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The Lunatic's Manual

By **BOB HERBERT**

The Army, to its credit, tells the story of a middle-aged lieutenant colonel who had served multiple combat tours and was suffering the agonizing effects of traumatic brain injury and dementia. He also had difficulty sleeping. Several medications were prescribed.

On a visit to an emergency room, he was given a 30-tablet refill of Ambien. He went to his car and killed himself by ingesting the entire prescription with a quantity of rum. He left a suicide note that said his headaches and other pain were unbearable.

As if there is not enough that has gone tragically wrong in this era of endless warfare, the military is facing an epidemic of suicides. In the year that ended Sept. 30, 2009, 160 active duty soldiers took their own lives — a record for the Army. The Marines set their own tragic record in 2009 with 52 suicides. And this past June, another record was set — 32 military suicides in just one month.

War is a meat grinder for service members and their families. It grinds people up without mercy, killing them and inflicting the worst kinds of wounds imaginable, physical and psychological. The Pentagon is trying to cope with the surge in suicides, but it is holding a bad hand: the desperate shortage of troops has forced military officials to lower the bar for enlistment, thus letting in people whose drug and alcohol abuse or other behavioral problems would previously have kept them out. And the multiple deployments (four, five and six tours in the war zones) have jacked up stress levels to the point where many just can't take it.

The G.I.'s have fought valiantly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thousands have died and many, many more have suffered. But the wars have been conducted as if their leaders had been reading from a lunatic's manual. This is not Germany or Japan or the old Soviet Union that we're fighting. But after nearly a decade, neither war has been won and there is no prospect of winning.

Trillions of dollars are being squandered. George W. ("Mission Accomplished") Bush took the unprecedented step of *cutting* taxes while waging the wars. And Barack Obama has set a deadline for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan without having any idea how that war might

be going when the deadline arrives.

This is warfare as it might have been waged by Laurel & Hardy. Absent the bloodshed, it would be hilarious. I'd give a lot to hear Dwight Eisenhower comment on the way these wars have been conducted.

July was the deadliest month yet for American troops in Afghanistan. Sixty-six were killed, which was six more than the number who died in the previous most deadly month, June. The nation is paying little or no attention to those deaths, which is shameful. The president goes to fund-raisers and yuks it up on "The View." For most ordinary Americans, the war is nothing more than an afterthought.

We're getting the worst of all worlds in Afghanistan: We're not winning, and we're not cutting our tragic losses. Most Americans don't care because they're not feeling any of the tragic losses. A tiny, tiny portion of the population is doing the fighting, and those troops are sent into the war zone for tour after tour, as if they're attached to a nightmarish yo-yo.

Some kind of shared sacrifice is in order, but neither Mr. Bush nor Mr. Obama called on Americans to make any real sacrifices in connection with either of these wars. The way to fight a war is to mobilize the country — not just the combat troops — behind an integrated wartime effort. To do that, leaders have to persuade the public that the war is worth fighting, and worth paying for.

What we have in Afghanistan is a war that most Americans believe is not worth fighting — and certainly not worth raising taxes to pay for. President Obama has not made a compelling case for the war and has set a deadline for the start of withdrawal that seems curiously close to the anticipated start of his 2012 campaign for a second term.

It's time to bring the curtain down for good on these tragic, farcical wars. The fantasy of democracy blossoming at the point of a gun in Iraq and spreading blithely throughout the Middle East has been obliterated. And it's hard to believe that anyone buys the notion that the U.S. can install a successful society in the medieval madness of Afghanistan.

For those who haven't noticed, we have a nation that needs rebuilding here at home. Maybe we could muster some shared sacrifice on that front.

It's time to bring the troops back, and nurse the wounded, and thank them all for their extraordinary service. It's time to come to our senses and put the lunatic's manual aside.