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Our Armies, Ourselves. How we treat our veterans says a lot about America's character. These days, it isn't pretty

ETCHED ONTO THE WALL OF A SENTRY BOX IN GIBRALTAR is an unsigned indictment from an unknown soldier. You imagine him there many wars ago, keeping watch and weighing his prospects for a normal life.

*God and the soldier, all men adore
In time of danger and not before.
When the danger is passed and all things righted,
God is forgotten, and the soldier slighted.*

President Kennedy quoted the verse in 1962 to the men of the Army's 1st Armored Division, who had been secretly moved into position during the Cuban missile crisis. "This country does not forget God or the soldier," Kennedy said. "Upon both we now depend."

How we treat returning soldiers once the parades have passed is a measure of a country's character and a government's competence. Often the war shadows the warriors: to the returning victors of World War II came honor and glory and the GI Bill. But for veterans of Korea—"the Forgotten War"—there was silence. Infantryman Fred Downs returned from Vietnam with four Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and one arm. Back in school, he was asked if he'd lost his arm in the war. Yes, he said. "Serves you right," he was told.

We've grown up since then, embraced complexity: it doesn't matter that nearly two-thirds of Americans say the Iraq war wasn't worth fighting; three-quarters say the government is not doing enough to help returning vets. They protect us when we hand them a rifle and say, "Go fight the enemy." We betray them when we hand them a pencil and say, "Now go fight the bureaucracy."

At least they're not fighting alone: Kennedy's promise to "not forget" is honored by every town that welcomes home its National Guard unit by helping members reconnect; by the ingenuity of groups like Sew Much Comfort, which provides "adaptive clothing" for vets with burns and other injuries, casts and prostheses. Mental-health professionals volunteer through Give an Hour to treat vets for free; pro bono lawyers help them navigate the dense disability-benefits maze. But private charity can't replace a public commitment to finish what we start, to do the long, hard, expensive

work of making soldiers whole when they come home.

Wars are like icebergs: much of the cost remains hidden, and the near doubling of the defense budget since 2001 does not cover what lies ahead. Better body armor and trauma care mean new life for thousands of soldiers who would have died in any earlier war. But many are broken or burned or buried in pain from what they saw and did. One in five suffers from major depression or posttraumatic stress, says a new Rand Corp. study; more than 300,000 have suffered traumatic brain injury. The cost of treating them is projected to double over the next 25 years. Four hundred thousand veterans are waiting for cases to be processed. The number seeking assistance for homelessness is up 600% in the past year.

In the face of so much need, too often comes denial. At a May 6 hearing, lawmakers lit into officials from Veterans Affairs after an e-mail surfaced from Ira Katz, its chief of mental health, on suicide rates of soldiers in its care. The subject line: "Shhh." The VA had been insisting there were fewer than 800 suicide attempts a year by vets in its care; the real number was closer to 12,000. "Is this something we should (carefully) address ourselves in some sort of release before someone stumbles on it?" Katz asked. Bob Filner, chair of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, saw criminal negligence. "The pattern is deny, deny, deny," he told Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Peake. "Then when facts seemingly come to disagree with the denial, you cover up, cover up, cover up."

It took a YouTube video to scald the conscience of officials at Fort Bragg, where soldiers returned from 15 months in Afghanistan to a barracks festooned with filth, paint peeling in pages off the walls. "Soldiers should never have to live in such squalor," said Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who saw the video. "Things happen too slowly." But even if the system worked perfectly, it would still take billions of dollars to meet the need.

Memorial Day was designed to honor dead soldiers; the other 364 belong to the living. Of the private efforts there is much to be proud, for they reflect the best traditions of the country the soldiers are fighting for. But the holes they are patching reveal a system in tatters; the very least veterans deserve from their government is honesty about its failures.

