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## A SPECIAL GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS REPORT

# Questions for the Candidates for President

**B**eyond the universally uttered sentiment, "We support our veterans," veterans' issues have rarely been mentioned during the televised debates by the candidates vying for their party's nomination for President of the United States. While we hope that these issues are brought up during at least some of their scores of town hall meetings, speeches, and other presentations, we have not seen much in the reportage of these events that inspires confidence.

So, to inform our members and their families about some of the most significant issues of concern to all of us—veterans, spouses, dependents, and survivors—VVA National President John Rowan reached out to the active candidates and requested their responses—in a Twitter-like 140 words or less—to a quartet of questions we felt reflect our concerns. After three months' effort by VVA Government Affairs staff to corral responses, we finally received the feedback we'd requested from five presidential hopefuls.

Of the Republicans, the nine active candidates (active as of January 1) who neglected to comply with our request are: Ben Carson, Gov. Chris Christie, Sen. Ted Cruz, Carly Fiorina, former Gov. Mike Huckabee, Gov. John Kasich, Sen. Rand Paul, Sen. Marco Rubio, and former Sen. Rick Santorum. On the Democratic side, only Gov. Martin O'Malley failed to respond.

What follows are the replies from Donald Trump and former Gvs. Jeb Bush and Jim Gilmore in the race for the Republican nomination, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders battling for the Democratic nod.

The responses have been edited to comply with the 140-word limit.

—Bernard Edelman

### Do you support enactment of S.901/H.R.1769, the bipartisan, bicameral, multigenerational Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015? If so, why? If not, why not?

**BUSH:** Military families serve, too. I don't think anyone objects to studying the generational effects of contact with noxious chemicals. My understanding is that there are also some limited benefits in place for children with birth defects connected to parental exposure to Agent Orange. Given that the VA was designed to help veterans who took on burdens related to their service, I think providing those benefits makes an awful lot of sense.

**CLINTON:** I was New York's first senator to serve on the Senate Armed Services Committee and made it one of my top priorities to provide our troops and their families with health care and support they need and deserve. And as First Lady, I fought to have Gulf War Syndrome recognized and to make sure veterans got the health care they needed.

I strongly support efforts to identify and treat invisible, latent, and toxic wounds of war that continue to affect veterans, family members, and caregivers. As President, I will dedicate research funding and promote collaborative efforts to facilitate the development and expansion of evidence-based diagnostic tools and treatments for these conditions.

**GILMORE:** Yes, I support enactment of those bills. One of the great concerns of veterans—of both Vietnam and of the veterans

of the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan—is their exposure to toxic chemicals such as Agent Orange and the clouds of burning oil from Kuwaiti oil wells ignited by Saddam Hussein's troops in the 1991 Gulf War. Legislation such as S.901 to study and determine the levels of exposure and what the VA should do to ensure treatment of these veterans and their sons and daughters who also may have been affected, is also essential.

**SANDERS:** I am proud to show my support for this effort as a cosponsor of S.901. As the former Chairman, and current senior member, of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I strongly believe the cost of war must include the cost of caring for the brave men and women who have put their lives on the line defending our country, and I know that some of the health effects of war can take months or even years to manifest. Exposure to toxins, like Agent Orange, can negatively impact the health of the veteran exposed and have also been shown to cause birth defects in their children. I fully understand the value in creating a national center at the Department of Veterans Affairs that can serve as a centralized, specialized location to research, diagnose, and treat veterans and their family members suffering from the effects of exposure to toxins. . . .

**TRUMP:** Yes, I do support the legislation. This is long overdue and should be a top priority for the next President. Taking care of veterans is not just about taking care of them as individuals—it entails taking care of their families, as well. When elected, I will work to have this legislation be a priority for the total overhaul of the Veterans Administration.

### What would you do to improve the delivery of timely, quality health care to veterans eligible to receive this care?

**BUSH:** We know that millions of veterans use the VA and are generally happy with their care. I recently met a former Army helicopter pilot who was paralyzed from the waist down. He likes his doctors and he's happy with his care. But he's frustrated with a bureaucratic mess that is preventing veterans from accessing that care.

VA has nearly twice the employees as the Marine Corps. Not enough of them are engaged in the care of veterans. There's a flood of bureaucrats slowing things down. They should be getting out of the way of people with the stethoscopes.

I also think if we trusted you to serve your country, we can trust you to choose your own doctor. The Choice Act has been viewed suspiciously, but the principle of empowering veterans with more options is sound. I support expanding the Choice Act and dropping some of the restrictions on the choice card.

**CLINTON:** I am outraged by the ongoing scandals at the VA. Veterans must have access to a health care system that puts their needs first. And I also believe that we cannot throw our veterans at the mercy of the private insurance system without any care coordination, or make them fend for themselves with health care providers who have no expertise in the unique challenges facing veterans.

I have put forward a comprehensive plan that will create a new framework to streamline the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to best serve veterans in the 21st century. It would transform the VHA from primarily a provider of services into an integrated health care system that balances its role as health care provider, partner, and payer for veteran-directed care.

**GILMORE:** The objective I shall pursue as president is to ensure that what the medical profession calls the "standard of care" should be set at the same high level for veterans as it is for civilians.

Many veterans live long distances from VA hospitals. They should be permitted to get care in closer civilian hospitals when travel to a VA facility is too burdensome or dangerous to their conditions. In addition, I would work with Congress to ensure enactment of legislation enabling veterans to seek care anywhere it is available.

Delivery of an equal standard of care will require a real dedication to effective and proper management of the VA health system. There will be no more falsification of records to cover up neglect or denial of care. . . . [T]he hundreds of thousands of doctors' appointments still delayed more than 30 days will be promptly scheduled. We will recruit and hire enough fully certified physicians, no matter what it takes.

**SANDERS:** The Department of Veterans Affairs must be well-equipped to care for the unique needs of veterans, including the needs of veterans exposed to toxins during their time in the Armed Forces. Veterans deserve VA health care facilities that are up-to-date and staffed with the very best health care professionals. I strongly support VA's research mission because I know the Department is well-positioned to find treatments and cures for illnesses and disorders that affect veterans.

As President, I would ask Congress to provide all the funding necessary to deliver timely, quality health care to eligible veterans, including funding for a national center for the diagnosis and treatment of exposure to toxins. I would also work to reform VA's programs that provide health care services to veterans into the community, so veterans can be treated at the location that can best meet their needs.

**TRUMP:** I have issued a policy statement on how I will work to overhaul the Veterans Administration, especially in the delivery of health care. Veterans should be enrolled upon entry into the service and should be issued a card upon separation that allows them to access any doctor, anywhere, anytime. We have models for this type of delivery already, so allowing better access to our veterans seems a logical thing to do.

Also, I want to take care of the total veteran—not just health care but also making sure he or she has access to educational opportunities and mental health treatments, if needed. The VA should have to compete with the private sector to receive taxpayer money, so overall, the health care available to all veterans should be improved.

### The Post-9/11 GI Bill should be a boon for veterans seeking to achieve the American Dream. However, reports persist of veterans ending up with their eligibility gone and having no marketable skills, only seemingly worthless degrees or certificates. What would you do to ensure veterans receive good value through the Post-9/11 GI benefits in regard to being marketable in the civilian workforce, and that the taxpayers get their bang for the buck for dollars invested (i.e., Return on Investment, or ROI)?

**BUSH:** We have serious issues in our higher education system—colleges cost way too much and too many colleges don't properly prepare students for a successful career. One thing I've noticed about the Post-9/11 GI Bill is that only about half the veterans who start school actually finish. But do you know where veterans excel? Starting and running businesses. One of my proposals in my veterans plan is to allow GI benefits to be used to insure a small business loan.

Look, the GI Bill is an earned benefit, and the point of it is to give veterans more opportunities. It's consistent with my overall philosophy on government. It is a veteran and their family [who can] best understand how to use these benefits, not some bureau-

crat in Washington. So let's get out of the way and let veterans amaze us with what they can do.

**CLINTON:** The men and women who risk their lives for our country should have access to a good education and good jobs when they come home, and I believe a critical part of that is ensuring the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are a permanent part of our nation's social contract with our veterans.

We also must protect veterans from discrimination and predatory companies. That's why as President, I will crack down on schools that prey on veterans, including through legislation that closes the 90-10 loophole exploited by for-profit schools, and by banning schools from receiving federal student aid if they are found guilty of fraudulently recruiting students. My administration will have zero tolerance for firms that overcharge veterans and will help defrauded students discharge debt from fraudulent schools.

**GILMORE:** As a veteran, I went to law school, myself, on the GI Bill. I will task the Secretary of Education with the mission to work with colleges and universities to ensure that guidance counselors ensure veterans get a better "bang for the buck" from educational institutions. I am tired of veterans being scammed by fly-by-night study programs that offer dubious education and worthless diplomas. No GI Bill money should go to educational organizations that don't have a good track record of employing the graduates.

Anyone who takes veterans in their programs cannot go out of business and leave the veteran stranded in the middle of a program with nothing to show for their hard work, hopes, and ambition. In every instance, veterans should have both the best guidance higher education can provide, but their courses of study should never be dictated by government bureaucrats.

**SANDERS:** It is critically important that veterans have access to the best education and job training available to help them find employment upon separation from the Armed Services. Education is one of the most important ways an individual can secure a spot in the middle class.

In 2008 I was proud to help lead the effort to make Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits transferable to the spouses and children of veterans, knowing what an important opportunity the education benefit could mean to veterans' family members. As Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I worked to help make sure all veterans qualified for in-state tuition under the post-9/11 GI Bill. As President, I will work to ensure the Post-9/11 GI Bill works as intended, to connect veterans to educational opportunities that will help put them on the path to good-paying jobs. . . .

**TRUMP:** I will work to see the GI Bill returned to earlier models where the veteran has the opportunity to gain education or training as they see fit. In order to do this, we must make more funds available. We can have more funds available if we cut down on fraud, waste and abuse and also shift funds from programs that are not producing to programs that are. I have many veterans working for me that gained their education and training through the GI Bill. Let's Make America Great Again by investing what is needed to give our veterans the best chance at success.

### More than two-thirds of reported veteran suicides are individuals over 50 years old, meaning that the majority of veterans committing suicide served during the Vietnam Era. Have you formulated any concrete ideas as to how to address this situation?

**BUSH:** It's a heartbreaking number. I think that when someone decides to leave the military, they just think they're leaving a job. But service is

a way of life—with structure, and purpose, and a support network of friends fiercely loyal to each other.

We're learning more about the impact of traumatic brain injury (TBI) on mental health. It is a key area of reform in my veterans' paper, and I plan to increase research and scientific study in that field.

But we have to be realistic. More TBI research is not a fix-all. There's no silver bullet. Government plays a role. Family and friends play a role. Non-profits and the private sector play a role. Our responsibility is to make certain that there is always someone there, always someone to call, always someone with a good heart who can lend a hand.

**CLINTON:** It is heartbreaking to see so many of our veterans commit suicide, and I will work tirelessly as President to end this epidemic. The comprehensive plan I have set forth will increase VA funding for mental health providers and training to ensure timely and ongoing access to quality mental health care and substance abuse treatment. It will also encourage state veterans affairs departments to include mental health programs in state requests for federal grant money.

To combat addiction, my plan will establish guidelines for health care providers that recommend treatments for pain other than highly addictive opioids. And I will ensure we review and upgrade discharges of service members who were wrongly separated from service due to service-connected mental health issues, such as TBI, PTS, and addiction, to make sure they have access to the help that they need.

**GILMORE:** First we have to have a President who is a veteran, and has experienced active duty, and the challenges of reintegrating back into society after the military service. I am the only veteran in the race, and served during the Vietnam era, which is very different from other veteran experiences.

We have to have a President that understands the dangers of post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, and drug dependence. Drug addiction often begins when doctors prescribe pain medication, and then don't manage the drugs they prescribe.

I am committed to finding and hiring psychiatrists to fill the vacant positions at the VA. This is going to require a healthcare program that understands the whole man or woman, and is committed to treating the illnesses of the veteran in all respects. Further, attention to the families of the veterans is . . . essential to the restoration of the health of the veteran affected.

**SANDERS:** Suicide among the veteran population—and the U.S. population at large—is a very grave problem that must be addressed. As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I held hearings to better understand the crisis of suicide among veterans and bring together VA, DOD, and outside organizations working to address this serious problem. . . .

As President, I would work with the Secretary of VA to continue to break down barriers to care. We must make it easier for veterans to seek mental health care, eliminate frustrating red tape and bureaucracy, and treat veterans where they are. . . .

I would also continue VA's efforts to integrate mental health care providers within primary care teams, helping to identify mental health needs early. I would also continue to improve and expand access to complementary and alternative therapies, also known as integrative health care. These therapies can help to treat veterans suffering with mental health issues and chronic pain without reliance on potentially addictive prescription drugs.

**TRUMP:** We have a mental health crisis in this country. Many state and local governments have abandoned mental health support because budgets are too tight and revenues are too thin. The VA should be the clearinghouse for all veteran mental health issues. I will ask as part of the overhaul of the VA that we expand our mental health access and outreach. To do this, we will need to make sure that all veterans have the ability to get care where they need it and when they need it. Allowing veterans to get mental health services from the private sector greatly expands access and opportunity. I will commit to all veterans to see that this happens. ■

