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The Forever War of the Mind

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By Max Cleland

War is haunting. Death. Pain. Blood. Dismemberment. A buddy dying in your arms. Imagine trying to get over the memory of a bomb splitting a Humvee apart beneath your feet and taking your leg with it. The first time I saw the stilled bodies of American soldiers dead on the battlefield is as stark and brutal a memory as the one of the grenade that ripped off my right arm and both legs.

No, the soldier never forgets. But neither should the rest of us.

When I was wounded, post-traumatic stress disorder did not officially exist. It was recognized as a legitimate illness only in 1978, during my tenure as head of the Veterans Administration under President Jimmy Carter. Today, it is not only recognized, but the Army and the V.A. know how to treat it. I can offer no better testament than my own recovery.

There are estimates that 35 percent of the soldiers who fought in Iraq will suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. I'm sure the numbers for Afghanistan are similar. Researchers have found that nearly half of those returning with

the disorder have suicidal thoughts. Suicide among active-duty soldiers is on pace to hit a record total this year. More than 1.7 million soldiers have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Imagine that some 600,000 of them will have crippling memories, trapped in a vivid and horrible past from which they can't seem to escape.

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We have a family Army today, unlike the Army seen in any generation before. We have fought these wars with the Reserves and the National Guard. Fathers, mothers, soccer coaches and teachers are the soldiers coming home. Whether they like it or not, they will bring their war experiences home to their families and communities.