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The Way We Treat Our Troops

By BOB HERBERT

You can only hope that the very preliminary peace efforts in Afghanistan bear fruit before long. But for evidence that the United States is letting its claim to greatness, and even common decency, slip through its fingers, all you need to do is look at the way we treat our own troops.

The idea that the United States is at war and hardly any of its citizens are paying attention to the terrible burden being shouldered by its men and women in uniform is beyond appalling.

We can get fired up about Lady Gaga and the Tea Party crackpots. We're into fantasy football, the baseball playoffs and our obsessively narcissistic tweets. But American soldiers fighting and dying in a foreign land? That is such a yawn.

I would bring back the draft in a heartbeat. Then you wouldn't have these wars that last a lifetime. And you wouldn't get mind-bending tragedies like the death of Sgt. First Class Lance Vogeler, a 29-year-old who was killed a few weeks ago while serving in the Army in his 12th combat tour. That's right, his 12th — four in Iraq and eight in Afghanistan.

Twelve tours may be unusual, but multiple tours — three, four, five — are absolutely normal. We don't have enough volunteers to fight these endless wars. Americans are big on bumper stickers, and they like to go to sports events and demonstrate their patriotism by chanting, "U-S-A! U-S-A!" But actually

putting on a uniform and going into harm's way? No thanks.

Sergeant Vogeler was married and the father of two children, and his wife was expecting their third.

It's a quaint notion, but true: with wars come responsibilities. The meat grinder of war takes its toll in so many ways, and we should be paying close attention to all aspects of it. Instead, we send our service members off to war, and once they're gone, it's out of sight, out of mind.

If we were interested, we might notice that record numbers of soldiers are killing themselves. At least 125 committed suicide through August of this year, an awful pace that if continued would surpass last year's all-time high of 162.

Stressed-out, depressed and despondent soldiers are seeking help for their mental difficulties at a rate that is overwhelming the capacity of available professionals. And you can bet that there are even higher numbers of troubled service members who are not seeking help.

In the war zones, we medicate the troubled troops and send them right back into action, loading them up with antidepressants, sleeping pills, anti-anxiety drugs and lord knows what other kinds of medication.

One of the things we have long known about warfare is that the trouble follows the troops home. The Times published [an article](#) this week by Aaron Glantz, a reporter with The Bay Citizen news organization in San Francisco, that focused on the extraordinary surge of fatalities among Afghanistan and Iraq veterans. These young people died, wrote Mr. Glantz, "not just as a result of suicide, but also of vehicle accidents, motorcycle crashes, drug overdoses or other causes after being discharged from the military."

An analysis of official death certificates showed that, from 2005 through 2008, more than 1,000 California veterans under the age of 35 had died. That's three times the number of service members from California who were killed in Afghanistan and Iraq during the same period.

Veterans of the two wars were two-and-a-half times as likely to commit suicide as people the same age with no military service. “They were twice as likely,” Mr. Glantz reported, “to die in a vehicle accident, and five-and-a-half times as likely to die in a motorcycle accident.”

The torment that wars put people through is not something that can be turned on and off like a switch. It’s a potentially deadly burden that demands attention and care. People shouldn’t be exposed to it if there is any possible alternative.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been world-class fiascos. To continue them without taking serious account of the horrors being endured by our troops and their families is just wrong.

The war in Afghanistan, the longest in our history, began on Oct. 7, 2001. It’s now in its 10th year. After all this time and all the blood shed and lives lost, it’s still not clear what we’re doing. Osama bin Laden hasn’t been found. The Afghan Army can’t stand on its own. Our ally in Pakistan can’t be trusted, and our man in Kabul is, at best, flaky. A good and humane society would not keep sending its young people into that caldron.

Shakespeare tells us to “be not afraid of greatness.” At the moment, we are acting like we’re terrified.



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