

Between the lines

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"I want to speak directly to our men and women on the front lines. You have done everything we've asked of you and more. Our nation is grateful for your courage."

So spoke President George W. Bush in his State of the Union speech last week. We don't question his sincerity. But our nation - and especially Bush's administration - seems to have a funny way of showing its gratitude.

Item: The number of regular Army and National Guard troops who killed themselves, or tried to, was up again last year. As many as 121 soldiers committed suicide in 2007, a 20 percent increase over 2006. Since 2002, the number who attempted or committed suicide has increased six-fold, from 350 to about 2,100 last year.

The leading cause, military officials say, is failed personal relationships, followed by legal and financial problems. Speaking of difficult personal relationships, the Pentagon extended normal combat tours from 12 to 15 months last year.

Item: Army officials at Fort Drum in upstate New York last year instructed Veterans Affairs representatives not to help injured soldiers fill out disability paperwork, National Public Radio reported last week. The paperwork is crucial to get disability payments and qualify for continued care.

Army policy allows the help. But members of a special Army investigative "Tiger Team" that visited Fort Drum last year apparently decided it was inappropriate. They asked administrators at the VA's regional office in Buffalo to stop the practice.

In 2006, NPR reported that soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder at Fort Carson, Colo., were being forced out of the military, shunned or discouraged from getting care.

Item: Nine months after VA Secretary Jim Nicholson promised to set up new traumatic brain injury screenings for combat veterans, the VA is having trouble working out the kinks. Officials still are trying to decide if the tests are reliable. Meanwhile, thousands of Iraq war veterans may have received inadequate care because doctors failed to notify them they'd tested positive.

Item: About one in every six soldiers or Marines returning from Iraq has suffered at least one concussion,

often from roadside blasts, according to a large-scale study paid for by the Army and published last week the New England Journal of Medicine. Those soldiers are at increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Soldiers involved in the study had been home from Iraq for three to four months. Those who'd had concussions were more likely to report lingering symptoms such as headache, poor sleep and balance problems.

In his speech last week, Bush said "we must keep faith with all those who have risked life and limb so that we might live in freedom and peace." He has said something similar in each State of the Union speech since he ordered the Iraq invasion in 2003. But there is an obvious disconnect between his words and his actions.

Somewhere between the well-crafted lines of Bush's speech and the blurred front lines of wars he started in Iraq and Afghanistan lie thousands of injured veterans who still aren't getting the care they need or the benefits they have been promised. Bush has 11 months to make good on his promise. Congress should help him. Americans should insist on it.

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