

Book Review

It Shouldn't Be This Hard to Serve Your Country: Our Broken Government and the Plight of Veterans

By David Shulkin
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Author Note

The insights or views expressed in this review are those of the author. They do not reflect official policy of any of the institutions the author has served. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

Introduction

To begin, imagine the following: a president perhaps unaware of the schemes of his political appointees ... public policies engineered by these scheming "political"... a well-intentioned and optimistic, if somewhat naïve, cabinet secretary stripped of his ability to run his agency. What could possibly go wrong?

In this book, these images or themes are introduced and developed as Dr. David Shulkin describes numerous unnecessary and insurmountable obstacles placed in his path during his short tenure (February 14, 2017 – March 28, 2018) as the ninth Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the Trump administration. Shulkin identifies key players in the chaos that characterizes this presidency.

Former VA Secretary Shulkin is a physician as well as a former firefighter and Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Health (July 6, 2015 – February 13, 2017) during the Obama administration. He was the highest-ranking person to serve in both the Obama and Trump administrations. Shulkin entered government service because of his dedication to United States veterans and their families. He came to the position of Secretary of the VA well prepared and highly endorsed by all who knew him, including President Trump. His intention was to strengthen and reform the VA. The abrupt termination of his short tenure meant that he was unable to accomplish much of his agenda; although, ironically, his successors put in place some of his initiatives after his departure.

Shulkin's purpose in writing this book was to share his experience, present the facts as he saw them, and allow his readers to draw their own conclusions concerning the future of the VA. He remains convinced that the VA is a "vital and irreplaceable American institution" (v). While his narrative offers a clear direction for the VA, his story also reveals the tragic fact that the VA appears to be headed for privatization because of the corruption in American politics today.

The book's title reveals Shulkin's extremely positive feelings about the dignity of government service, both for cabinet members such as himself and for the men and women in uniform. He is convinced that those who dedicate a significant portion of their lives to their country ought to be able to trust the promises made to them by those in positions of authority beginning with Abraham Lincoln. Sadly, Shulkin discovered again and again that this sacred duty is too readily disregarded by those with power over veterans and others who faithfully serve these United States.



It Shouldn't Be This Hard to Serve Your Country has bi-partisan endorsement. This is fitting, since Shulkin gave his best effort to garner bi-partisan support for his objectives and policy initiatives. Such notables as USA General (ret) Stanley McChrystal, former acting administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Andy Slavitt, 55th governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, and former Senator, former Governor of Nebraska, and recipient of the Medal of Honor, Bob Kerrey, have given ringing endorsements of the book.

Summary

Because he was denied access to his records immediately after being fired, Shulkin is forced to tell his story without reference to official calendars and other material that would otherwise aid in the preparation of a narrative such as this. To insure accuracy, he was forced to rely upon his wife's meticulous record-keeping and other sources still available to him. Despite these obstacles, he engages the reader with seeming play-by-play precision as he recounts the events that led up to his being named Secretary of the VA, his leadership accomplishments while he held that position, and his sudden (if expected) termination.

The Prologue describes Dr. Shulkin's emotional roller coaster ride from the time he entered government service until he was fired by a Trump tweet. The author describes his intense desire to serve our country's fighting heroes in the VA, "once thought to be the only part of the federal government that was above politics" (4). The Trump era changed all that. Shulkin decries "the politicals," i.e., those who are associated with the Koch brothers' empire and others who are intent upon dismantling the VA. Indeed, Shulkin believes that these politicals can even bring down the honored tradition of public service in our country.

The Critic's Choice

The early chapters of the book focus on Shulkin's path to Trump's cabinet. The former Secretary's first official glimpse into the confusion and disorganization of the current administration is vividly recounted in the first chapter. Having completed his obligations as Under Secretary of the VA, Shulkin was waiting in Washington, D.C. to discover what would be the next phase in his life. Ike Perlmutter, one of the politicals, summoned Shulkin immediately to Mar-a-Lago for an interview. Although the call came during a meeting with Congressman Beto O'Rourke, Shulkin answered the phone, apologized to the Congressman, left the meeting, and caught the next plane to Palm Beach for "an interview unlike any other" (16). This anecdote serves as a metaphor for the incredible journey that lay in store for the next VA Secretary.

Once appointed to his post, Shulkin describes the bizarre events and encounters that led to his termination. The most sinister plot by the politicals involved a European business trip Shulkin took with his wife. As happened in many other instances, the politicals leaked inaccurate information again and again to the press, both liberal and conservative. Reporters willingly broadcasted the misinformation and Shulkin's reputation nose-dived despite his significant achievements on behalf of the veterans and their families. Although investigation after investigation cleared him of any wrongdoing concerning that trip or any other, that information was very slow to reach the press. By the time reporters realized that they had been duped, it was too late. Meanwhile, President Trump and his then White House Chief of Staff, USMC General (ret) John Kelly, gave every indication to Shulkin that he would be around for a long time and was doing a great job. The triangle became clear to Secretary Shulkin: the politicals were working for themselves, the President was clueless, and the Secretary would lose his job.

Meanwhile, Secretary Shulkin continued to meet and treat veterans in their medical facilities. He also engaged with veterans' support organizations, high-ranking officials in companies that provide for veterans' needs, and members of Congress who could assist him in his drive to support veterans and improve the VA. Approaching his new post with substantial experience in veterans' affairs, Shulkin hit the ground running toward the goal of dramatically improving wait times, quality of care, telehealth equipment and delivery, as well as utilization of the private sector. He worked to gain benefits for the Blue Water Navy and expand choices for veterans without privatizing the VA. All this he did while being sabotaged by Darin Selnick and other political appointees who schemed with the Koch brothers and their favorite organization, Concerned Veterans of America, to severely weaken the VA.

Shulkin clarifies his attitude toward the civilian sector in the care of veterans. He notes that "there is a big difference between providing veterans greater access to care in the private sector (which I support) and privatization" (327). The VA needs to do what it does best, i.e., provide essential services to veterans, and allow veterans to choose the private sector when it makes sense medically. The cost of following this protocol, as Shulkin thoroughly demonstrates, will save significant government funds.

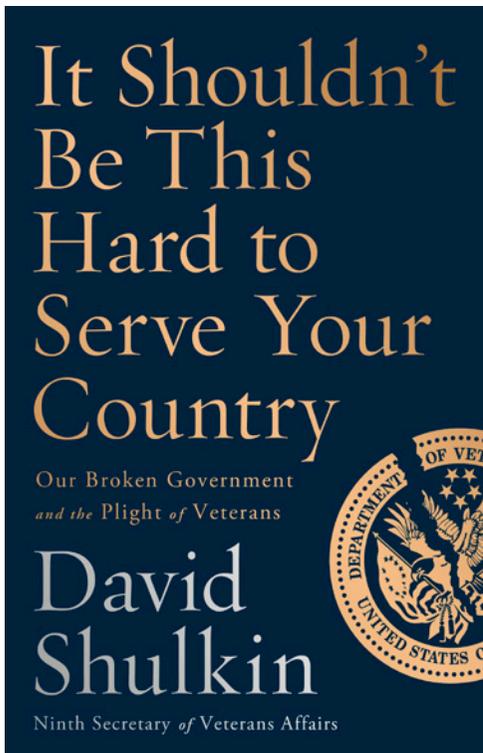
Shulkin's unwavering goal has always been to get it right for veterans. He was removed from office because of his dedication to veterans and not to the Trump agenda and political appointees. Shulkin's bipartisan approach was spurned and every request to include Democrats in photos or at meetings was rejected. Eventually, Trump fired him with a tweet.

Reflections

This book is a tale of betrayal, scandal, and lies. The author reveals the havoc that results in a president's loss of control over the political appointees who supported his presidential campaign. Readers gain insight into what happens when a country is run by politicals who force their agenda in front of and behind the back of this president. The narrative also helps readers to discover what happens when these politicals ensure that a cabinet member is powerless to run his agency.

This book is also a tale of integrity, devotion to duty, and honor. In this sometimes painful and always honest work, Shulkin accepts the challenge to rebut the bad press he received and set the record straight about his accomplishments and shortcomings. In short, he is finally able to tell his side of a tragic story. When a man does his job competently and to the best of his ability, it makes no sense to terminate him, unless politicals succeed in their insidious plot against him in "a disorganized and unconventional White House" (330). Such was the case in the Trump administration. Shulkin had to go.

The author emerges in this text as a dedicated family man and an extraordinarily competent and compassionate professional. Several times he acknowledges his indebtedness to his wife (also a physician) and their two distinguished adult children. Shulkin continued to treat veterans when he visited their medical treatment facilities so that he would not lose touch with them and their experience. His hopes and dreams for them ring true.



The reader is left to wonder how much better the VA could be if Shulkin had had several more years to complete the tasks he initiated. The Washington environment, an attack culture, is not conducive to the best interests of those who serve our country in uniform. The ultimate tragedy is that the VA is not and does not seem to be becoming pro-veteran. Shulkin states: "If the United States intends to honor its promise to take care of all its veterans, then we need the VA. It's that simple" (335). Otherwise, we forsake this moral obligation.

One final thought ...

This book should be required reading for all Americans. We may not turn our back on the problems Dr. David Shulkin experienced and foresees for U.S. veterans.