

## ***ABOUT 18 A DAY***

By Michael Ventura

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“About 18 veterans commit suicide on an average day” (*The New York Times*, May 19, p.26).

These are young veterans mostly, some of the 1.6 million who’ve served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The report continues: “Benefits claims are supposed to be dealt with in days or weeks, but it takes an average of more than four years to fully adjudicate a mental health claim. When a veteran appeals a disability rating, the process bogs down drastically. The problem is an overwhelmed bureaucracy and a chronic inadequacy of resources and planning.”

About 18 a day comes to about 6,570 dead veterans a year.

According to President Obama’s June 22 speech, we have lost “nearly 4,500” in Iraq and “over 1,500” in Afghanistan, about 6,000 in nearly 10 years of war. I found no figures as to how long we’ve been losing so many vets to suicide, but just one year’s count is more than a decade’s dead in two wars. They’re killing themselves with more speed and fury, and in greater numbers, than during 10 years’ combined mayhem by Iraqis, the Taliban, and al Qaeda.

The president did mention that many vets “still battle the demons that follow them home,” and he gave the usual lip service, promising veterans, “We will keep our sacred trust with you.”

Note his care to use the future tense. Two and a half years into his administration and it still takes more than four years to offer help to a traumatized veteran. In neglect, many end their sufferings at the rate of about 18 a day -- a toll, in one year, roughly twice that of those who died in the Twin Towers.

This is called a “war on terror”? It is a war that terrorizes our young veterans at a terrible cost to their sanity and their lives.

As Rachel Maddow ably reported in her MSNBC broadcast after Obama’s speech, when he took office in January 2009, there were 34,000 American troops stationed in Afghanistan. By December that year, Obama increased the number to 68,000. On Dec. 1, 2009, he announced his “surge,” an additional 33,000 troops, and promised to pull them out starting in July 2011. Next month. In his June 22 speech, Obama made it clear that only the “surge” troops are being extracted – 10,000 this year, the rest by September 2012, when, as Maddow reported, we will still have “double the number [of troops in Afghanistan] that we had when Obama took office.” When will they come home? Obama said 2014.

Has there ever been a war in which a country lost more troops at home and by their own hands than on the battlefield? Tens of billions get spent on new weapons development while the Veterans Benefits Administration is understaffed and underfunded. What words could adequately describe such a measure of disgrace?

It must be remembered – and history will remember – that President Obama justified his escalation of war with a lie as egregious as any told by George W. Bush. Dec. 1, 2009, Obama outlined “three core elements” of strategy, one of which was “an effective partnership with Pakistan.” He gave the strong impression of having secured that

partnership. (That's Obama's style of lying: not directly, but by giving his audience an impression that creates a lie in the air rather than in his mouth.)

He knew better. Obama was told explicitly that Pakistan wanted no part of it. Two months before his "surge" speech, "the head of Pakistan's chief spy agency... met with senior officials at the Central Intelligence Agency... in Washington, where he argued against sending more troops to Afghanistan" (*The New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2009, p.1). "Pakistani generals and diplomats argue... [that] America must seek a high-level political settlement with its Taliban enemies" [*The Economist*, Nov. 28, 2009, p.27).

Not three weeks after Obama announced the escalation and Pakistan's newly committed alliance, "parts of the Pakistani military and intelligence services [mounted] what American officials... describe as a campaign to harass American diplomats [in Pakistan]... American helicopters used by Pakistan to fight militants can no longer be serviced because visas for 14 American mechanics have not been approved" (*The New York Times*, Dec. 17, 2009, p.1). When queried, Pakistan shrugged. "Pakistani officials acknowledged the situation but said the menacing atmosphere resulted from American arrogance."

It's never gotten better. Sometimes the Pakistanis make gestures. Usually they make trouble. I have three manila envelopes thick with printouts for documentation. Pakistan's only consistent commitment to America is to take the money that China loans us. Lately, they've gone directly to the source: "China has agreed to immediately provide 50 JF-17 fighter jets to Pakistan" (*The New York Times*, May 20, p.8). One winces to think of China's leaders laughing as Obama drives Pakistan into their arms so that they, in turn, can use Pakistan to threaten their only regional rival, India.

"Pakistan Pushes for Drastic Cuts in C.I.A. Activity" [*The New York Times*, April 12, p.1). Just 19 days later, without telling Pakistan, U.S. Navy Seals attacked and executed Osama Bin Laden where he lived "comfortably within walking distance of the Pakistan Military Academy" (*The Week*, May 20, p.8). Pakistan responded with fury: "Pakistan Arrests C.I.A. Informants in Bin Laden Raid" (*The New York Times*, June 15, p.1). Good riddance to bin Laden, at last, but Pakistan's reaction was to arrest Pakistanis who helped make it possible. That is not an ally. Yet President Obama once assured us that Pakistan was with the program and essential to victory in Afghanistan. If they are essential, victory is impossible; if not, one must wonder why Obama said it.

Pakistan was notably downplayed in Obama's June 22 speech. What has changed? The White House isn't saying. In fact, departing Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates emphasized "it was critical for the United States to maintain ties with Pakistan" [*The New York Times*, June 17, p.12). Still, in the face of dead end after dead end, Obama's June 22 speech extends our Afghan presence to 2014, while 18 veterans a day take their own lives. At the present rate, that amounts to 19,710 vets dead by the end of 2014.

And what are we defending? "Family members of [Afghan] President Hamid Karzai and his top officials took millions from the Kabul Bank... Karzai's brother took \$18 million, the bank's CEO took another \$18 million, and a vice president's relatives got another \$19 million" (*The Week*, April 8, p.9). Meanwhile, this headline: "In Reversal, Poppy Crop Is Expanding" [*The New York Times*, April 19, p.8]. In the longest war of our history, we have not even checked Afghanistan's production of heroin. This is what Obama will continue to fight for until at least 2014? So far we have expended \$1.1

trillion on this war, and “the cost of keeping a single soldier on the ground now exceeds \$500,000 a year” (*The Economist*, Jan. 1, p.11).

Do the math: \$500,000 a year times at least another 60,000 for at least another three years. All of it borrowed. Plus 18 American veterans a day who die by their own hands and a Veterans Benefits Administration too understaffed, too undersourced, and too mismanaged to help.

In a long life of disgusting political situations, I’ve found nothing more disgusting than America’s liberals cowed into acquiescence because they don’t wish to demonstrate against the United States’ first black president. The situation is outrageous. The general silence of liberals is so disgusting a betrayal that mere words cannot suffice to gauge our portion of shame.

Had George W. Bush done the same, there would have been protests, demonstrations, something – something to retrieve some fragment of honor for this contradictory, confused, wounded, baffled country. But there is nothing.

Said Shakespeare, “Nothing will come of nothing.”

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