

OUR TROOPS DESERVE BETTER SUPPORT WHEN THEY COME HOME

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I'm always annoyed when people criticize my stance against the Iraq war by charging that I don't support our military men and women there. With very few exceptions our soldiers and sailors are the best trained and best behaved in the world, but they should be sent into battle only when the nation is truly threatened.

Our troops are particularly vulnerable when they find themselves in situations where they are not wanted. In such instances the psychological pressures of an unpopular war are added to the physical dangers of unconventional war. Our soldiers in Iraq were also not given the body and vehicle armor that they needed.

Tens of thousands of those who served in Vietnam under similar conditions are still suffering the effects of this unfortunate mixture of circumstances. We should be glad that Iraq War veterans are receiving much warmer homecomings, but we should be ashamed of what has happened to some after the parades are over.

Paul Sullivan of Veterans for Common Sense calls the Iraq and Afghan wars "360-365 combat," incoming fire coming from all angles and for one full year. (This term was obviously coined before the Pentagon extended duty to 15 months.) One of the most alarming figures is the estimate of 1,000 suicide attempts per month by our recent veterans. This figure was quoted in an e-mail by Dr. Ira Katz, mental health chief for the Veterans Administration.

At a congressional hearing last year Katz had reported only 790 suicide attempts for all of 2007, and he assured legislators that there was no problem. The director of the National Institute of Mental Health predicts that there will be soon be more deaths from suicide in barracks and homes than on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Most of the casualties have come from road-side bombs, and even with Kevlar helmets, the blast can still rattle the brain so intensely that subtle but serious internal injuries are the result. There is growing evidence that links these brain injuries with high suicide rates. A 2001 article in the journal *Brain Injury* states that "the possibility that patients who have suffered traumatic brain injury will commit suicide is high, and in many cases clinicians tend to underestimate it." In 2006 Congress cut funding for the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center because, as a congressional spokesperson said, "there were just so many priorities."

A recent RAND Corporation study estimated that at least 300,000 vets are suffering from post traumatic stress (PTSD), and 320,000 have serious brain trauma. A staggering 60 percent of all patients admitted to Walter Reed Military Hospital have brain injury as their primary or secondary diagnosis. Of the soldiers interviewed by RAND only 43 percent had been thoroughly evaluated for their brain injuries, and that only 53 percent had asked for PTSD treatment. The failure to seek treatment is partly the result of soldier machismo, but there have been far too many cases of officers and military doctors ignoring clear signs of mental disorder.

In 2007 Ryan Lecompte, after finishing two tours in Iraq as his platoon's "best soldier," was diagnosed with PTSD. At home he displayed all the signs of this illness: withdrawal (sometimes into a fetal position), heavy drinking, and fits of anger. Lecompte went to anger management classes and was given some drugs, but he did not receive proper treatment. Lecompte's superiors claimed that he was a drunk and that he was just faking his symptoms. The commander at Fort Carson supported that opinion and Lecompte was demoted and received a pay cut.

Some of these soldiers are so deep in denial or so dysfunctional that it is their spouses that take up their cause for them. Tammie Lecompte was one such wife. She wrote many letters to Washington and finally aides to Senators Christopher Bond and Tim Johnson forced the general at Fort Carson to send Ryan Lecompte to Walter Reed, where his condition was described as "major depressive disorder . . . with catatonic features." Lacompte is now back home in South Dakota where is receiving treatment at a local VA hospital and making a very slow recovery. The VA, along with Medicare, now provides the most cost efficient health care in the nation.

When Navy pilot John McCain returned from 5 years of brutal captivity in North Vietnam he received excellent care at two military hospitals. But from 2004 to 2007 McCain voted against every bill to increase VA budgets. McCain supports outsourcing VA functions to private companies, but some of these measures have been dismal failures. One such firm, Corporate Health & Wellness, went out of business within two months after receiving a government contract. Generally, as one analyst concluded, "every veteran who moves from the VA" to private care "will find it more dangerous and more costly." Contrary to widespread opinion, not all veterans receive health benefits; indeed, a Harvard Medical School study found that 1.8 million were part of the 46 million Americans without health care.

Conservatives who try to shame us with the slogan "Support Our Troops" should themselves be ashamed of Bush administration policies that have failed our troops not only when they come home but on the battlefield itself.