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Under Trump, Military Veterans and Service Members Have Been 'Losers'



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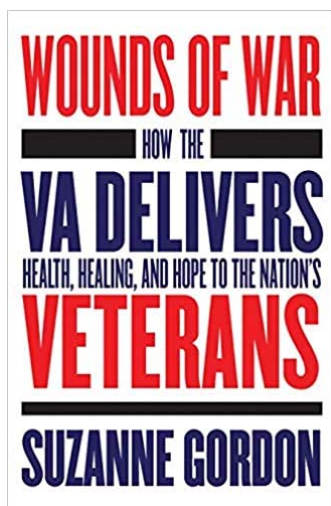
For the last few days, Donald Trump has been furiously denying conversations reported in *The Atlantic* in which he referred to veterans, active-duty soldiers, and World War II fighters interred in a military cemetery as “suckers” and “losers.” In one rebuttal to this “fake news,” the president insisted that he has “never called our great fallen soldiers anything other than HEROES.”

Trump’s opposition has worked itself into righteous indignation over his comments. VoteVets, the Democratic Party-backed advocacy group, denounced “Traitor Trump’s” disdain for those “making the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our democracy.” Presidential

candidate Joe Biden took it as further confirmation of his opponent's unfitness "to be the commander in chief," and a personal insult to his late son, Beau, a Bronze Star winner in Iraq. Democrat M.J. Hegar, the Afghan War veteran seeking a U.S. Senate seat in Texas, found Trump's remarks "sickening" and issued "a call to action to every patriot across the country ... to stand up for the next generation putting on the uniform."

What such critics have uniformly failed to note is that, under Trump, too many veterans and service members have been "losers." A far bigger problem than Trump's hurtful private comments about them is his Administration's policy of privatizing their health care coverage, which goes unmentioned by leading Democrats.

As part of this Republican outsourcing push, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper



is now trying to cut Pentagon spending in the one place where it's actually needed—the Military Health System (MHS). Esper wants to trim \$2 billion allocated for direct care for 9.5 million active-duty personnel, military retirees, and dependents over the next five years. This will force more service members and their families to go off base and use their Tricare insurance to pay for treatment in a private healthcare system that's currently overloaded with COVID-19 patients.

"If enacted," one expert told us, "these cuts will seriously jeopardize the ability of the MHS to fulfill its mission to provide the health care to which the DOD family is entitled ... the MHS is in a 'death spiral' during a time of national COVID-19 pandemic emergency." Two programs at risk are the DOD's Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) and Center for Deployment Psychology (CDP), both based at the Uniformed Services University (USU) in Maryland, which functions as the nation's federal health professions academy. At these research centers, clinicians study how to develop more effective ways of treating military trauma.

Suicide Prevention?

One of the major goals of these programs is reducing the high rate of suicide among current and past service members. According to the Defense Department, 541 men and women on active duty or in reserve units died by their own hand in 2018. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) reports that the risk of suicide among former military personnel is 21 percent higher than among other Americans. On average, 20 veterans kill themselves every day. With the support of Democrats who are normally Trump critics, the Senate just unanimously passed a bill that would accelerate VHA privatization by disbursing more federal grants to private groups working on “suicide prevention.” Members of the Democrat-controlled House could still choose to beef up the VHA’s own mental-health programs instead, but their track record isn’t much better.

In 2018, with bipartisan support, the White House won congressional approval for the VA MISSION Act. Under this legislation, billions of dollars that should have funded direct care for nine million patients in veterans’ hospitals and clinics around the country has instead been diverted to private-sector providers. Pandemic conditions in non-VHA hospitals and the related disruption of private medical practice throughout the country recently forced Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie to “pause” this vast outsourcing effort. But, if Trump is re-elected, it will be full speed ahead again for VHA privatization and, eventually, veterans’ hospital closings.

Meanwhile, experienced clinicians, who deal with troubled soldiers and veterans, fear that their efforts to coax them into treatment could be undermined by Trump’s “sucker/loser” labeling. In military culture, mental-health problems and even physical injuries are too often stigmatized as a sign of personal failure and weakness. If you’re depressed due to PTSD, a traumatic brain injury, chronic pain, hearing loss, or some other service-related condition, there’s pressure to not self-report. Instead of seeking professional help, the sick, angry, and suicidal resort to self-medication, via drugs and alcohol, or worse.

Scams and Rip-Offs

The abuse of veterans and active-duty soldiers does not end with health care. In 2017, Vice President Mike Pence broke a tie and was the deciding vote in the Senate for a bill that repealed a Consumer Financial Protection Bureau rule allowing class action lawsuits against financial predators. Veteran and military groups staunchly opposed the bill, as military communities are prime targets for scams and rip-offs, and service members who frequently travel lack the time or resources to pursue individual arbitration claims. In other words, Trump made suckers of military families, who sacrifice to preserve constitutional

rights like the right to a trial before peers. This may also increase the risk of military suicide since financial instability is, as Lt. Col. Samuel R. Cook has argued, “suicide’s weapon of choice.”

Trump’s statements are hardly the way “to bind up the nation’s wounds” or “care for him who shall have borne the battle,” as Abraham Lincoln said. But the president’s denigration of soldiers, dead and alive—from John McCain to the next unknown veteran suicide victim—is not playing well in the ranks. Recent polling by Military Times confirms a further decline in Trump’s popularity within the military since 2016. Forty-one percent of active-duty personnel surveyed said they were voting for Biden, while 37 percent still favored Trump. Nearly 50 percent of those surveyed held an unfavorable view of Trump, a reversal from his 46-37 favorability ratings in 2017. Among officers, the disapproval rate was even higher, at 59 percent, with more than half expressing strong disapproval.

On November 3, the nation’s 20 million veterans, who voted disproportionately for Trump over Hillary Clinton four years ago, will have an opportunity to correct their own mistake. What better way to prove they’re not suckers than by helping to defeat a politician who privately disses and dismisses them—through word and deed—while publicly lauding their heroism?

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