

Mr. William F. Tuerk, nominated to be Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM F. TUERK  
Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs-Designate  
United States Department of Veterans Affairs

Before the

Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate

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Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka, and Members of the Committee: thank you for honoring me with an invitation to appear before the Committee. As you know, I have been nominated by the President to serve as Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs in the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. I am thrilled to be sitting, after all these years of working in this room, on this side of the table. And I am more than a little humbled.

Before I get into the substance of my statement, there are some people ? people who are responsible for me being here ? that I need to publicly thank. First, allow me to express my gratitude to the President of the United States, the Honorable George W. Bush, for nominating me to serve in this high position. Let me also thank VA Secretary Jim Nicholson for recommending my candidacy to the President. In addition, I need to express my gratitude to two senior VA officials, Deputy Secretary Gordon Mansfield and Secretary Nicholson's Chief of Staff, General Mick Kicklighter; without the support of these two distinguished men, I would not be here this morning. I am also indebted to former VA officials who I count as friends ? most particularly, to former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Tony Principi; to former Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, General Jack Nicholson; and to my boss at VA some years ago, former Assistant General Counsel, Audley Hendricks. And I have been honored with the support of the senior Republican Member of this Committee, Senator Arlen Specter. It is he who bestowed upon me the privilege of serving as Chief Counsel and Staff Director of this Committee during his Chairmanship. And it is he who first urged the President to consider my qualifications for a senior appointment in this Administration.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I know it is customary for nominees to thank their spouses, children, and other family members at this point in the proceedings. Mr. Chairman, my wife, Vivian, is not able to be here today ? but she certainly would be here if she could be here. She has supported my career at every step of the way ? but that is a minor reason for my devotion to her. I am most indebted to her for my daughter, Jackie, and my son, Peter. They are here this morning. If I may, Mr. Chairman, I would like to introduce them to the Committee.

Mr. Chairman, I am here this morning to ask that this Committee recommend my confirmation to the Senate as a whole. My qualifications for service in an appointed position at VA stem greatly ? but not entirely ? from my service to veterans right here in this suite of offices. Here ?

and also as an attorney in the health care practice group at VA ? I learned many substantive issues relating to law and policy that affect veterans and their survivors. But I learned more. I learned how to be a team member ? and a team builder. I learned the importance of garnering support across the political spectrum. I learned that one must earn the trust of veterans and their representatives, the veterans service organizations ? and also that that trust is earnable ? even by those who, at times, have to say "no" ? so long as there is common agreement on the fundamental worthiness of veterans to the Nation's respect and gratitude. In short, I think I learned how to get things done in Washington ? and, more importantly, how to identify the things that ought to get done in Washington.

These are the lessons I will take to the VA, if I am confirmed. And there are many things ? concrete things ? that I intend to get done in the relatively short period of time that will be available to me if I am confirmed. First and foremost, there are 11 new cemeteries in various stages of development that I intend to get fully opened and operating before I leave VA ? in Atlanta; in Detroit; in Miami; in Pittsburgh; in Sacramento; in Bakersfield; in Birmingham, Alabama; in Greenville/Columbia, South Carolina; in Jacksonville; in Philadelphia; and in Sarasota. I intend to find ways to enhance the VA's State Cemetery Grant Program so that veterans in less densely populated areas might better be able to gain access to burial among comrades in a place of honor. I hope to reenergize VA's "National Shrine Commitment" program so that veterans' cemeteries might truly be monuments to the men and women who have served. And I intend to leave the National Cemetery Administration with a plan to meet the burial needs of my generation, and with a committed, enthusiastic, well-trained, and diverse workforce. It is to the accomplishment of these goals that I intend to devote my energies and talents if I am confirmed.

Mr. Chairman, I do not believe in fixing that which is not broken. I know very well from personal experience how committed, sensitive, and responsive the employees of the National Cemetery Administration are. It's worth saying over and over again that the National Cemetery Administration recently earned the highest customer satisfaction scores ever awarded to any organization, public or private. My mission, then, will not be to change the National Cemetery Administration. It doesn't need changing. It will be to channel the exceptional capabilities and devotion of NCA staff to satisfy evolving needs while continuing to meet the superior standard that it has set for itself. And while I know that I am lucky ? extraordinarily lucky ? to have the potential opportunity to lead such a class organization, I also know that leading the Nation's recognized leader in customer service will be a personal challenge of the greatest magnitude. I gain confidence from the fact that I have experience in leading a smaller, but no less elite, staff ? the staff of this Committee. If I have earned their trust and confidence ? and I think I have ? I think I will have a good shot of earning the trust and confidence of the National Cemetery Administration's workforce and, most importantly, the veterans and survivors that they serve. I give you my solemn commitment that, if my nomination is approved by the Committee and by the Senate, I will work tirelessly to earn that trust and confidence. The President, the Committee, and the Nation's veterans deserve no less.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Akaka, and Members of the Committee, I would be pleased to respond to your questions.