

Ranking Member Richard Burr

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to you and our colleagues. I also want to welcome our four nominees and their families. Congratulations on your nominations and thank you all for your willingness to serve our nation's veterans in the important and challenging roles you have been nominated to fill.

If confirmed, you would carry out one the noblest missions in government – caring for the men and women who have served and sacrificed on behalf of us all. But, as we'll discuss today, you would face many challenges in carrying out that mission. Our job is to make sure you are aware of the upcoming challenges and are prepared to meet them, so that our veterans and their families will be well-served by VA, now and in the future.

For you, Mr. Baker, if confirmed as the Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology, one of your most pressing tasks would be to make sure VA has the IT solutions it needs to get the new GI Bill program up and running by this fall. At a minimum, this means that VA must be able to pay the benefits that veterans have earned on time and without frustrations or delays.

On top of that, you would play a critical role in VA's efforts to transform its paper-based claims process into a modern, electronic system. It's clear that the current process causes frustrations and confusion among veterans – including many from back home in North Carolina. So, if you are confirmed, I hope you will aggressively move towards a modern benefits system that will better meet the needs of veterans and their families.

Turning to you, Colonel Gunn, if you are confirmed as General Counsel, your responsibilities would touch on virtually every facet of VA. You would be called on to interpret the law, evaluate proposed legislation, and advise on health care and benefits issues. You would also be responsible for representing VA before the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. With the court's caseload at record levels, one of your challenges will be to help make sure veterans get timely and fair decisions on their cases.

General Riojas, if confirmed as the Assistant Secretary for Operations, Security, and Preparedness, one of your most critical functions would be to keep veterans and their families safe while they are receiving care at VA facilities. Clearly, VA cannot fulfill its mission of caring for those who have served, if veterans are hesitant to come to VA when they are in need.

On a broader scale, you would be responsible for coordinating VA's efforts to help the nation deal with public emergencies, like the H1N1 flu outbreak we are confronting today. The issue of our nation's preparedness has been a priority of mine for a long time. So, I look forward to hearing your thoughts on whether VA could take on a larger role in providing medical support to the nation during an emergency.

Finally, Mr. Sepulveda, if confirmed as Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration, your charge would be among the most critical at VA -- fostering a high-quality, dedicated, and well-trained workforce. VA employees are, without question, the backbone of the health care and benefits systems. They will be vital in making sure veterans are getting the benefits and services they need in a quick, effective, and hassle-free way. So, if confirmed, one

of your challenges would be to ensure that VA has a robust plan for recruiting, training, and retaining the necessary workforce.

Mr. Chairman, these are just a few of the challenges these nominees would face, if confirmed. I look forward to hearing more about how they would tackle those and other challenges. Also, I look forward to working with you to ensure that VA has a full complement of leaders who will work every day to improve the lives of our nation's veterans and their families.

I thank the Chair.