

APPENDIX O

SEPTEMBER 25, 1997

LETTER FROM HON. HERSHEL GOBER TO HON. ARLEN SPECTER
CONCERNING INACCURACY OF MONTHLY PERSIAN GULF WAR
VETERANS' CLAIMS STATISTICS



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

SEP 25 1997

The Honorable Arlen Specter
Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In your letter to me of September 15, 1997, you indicated your concerns about the accuracy of information we have been providing in our monthly reports of Persian Gulf veterans' claims pending and completed at the Regional Offices. I have personally looked into this matter and determined that your concerns are well warranted. To my dismay, I now cannot claim confidence in the data previously provided you. This is an embarrassment to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I could offer many explanations. Rather, I am writing to advise you of how we are going to fix the problem.

On July 21, 1997, I met with members of your staff. During that meeting it was brought to my attention that the Committee was experiencing difficulty obtaining needed information from the VA about veterans of the Persian Gulf conflict. Your staff asked that I designate a focal point in whom I would vest responsibility for coordinating all departmental information pertaining to the Persian Gulf conflict. On September 9, 1997, I issued the enclosed memorandum to all VA key staff advising them that I have assigned the Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning that responsibility (Enclosure #1). The Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning then appointed, on detail, a senior executive as the VA's Project Manager for management of Persian Gulf information. That individual, Mr. Charles DeCoste, has met with VA officials to begin the process to ensure we are obtaining and providing information you (and we) need which is accurate.

There *are* a few things that we have learned so far during this process:

- We know that there has been considerable confusion over terms. To address this, VA has developed definitions in concert with the Department of Defense. We in VA have agreed that we will use these definitions (see Enclosure #2) for all data efforts. We will discuss these definitions and the related data with Committee staff and resolve any differences.
- We know that we must coordinate better across all VA elements to design ways for acquiring information so that we can assure veterans, the Congress, and ourselves that we are addressing the specific needs of this particular group of the veteran population.

2.
The Honorable Arlen Specter

We will apply what we have learned to the successful and prompt accomplishment of our plan to improve our current situation. The outline of that plan is as follows:

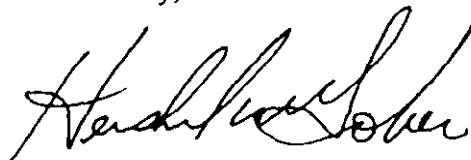
1. Assess and evaluate current data sources relative to Persian Gulf veterans. This will enable us to accurately determine information on veterans service-connected for diagnosed and undiagnosed illnesses. This will include determining what information is not and will not be available.
2. Determine our data gaps. Among these are our ability to identify specific "at-risk" groups, e.g., the 100,000 individuals believed to be exposed during the Khamisiyah incident.
3. Electronically match disparate data sets maintained by VBA, VHA, and DoD and establish a Persian Gulf Management Information Support System. This will permit us to track veterans through all data bases to accumulate information specific to each group.

It is my intention that we will do whatever is reasonable to complete this plan by the end of March 1998. We will provide data and information, as available, throughout the process, but only after it has been validated.

As I understand it, a briefing has been scheduled for Thursday, September 25th during which VA staff will be prepared to discuss this plan and the information we expect to acquire in response to VA and Committee needs.

Thank you for bringing the extent of this problem to my attention. We will fix it.

Sincerely,



Hershel W. Gober
Secretary-Designate

Enclosures

Memorandum

Department of Veterans Affairs

Date: SEP 9 1997

To: Administration Heads, Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key Officials

From: Secretary-Designate (00)

Subj: Issues Oversight – Tobacco & Persian Gulf Vets Information

1. The Department is currently addressing high profile issues related to Persian Gulf veterans and to service-connection for tobacco-related diseases and conditions. Critical to successful management of these issues is effective use of information, which highlights the need to manage related information as "One VA."
2. The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee recently requested that I designate a single focal point for all Persian Gulf related information. About the same time, the tobacco issue began to demand heightened attention. In response, I have asked the Assistant Secretary for Policy & Planning to manage the accumulation and reporting of consistent, "official" information in both these areas, from data bases resident in all organizational elements of VA.
3. The Office of Policy and Planning (OP&P) will function as the principal point of contact for external Persian Gulf and tobacco information requests. In addition, the Office will facilitate development of pertinent information by overseeing establishment of a multifunctional, relational data base on Persian Gulf veterans which consolidates data from existing VA, BVA, VBA and VHA information systems to create a single source of information that permits VA to effectively identify all we know about these veterans including the number, nature and trends of veterans health and disability matters. Similarly, OP&P will manage development of a VA-wide impact analysis of tobacco issues and will assist by providing information in support of an effective legislative strategy.
4. Significant policy and legislative actions may be substantially affected by decisions made here and elsewhere, based on information we provide on these subjects. The Assistant Secretary for Policy & Planning, Dennis Duffy, will be working closely with program officials to ensure we provide the strongest possible factual basis for those decisions, in both Persian Gulf and tobacco issues. I look forward to your support in this collaborative effort.



Hershel W. Gober

Department of Veterans Affairs Persian Gulf Definitions

Persian Gulf Era – That period of active duty military service beginning on or after August 2, 1990 and continuing to the present.

- Any individual who served on active duty regardless of location and who has been discharged since August 1, 1990 is a veteran of the Persian Gulf Era. This includes any individual activated from “Reserve” status and subsequently separated from active duty.
- Veterans of the Persian Gulf conflict and of the Southwest Asia theater of operations (see below) are subsets of the Persian Gulf Era veteran population.

Persian Gulf Theater - A period of active duty military service beginning on or after August 2, 1990, continuing to the present, and occurring in the Southwest Asia theater of operations as defined by 38 CFR 3.317. It includes Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the airspace above all of these locations.

- This subset of the Persian Gulf Era includes the Persian Gulf Conflict.

Persian Gulf Conflict – That period of active duty military service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations beginning on or after August 2, 1990 through July 31, 1991.