



December 3, 2009

EDITORIAL

## Neglected Warriors

Here is a horrifying fact about the human cost of the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: The suicide rate among active duty soldiers has doubled since 2001. Officials talk of a near epidemic as they warn that the pace of suicides among soldiers and Marines is likely to top last year's tally of 182 active duty members.

The numbers are even worse when suicides of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are included. There's an average of 53 suicides a year among patients at veterans' hospitals, plus an unknown number among the three out of four who never use veterans' services.

Congress is rushing to enact prevention measures that should have been in place long ago. The Pentagon spending bill for next year provides for significant increases in mental health specialists and services to close the alarming gap in care. It is also preparing hearings to examine the possible link between repeated deployments and suicide.

Pentagon commanders are consulting the National Institute of Mental Health for help in developing strategies to counter the deep-rooted tradition of soldiers masking their emotional turmoil. The chain of command must do more to encourage soldiers to seek mental health counseling — making it clear that their careers will not suffer.

The Obama White House is reviewing a policy, which dates back to Lincoln, that denies presidential letters of condolence to families of soldiers who kill themselves in war zones. There's about two dozen such suicides each year. It's important to take this fresh look at notions that dishonor attaches to soldier suicide.

Far greater candor is needed about all the factors and risks that can drive warriors toward self-destruction. Until that happens, the nation will never provide adequate mental health care and soldiers struggling with despair will never seek the help they need.

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