

The Right Ric for the Right Reasons¹

In reacting to the nomination of Eric (Ric) Shinseki to be Secretary for Veterans Affairs, the press has been quick to remind us of his differences with former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and his “criticism” of the Bush policies in Iraq. More than a few articles imply (inaccurately) that he was “fired” as Army Chief of Staff. Many seem to suggest that Rumsfeld’s rebukes are reason enough to award Shinseki a cabinet position in the new administration. They also stress his being the first Asian–American to wear four stars. While his ethnic background and his courage to speak the truth to power are noteworthy, these factors too often consume the lead lines in articles, obscuring the more important qualities that make Shinseki’s appointment so appropriate.

We are Ric’s classmates. As plebes, we sat together in the cavernous cadet dining hall at West Point and listened to General Douglas MacArthur’s legendary speech on our school’s motto of Duty, Honor, Country. It was a brilliant oration that gave fresh meaning to that “hallowed refrain.” Forty-six years later we are still moved by MacArthur’s memorable phrases and haunting delivery. But what MacArthur did for our motto in words, Ric Shinseki has done with his life. And it’s this personification of Duty, Honor, Country that really deserves emphasis when reflecting on his appointment to the Obama cabinet.

Ric’s courage and character were revealed early after graduation during his two tours in Viet Nam, where he sustained what for most men would have been career-ending wounds. Though they left him with a limp, he never saw his wounds as entitling him to anything. If he were to be recognized and promoted, it would be done solely on merit. And it always was, through his selection to lead the peacekeeping force in Bosnia and culminating with his appointment as the Army’s Chief of Staff. By then, Ric was known as the soldier’s general. He was devoted to the men and women on the front lines. His favorite pastime was hanging out with the troops and they loved him for it. Ric was plain-spoken and authentic. His inability to stretch the truth was as evident to his soldiers in the field as it was to the Senators on Capitol Hill.

But as clearly as his qualities were shown in his 38 years in the Army, they were even more obvious throughout the last five years since his retirement. During a period when individuals have made political and financial gain out of events far less substantive, Ric has gone about his role as a civilian in the same quiet way that characterized his military career. No tell-all books. No talk-show commentaries on the war. No reminders that he was right after all. Not that he wasn’t given plenty of opportunity to profit from his experience. There has been a steady stream of requests for his views. So why didn’t he leverage his reputation and perspective? Simply, it wasn’t his style. But there’s more.

¹ Fred Laughlin is the Past President and Clair Gill the current President of the USMA Class of 1965.

Upon hearing of his nomination, we emailed Ric with congratulations from the Class of '65. His reply to us the next day included this excerpt:

I'm using this opportunity to convey through you to all our classmates and their spouses my heartfelt appreciation for their unwavering support over many years. ... I had absolutely no plans to return to government, having declined all invitations to join any of the campaigns or endorse any of the candidates. I personally felt that a former Chief of Staff still lived with the oath taken while serving, underscoring nonpartisan, apolitical principle.

Such is Ric's humility and sense of duty. They are rare commodities in politics, but it is what Ric will bring to his new job.

In applauding Ric's appointment, E.J. Dionne Jr. recently wrote that the President-elect "*made what may be the most politically and morally significant choice of his transition.*" Dionne goes on to say that politically it will "*win respect and trust within the armed forces*" and morally "*Shinseki's appointment marks the vindication of a man who was punished for telling the truth in the run-up to the Iraq War.*"

On this last point, while we agree that the public may see Ric's appointment as vindication, we doubt that he himself would see it that way. Because in his mind, telling the truth needs no vindication. Honesty is its own justification.

Which brings us back to the right reasons for Ric's appointment. As newsworthy as they were, Ric's testimony to Congress in February 2003 and the recognition of his being the first Asian American four-star general don't qualify him to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs. What does is a professional competence undergirded by a profound sense of duty, an ingrained habit of honesty, and an abiding devotion to his country. Ric Shinseki has aligned his personal moral compass with these ideals and he will bring them to Washington. There he will combine them with affection for uniformed personnel, past and present, and ensure that they receive their due from a country that owes them so much.