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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

B-234 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

June 18, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We request that you immediately halt your proposed effort to memorialize in bronze the Department of Veterans Affairs' outdated motto at every VA cemetery. Given the economic and healthcare crisis facing this country, it is disappointing that you would use taxpayer funds on this unnecessary expense. More importantly, your announcement sends a troubling message to millions of veterans and their families that even in death they are unwelcome at VA. In a divisive time in America, we encourage you to create a VA culture that is welcoming. You can begin by changing VA's motto to reflect dedicated service to every veteran, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

VA's motto represents a historical circumstance different from the world we live in today. The motto quotes President Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address: "To care for **him** who shall have borne the battle and for **his** widow, and **his** orphan." Lincoln's speech, which addressed a nation torn apart by civil war, acknowledged the incredibly difficult work that lay ahead in reconciliation and urged charity, love, and kindness. In their original context, these words were about the obligation to care for *all* who had endured the conflict and for their families.

We agree the original spirit of President Lincoln's words was one of inclusion. But today, these words exclude millions of veterans and families that VA is obligated to serve, such as women veterans, LGBTQ+ veterans, and caregivers. In 1959, when then-Veterans Administration administrator Sumner G. Whittier chose Lincoln's words as the VA motto, nearly half a million women had served in the United States Armed Forces during that century alone. The motto ignores LGTBQ+ veterans who were forced to conceal their identity until repeal of Don't Ask-Don't Tell, as well as the transgender community, who still cannot openly serve. Millions of caregivers and survivors also deserve acknowledgement in VA's mission. We

recognize that the intent in using Lincoln's words verbatim was not to deliberately exclude; however, that is nonetheless the impact.

We remind you of VA's core values: integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect, and excellence. Specifically, we want to draw your attention to the values of respect: "treat all those I serve and with whom I work with dignity and respect. Show respect to earn it." We believe men and women who honorably served in defense of our nation are worthy of the utmost, unwavering respect both in life and in death. These veterans and their families deserve a final resting place that fully values and honors their service.

We applaud your recent decision to remove the headstones of German prisoners of war that bore swastikas and language praising Hitler. This was the right step in affirming that VA cemeteries honor the service and legacy of all who served and who fought in defense of American values of tolerance, freedom, and decency. As time goes on, VA will only serve a more diverse population including more women veterans who comprise VA's fastest growing cohort. You now have another opportunity to make a decision that comports with your leadership of an organization that must serve *all* veterans.

In addition to retracting your decision to further promulgate the motto at VA cemeteries, we ask that you:

1. Replace VA's motto with the following: "To fulfill President Lincoln's promise to care for those 'who shall have borne the battle' and for their families, caregivers, and survivors."
2. Share any documents, including the cost estimate, pertaining to the decision to erect the motto in bronze at every Department of Veterans Affairs cemetery.
3. Conduct a nationwide, inclusive of U.S. territories, evidence-based study of veterans, their families, and caregivers, oversampling for women and minority veterans, regarding their opinion of the motto and specifically discuss whether it is considered inclusive.
4. Provide the committee with a comprehensive list of all locations where the motto currently appears on signage.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue during these extraordinary times. We look forward to your response no later than June 30, 2020. If you have questions regarding this request please contact Matt Reel, Deputy Staff Director, at matt.reel@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



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Committee on Veterans' Affairs



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