

VIEWPOINTS

Waging war on vets' deadly enemy

Observing Veterans Day has always been a bittersweet experience for me.

It's a time to think of those who have proudly served and defended our country in the military. It's a time of sadness, as one reflects on the ultimate sacrifices so many have made as our nation strives to preserve its freedom.

It's also a day tinged with hope, as certainly there's an overwhelming appreciation for the domestic tranquility we enjoy, and the expectation that our country, which has lost so much over the past decade while fighting two wars overseas, will, if all goes as planned, be able to stand down soon.

Most international troops are scheduled to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014. U.S. and Afghan officials have been negotiating how many American troops will remain after the deadline, with several officials suggesting that a few thousand will stay behind to train and advise Afghan security forces.

Naturally, I've bookmarked 2014 as a pretty good year for our nation. Not all of our troops will be coming home, it appears, but next year certainly is shaping up as a time of promise — a time when the U.S. will experience a new degree of peace.

Turns out, however, that many of our troops are still at war — and the casualties are tragic and too high in numbers.

It's a war that likely will continue long after our nation

BETWEEN THE LINES



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officially experiences the "peacetime" that's supposed to arrive in 2014.

Cynthia Aden, Clay County veterans service officer spoke briefly at Monday's Veterans Day service in Vermillion, and dropped a bombshell.

"We are losing more service members to suicide than have been killed by the enemy in Afghanistan. So, if you know of someone who may need assistance, please encourage him or her to seek help through the Veterans Administration ...

"We need to keep our veterans and military members safe," she said.

An article titled "America's Vets: More Jobs, More Help, More Suicides" published by The Fiscal Times on Nov. 11 goes into more detail.

The article notes that President Obama spoke of an "epidemic" of military related suicides during a speech last summer to the Disabled American Veterans Conventions.

The suicide rate among active military personnel nearly doubled over the past decade, from 10.3 per 100,000 in 2002 to

18 per 100,000 in 2012, according to The New York Times. Moreover, veterans are killing themselves at more than double the rate of civilians, according to a Carnegie Knight-News 21 analysis. An estimated 8,000 veterans die by suicide each year, or an average of 22 per day, according to a 2012 VA study.

That rate has remained "consistently high" since the Iraq and Afghanistan wars began 12 years ago, according to Veterans' Committee Chairman Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL). Miller said that during that same period, the VA has increased its budget by 39 percent and its staffing by 41 percent.

The population of veterans over 50 — more than two-thirds of all veterans — is swelling with aging baby boomers, the Huffington Post noted recently. "Mostly men, they are considered more at-risk of suicide because they tend to be socially isolated; they struggle with physical or mental deterioration; and they possess easy familiarity with firearms," according to the report.

Some experts warn that the trend among veterans across age groups will get even worse despite aggressive campaigns by government agencies and private advocacy groups to combat it. David Rudd, a mental health expert who specializes in veterans' problems, testified before Congress earlier this year that 80 percent of veterans who attempted suicide and survived

had received mental health care from the VA one month earlier. He said that underscored the problem that many must wait an average of 50 days before they can gain access to VA treatment.

One can't help but reminisce about the quandary our troops were in about a decade ago. They were sent to war without adequate armor, and many soldiers simply purchased the armor themselves, despite assurances from the military that the gear would be in hand before they're in harm's way.

It was a topic briefly brought up during the heat of South Dakota's U.S. Senate campaign in 2004, when John Thune and Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, both of South Dakota, appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press."

"We're holding bake sales for body armor," Daschle said at one point during the two men's heated discussions that centered on the war in Iraq at that time.

Public awareness of the armor shortage prodded the government into action. I'm not sure, however, that simple awareness will lead to a solution to the growing problem of veterans' suicides.

This is not a hopeless situation. Susan Blumenthal, MD, in an article published by The Huffington Post in the fall of 2012, pointed out a litany of steps that either are or need to be implemented to help stem this problem.

Among her recommendations: More research

on the risk factors for suicide in the military and for evaluating new approaches to prevention and intervention. Recently, a Defense Department panel heard testimony from family members of soldiers who had committed suicide during their military service. Their message: A comprehensive action plan to prevent suicide among service members and veterans is urgently needed to illuminate the specific risk factors and to develop effective interventions to address this public health problem, now and into the future.

Clearly, it is an unacceptable disservice to those who have courageously served this country for them to suffer so. This nation has prided itself on treating its military and veterans with respect and care.

President John F. Kennedy, a man this nation currently is remembering as the anniversary of his tragic death approaches, once said, "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

It is time for all of us, as a nation, to commit ourselves to a new war against this deadly trend. We must invest the resources, develop innovative partnerships, and take the actions necessary across all sectors of society to prevent this silent wound of war and tragic loss of life among America's service men and women.

Share your JFK memories

Friday, Nov. 22, marks the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Where were you when you heard the news? How did you learn about the president's death?

We're interested in our readers' recollections of that fateful day in Dallas, TX. Please share your memories and thoughts with us. We will publish some of what we receive in the Friday, Nov. 22 edition of the Plain Talk, and will post all submissions on our web page at plaintalk.net.

You may send them to us via e-mail at david.lias@plaintalk.net. You may also mail them to JFK Memories, c/o David Lias, Vermillion Plain Talk, 201 W. Cherry Street, Vermillion, SD 57069.

The deadline for submissions that may be considered for our print edition is 5 p.m., Monday, Nov. 18. Memories we receive after that deadline, either by mail or electronically through Nov. 22, will be posted on our Web page.

PLAIN TALK POLL RESULTS

Do you plan to get an early start on Christmas shopping by visiting stores on Thanksgiving Day?

- No 18
- I'm undecided 3
- Yes 1

Total Votes 22

To participate in the Plain Talk's weekly poll, log on to plaintalk.net.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Plain Talk encourages its readers to write letters to the editor, and it asks that a few simple guidelines be followed.

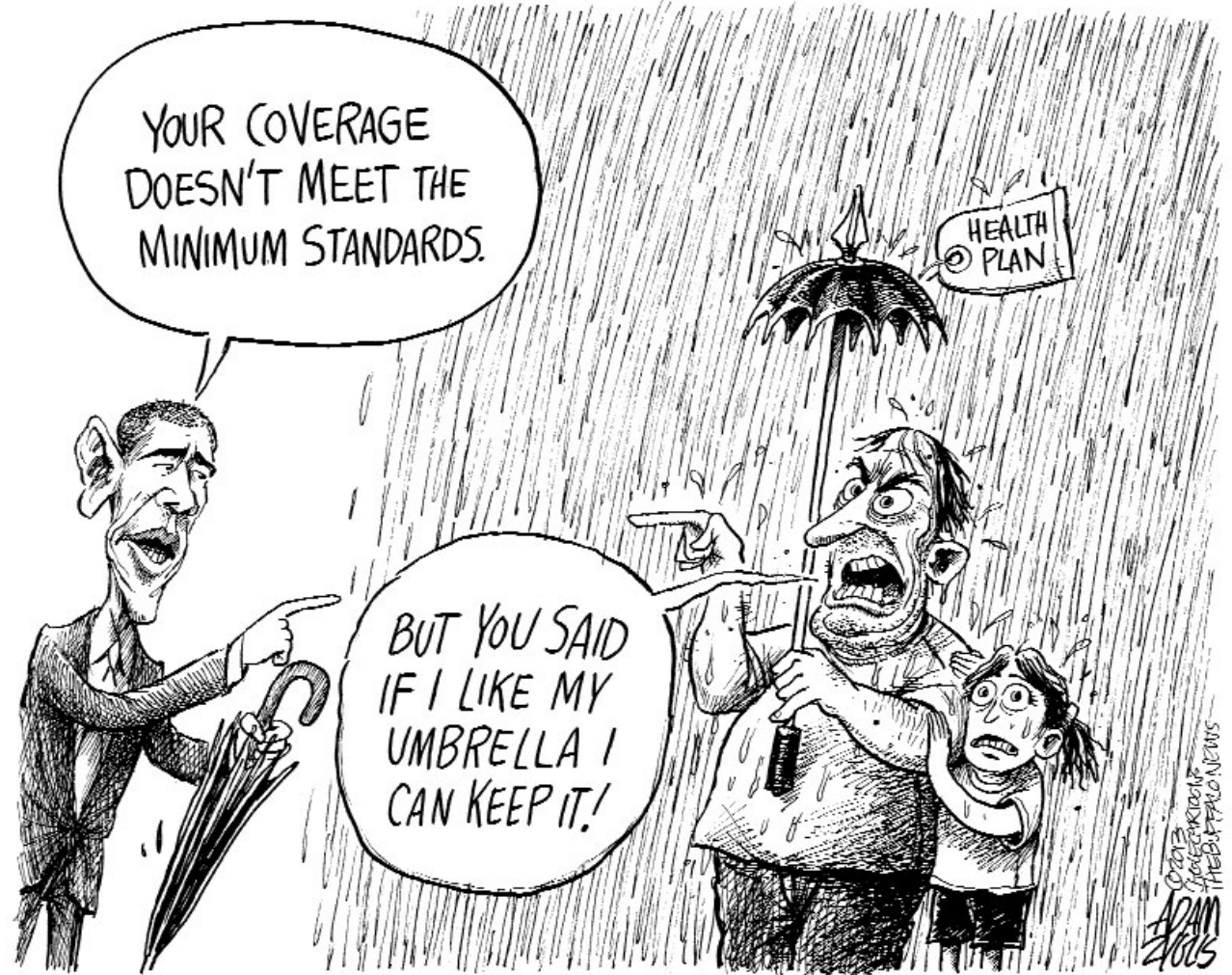
Please limit letters to 300 words or less. Letters should deal with a single subject, be of general interest and state a specific point of view. Letters are edited with brevity, clarity and newspaper style in mind.

In the sense of fairness and professionalism, the Plain Talk will accept no letters attacking private

individuals or businesses.

Specific individuals or entities addressed in letters may be given the opportunity to read the letter prior to publication and be allowed to answer the letter in the same issue.

Only signed letters with writer's full name, address and daytime phone number for verification will be accepted. Mail to: Letters to the Editor, 201 W. Cherry St., Vermillion, SD 57069, drop off at 201 W. Cherry in Vermillion or e-mail to david.lias@plaintalk.net.



Reaching for waning daylight

The time is pre-1970 and exhausted factory workers sigh deeply at the steam whistle's first billowy blow — wonderful music, sending them in squalls straining toward the exterior door of the Art Metal Manufacturing plant in Jamestown, New York. And later, whole bands dash in a dead heat for the Exit.

Once outside, most are sprinting, others galloping, while still others quickly walking in long strident steps to the gravel parking lot, where time takes on a wordless euphoria, a state only these can aptly define while airily finishing the 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. shift.

Their eyes squint out sunlight, as they leap with awkward exuberance and graceless might into wide-open arms of the day's remains.

With recurrent certainty, quitting time poses seductively, sweetly pronouncing a perennial consolation — the undeniable release from churning monotony left-on assembly lines, looming behind them as hostile timekeepers of their past, present and future.

There they go running with sweat-stained armpits and hungry stomachs — weary souls cheerfully escaping those four walls, as they end another forgettable day fluted with few breaks.

Systematically, their minds, previously pinched by the mundane, now churn as they dart searchingly

MY STORY YOUR STORY



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for the family car loaded down with bobbing heads of insatiably antsy children and tolerant nerves of patiently waiting wives. Now champions in the sprint, they will wear greetings of shouts, hugs and kisses as prized medallions around their necks.

Many in their prime, yet buried alive by their own futures sentenced within those four walls, are gleeful, unable to hide their exuberance to be finished with another long day of manufacturing fireproof metal desks, file cabinets, carts for typewriters — office equipment destined for who knows where: fisheries in Maine, car manufacturing plants in South Carolina and public libraries in Ohio. Perhaps.

For eight long hours, they have kept company with boredom — fitting, sizing, clamping, finishing — spending their time building furniture for hordes of faceless, nameless workers in different states — a growing inventory that later would export to other countries and continents.

The currency of their day now spent, they high-step it out of there, some with below par agility from aching bones melded in pain from long hours on concrete floors.

Strenuously, they reach for waning hours of daylight, not yet spoiled by nightfall. Pulses race while chasing by one another, ever advancing to finish lines in one-room flats nearby, three-room apartments down the way or tidy bungalows across town.

Nature's succulent, deliciously raw vibrancy are background to their jaunts: trace fragrances of lush vegetation filling the air, proud puffy robins fluttering about, rat-a-tat woodpeckers prodding hallowed deadwood, a flock of gulls harping overhead.

Look at them — all gritty, hard-working linemen — a picture of recurrent misery, running for their lives into what precious little is left of the day.

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Vermillion
PLAIN TALK

Since 1884 • Official County, City and School District Newspaper
201 W. Cherry, Vermillion, SD 57069 • Publication No. USPS 657-720
Publisher: Gary Wood • Editor: David Lias
Published weekly by YANKTON MEDIA, Inc. • Periodicals postage paid at Vermillion, SD 57069.
Subscription rates for the Plain Talk by mail are \$27.56 a year in the city of Vermillion. Subscriptions in Clay, Turner, Union and Yankton counties are \$41.34 per year. Elsewhere in South Dakota, subscriptions are \$44.52, and out-of-state subscriptions are \$42.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Plain Talk, 201 West Cherry Street, Vermillion, SD 57069.

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