

This month Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki announced the addition of some 1,900 mental health nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers to its existing workforce of 20,590 mental health staff in attempt to get a handle on the epidemic of suicides among combat veterans. Unfortunately, when presidents misuse our military on an unprecedented scale – and Congress lets them get away with it – the resulting stress causes military suicides to increase dramatically, both among active duty and retired service members. In fact, military deaths from suicide far outnumber combat deaths. According to an article in the Air Force Times this month, suicides among airmen are up 40 percent over last year.

Considering the multiple deployments service members are forced to endure as the war in Afghanistan stretches into its second decade, these figures are sadly unsurprising.

Ironically, the same VA Secretary Eric Shinseki was forced to retire from the Army by President Bush for daring to suggest that an invasion and occupation of Iraq would not be the cakewalk that neoconservatives promised. Then Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who is not a military veteran, claimed that General Shinseki was "wildly off the mark" for suggesting that several hundred thousand soldiers would be required to secure post-invasion Iraq. Now we see who was right on the costs of war.

In addition to the hidden human costs of our seemingly endless wars are the economic costs. In 2008, Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz wrote "The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict." Stiglitz illustrates that taking into account the total costs of the war, including replacing military equipment and caring for thousands of wounded veterans for the rest of their lives, the Iraq war will cost us orders of magnitude greater than the 50 billion dollars promised by the White House before the invasion. Add all the costs of Afghanistan into the mix, wrote Stiglitz, and the bill tops \$7 trillion.

Is it any wonder why our infrastructure at home crumbles, healthcare is more expensive and harder to come by, and unemployment together with inflation continue their steady rise? Imagine the productive power of that seven trillion dollars in our private sector. What could it have done were it in private hands; what may have been discovered, what diseases might have been cured, what might have been built, how many productive jobs created?

With the bills coming due for our decade of reckless military action, the cuts rarely come from

the well-connected military industrial complex with their lobbyists and powerful political allies. In President Obama's 2013 budget, troop strength is to be cut significantly while enormously expensive and largely superfluous weapons systems emerge essentially unscathed. As defense analyst Winslow Wheeler wrote this month, costs of the "next generation" fighter, the F-35, will increase by another \$289 million. This despite the fact that the fighter is badly designed and already outdated, a "virtual flying piano" writes Wheeler.

The military contractors building monstrosities like the F-35 are politically connected and thus protected. Unfortunately, returning military veterans are less so. In the same 2013 budget, the White House proposes to increase medical and pharmaceutical costs paid by veterans while reducing their cost of living increases. And how many years of increasingly alarming mental illness and suicide statistics has it taken for the modest increase in resources to be made available?

Those who predicted the real costs of our decade of global military conquest were ridiculed, scoffed at, and fired. History has now shown us that much of what they warned was correct. America is clearly less secure after a decade of unnecessary wars. It is more vulnerable and closer to economic collapse. Its military is nearly broken from years of abuse. Will we come back to our senses?