

U.S. Still Losing a Brigade's Worth of Vets Every Year to Suicide by Penny Coleman

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It's Veteran's Day and exactly a week since Obama's exhilarating victory. I know that I, like so many others, am filled with soaring hope and feeling expansive. In truth, so many Americans have been hurt so badly these past eight years, and so many of us are invested in the idea of change, that there will have to be disappointments, and compromise and patience.

For some, however, Patience = Death.

"Every year we lose about a rifle platoon worth of Marines to suicide," Navy chaplain Lt. Wayne Tomasek recently told a gathering of recruits.

"There is no tomorrow. Tomorrow will be too late," Tomasek said. "Intervene now. Don't waste time. Are you up for that challenge?"

Throughout the campaign, Barak Obama repeatedly referred to the "sacred trust" he plans to establish with American veterans. "There is a U.S. military principle that we all admire: leave no one behind," he said. "This is a moral obligation. When I am President, we will not leave any of our veterans behind."

It will be a daunting undertaking. Suicides in the military have been climbing steadily since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Veteran suicides, at last count (2005), were occurring at more than 6,200 a year, and suicide attempts at about 1000 a month. For all the much-touted attempts of military officials to intervene, those appalling numbers have not been checked.

Last week, announcing a new five-year, \$50 million partnership with the National Institute of Mental Health to study the problem, Dr. S. Ward Cassells, Assistant Secretary of Defense for health affairs, admitted that in half the cases the Army can't figure out why the suicide occurred.

He then trotted out all the same old demons: marital or relationship problems, financial problems, drug or alcohol abuse — all those things which suggest the responsibility of individual soldiers — but then he had to admit, "We've reached a point where we need some outside help. We've learned a lot. We've also learned we don't understand it all."

Dr. Thomas R. Insel, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, injected an optimistic note of sanity into the stale conversation, announcing that the study will focus on the role that combat and multiple deployments play in suicide. It is *so* way past time!

In 2003, the Bush administration decided to save money by limiting access to the VA health care system. That exclusionary policy left almost six million veterans and their families without insurance. Among his campaign promises, Obama said that one of his first acts as president will be to allow all veterans back into the VA. That alone might help prevent suicides.

He has also promised to establish a "zero tolerance" policy for veterans falling into homelessness, and, to that end, he sponsored legislation earlier this year in the Senate (that Bush has threatened to veto)

which would provide support services — like mental health counseling, financial planning, and job training — to prevent veterans and their families from sliding into homelessness. Perhaps that will help prevent suicides as well.

He has also promised to reduce the benefit claim backlogs at the VA, to install oversight of the claims process to insure fairness and consistency, to help veterans, especially guardsmen and reservists, fight job discrimination, and in general, to make sure that the VA provides an example of single-payer quality health care delivery that will serve as an inspiration not only for veterans, but for all Americans.

Obama has made some very pretty promises to a population that can't afford to be spun. What is happening to veterans now is a public health issue of immense proportion. There is no time to waste.

Obviously, the most immediate and reliable way to prevent soldier suicides is to get troops out of harm's way -- bring them home.

On the first Veterans Day after the Obama election, I am hoping, in the words of the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "for a rebirth of wonder," hoping that maybe now, finally, "the American Eagle (will) really spread its wings and straighten up and fly right."

Penny Coleman is the widow of a Vietnam veteran who took his own life after coming home. Her latest book, [Flashback: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Suicide and the Lessons of War](#), was released on Memorial Day, 2006. Her Web site is [Flashback](#).