

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20510**

October 5, 2012

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

As Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, we are writing regarding the report recently released by the Inspector General (IG) entitled *Administrative Investigation of the F[iscal] Y[ear] 2011 Human Resources Conferences in Orlando, Florida*. We are disturbed by the lack of leadership, lack of judgment, and wasteful spending outlined by this report, particularly at the highest levels of the department.

As you are aware, this report found unnecessary or wasteful spending and revealed a complete lack of leadership at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in approving and then managing two HR conferences last year. The IG found that the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration, John Sepulveda, delegated the management of these conferences to two deputies. The IG further found no evidence that Mr. Sepulveda and his deputies met to discuss the conferences. The report questioned \$762,000 in conference expenses. For example, \$49,516 spent on a video parody of the movie *Patton*, \$112,823 for promotional items, and \$43,017 in cash awards to the conference planners. We believe the resignation of Mr. Sepulveda and the reported placement of two employees on administrative leave is a step in the right direction.

However, the lack of oversight of these conferences did not stop with Mr. Sepulveda and two employees; the IG report also pointed to a lack of leadership from the Chief of Staff, John R. Gingrich. In a directive to the department dated January 29, 2009, Mr. Gingrich initiated for himself the ultimate responsibility on behalf of VA for approving conferences involving 100 or more employees. As stated in the directive, the purpose of Mr. Gingrich's role was to "ensure prudent use and control of [VA's] limited resources...." Citing the importance of Mr. Gingrich's role as the VA conference gatekeeper, VA officials testified before Congress nearly one year ago that the conduct of conferences is "too important for [VA] to treat casually -- that is why VA requires a very strong business case supporting each conference."

Mr. Secretary, against the backdrop of the fiscal crisis our country is in, no one can conclude that the one-page document Mr. Gingrich signed to approve an \$8 million budget (an amount, incidentally, that exceeds the combined, annual budget of the Committees on which we are proud to serve) for the HR conferences was an exercise of ensuring "prudent use and control" of taxpayer resources. That document is barely a permission slip, let alone a "strong business case." To say he treated his responsibility casually is an understatement. We can only conclude that Mr. Gingrich's role was merely to provide the appearance of oversight, nothing more. We believe that is precisely why the IG recommended that administrative action be taken against him. With the utmost respect for Mr. Gingrich's service to the nation in uniform and in public service, we believe the appropriate administrative action is his immediate removal as VA Chief of Staff.

Accountability begins at the top. In this instance, the VA Chief of Staff cavalierly approved an exorbitant conference budget under the guise of a process meant to safeguard against that very occurrence. A message must be sent to all VA employees that perfunctory execution of so great a responsibility is

inexcusable at any time, and at any level. Mr. Gingrich's removal as Chief of Staff is the unequivocal way to deliver that message of accountability.

We look forward to your response and thank you for your commitment to our nation's veterans.



Jeff Miller  
Chairman

Sincerely,



Richard Burr  
Ranking Member