

VA Secretary David Shulkin misused government resources

In my 26 October 2017 column, I wrote about Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin's trip to Europe at our expense. Someone else was paying attention. According to a VA inspector general report issued last week, "David Shulkin improperly accepted Wimbledon tickets and airfare for his wife during a European trip last summer that cost taxpayers more than \$122,000," According to Forbes, Shulkin's net worth is over 17 million dollars. In addition, Shulkin's chief of staff made false representations to a VA ethics lawyer and altered an official email to secure approval for taxpayer funding of Shulkin's wife's flights.

The inspector general found the trip led to a "misuse of VA resources." Shulkin and his wife, Merle Bari, took the trip with three other VA executives and a six-member security detail supposedly to attend meetings in Denmark and a summit on veterans' issues in London. Nearly half the 10-day trip last July was spent sightseeing, and Shulkin directed an aide beforehand to plan the leisure activities with his wife. The aide made "extensive use of official time" to make the arrangements, investigators found. "This was time that should have been spent conducting official VA business and not providing personal travel concierge services to Secretary Shulkin and his wife," Inspector General Michael Missal wrote.

The inspector general recommended that the secretary reimburse the VA for Bari's airfare and take disciplinary action against his chief of staff. He urged the VA to audit the trip and improve training on travel planning and ethics regulations surrounding improper gifts.

In response, Shulkin said the report ignores key evidence and "draws conclusions based on subjective and arbitrary criteria." He said he had nothing to do with securing approval for his wife's airfare. "It is outrageous that you would portray my wife and me as attempting to take advantage of the government," Shulkin wrote. He did say he would comply with the recommendations to reimburse the costs.

Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate and House VA committees said in a joint statement that they were "disappointed" by the findings and urged Shulkin to "actively address" all of the allegations. "We believe that public officials must be held to a higher standard, and whether intentional or not, misusing taxpayer dollars is unacceptable," wrote Sens. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and Jon Tester, D-Mont., chairman and ranking member of the Senate committee, and Reps. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., and Tim Walz, D-Minn., chairman and ranking member of the House committee. Colorado Rep. Mike Coffman, a moderate Republican who has criticized Shulkin, called for his resignation Wednesday within hours of the report's release. "It's exactly corruption and abuses like this that doesn't help our veterans," Coffman tweeted.

In a scheduled hearing before the US House, Shulkin said he thought e-mail at the VA had been hacked and changed. This prompted MN Rep Walz to ask the Justice Department to investigate the supposed hack. At a time when Veterans are experiencing long delays at the VA, the director should not use government funds for his family vacation to Europe.