closely associated with Concerned Veterans of America, a phony “veterans advocacy” group funded by the Koch brothers, which seeks the wholesale privatization of the VA.

Earlier this month, the *Washington Post* reported that relations between Shulkin and his staff had deteriorated to such a point that Shulkin had an armed guard posted at the door to his office. Shulkin had also requested permission from the White House to fire disloyal officials but was rebuffed.

Trump’s nomination of his personal physician, Dr. Ronny Jackson, to replace Shulkin is a further development in the president’s push to surround himself with personal lackeys whose principal qualifications are loyalty to Trump and a willingness to advance his reactionary agenda.

Critics pointed out that Jackson, a Navy rear admiral, has never managed a group larger than 40, and was now to run an agency that employs 360,000 and serves nine million veterans.

The VA is a chronically underfunded and corrupt organization that demonstrates the contempt that the US ruling elite harbors for the soldiers, sailors and airmen whose bodies and minds have been shattered by their experiences in combat in the service of American imperialism.

In 2014, it was revealed that officials at several VA hospitals had falsified records regarding how long patients had waited for appointments so as to secure bonuses. The delays in receiving appointments were directly linked to the deaths of 40 veterans.



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