

February 4, 2009

President Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

May I offer my congratulations on your election to lead us. We have put great trust in you; indeed, we have offered you our faith that you will work to put us back on the path that our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution have set for us—the path that we must follow to not only reach our full potential, but to help bring peace, compassion, and harmony to this world that grows closer each day.

You have taken on a formidable task as there are entrenched forces that do not always seek what is best for us as a whole—forces that will seek to keep the often uneven, often so unjust, status quo as it is. But there is a better path, a path of conscience, a path of righteousness, a path, indeed, of what simply is right.

It has been my great privilege to work as editor of the memory book of the West Point Class of 1968—*Both Sides of the Wall: Reflections of the West Point Class of 1968*. I have learned a great deal from this incredible group of men who have given everything to our country. One of the things they live by, which they have shared with me, is the determination to follow the path laid out in the oath they all took: *to choose the harder right*. I can only begin to imagine how many times a day you will be challenged to do just that.

I am writing today as an author, an historian, an educator, an editor, and a long time Veteran Advocate. When it comes to our Veterans, as a people, we have yet to choose that harder right. I believe that we have what I call an unwritten Covenant with those who put all on the line for us—*Be there for us, and we will be there for you*. We clearly have not kept that Covenant.

Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Eric Newhouse has spelled out for us just how poorly we have tended to our Veterans in his book, *Faces of Combat, PTSD and TBI: One Journalist's Crusade to Improve Treatment for Our Veterans*. His words, which obviously come from a heart and soul touched by our Veterans, ring out clearly, like the proverbial fire bell in the night, that there is something deeply inadequate in the response we give—often do not give at all—to the needs of those who come home with the horror of war on their skin, in their blood, in their hearts, dug into their souls.

No one—no one—comes home from war the same as the person who left. We have yet to recognize that. We have yet to recognize the intense nightmare that it is to live and breathe each hour or each day with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder;

we have yet to recognize the scope of the “signature wound” of Traumatic Brain Injury suffered in Iraq. Even moderate estimates put the latter figure at over 150,000.

We have yet to even begin to fully face up to the impact of Agent Orange, or of Depleted Uranium.

Mr. Newhouse, who has been called, and is, a “Crusading Journalist,” has documented the suffering, neglect, and trauma of those we have sent to war. PTSD has existed all through history among those who have known the verity of war. Call it Soldier’s Heart, Battle Fatigue, or PTSD, it is there, and it is real.

I have long felt that one of the greatest legacies of the Viet Nam War was that soldiers started telling the truth about war and what it does to the hearts of soldiers. I cannot begin to tell you how many of them I have spoken with over the years carry not only the wounds of war, but the wounds inflicted by the neglect and, often, scorn inflicted on them by fellow citizens. Despite the recognition of PTSD as a reality, the needs of those suffering from it are not yet truly being met either for my generation, or for all the combatants of subsequent wars.

Mr. Newhouse presents these Veterans to us in all their pain—in all their trauma, physical and mental; in their neglect at different VA facilities; in the problems of anger and violence when they come home without time, direction, or assistance in turning off the anger they were trained to muster to engage in mortal combat with fellow human beings.

Not only does Mr. Newhouse present this; he offers suggestions on how to improve the position of Veterans, and describes the model that the state of Montana is engaging in at the home level.

It is without doubt that your hours are filled. It is also without doubt that the hours of our soldiers, of their families, have been filled with fear; with courage; with unimaginable horrors that we civilians cannot begin to truly comprehend. Mr. Newhouse has brought us those stories, the stories of individuals and their families attempting to cope with what engaging in war has brought to their firesides and souls.

I ask you, as a fellow citizen, to please find the time to give to this important work by Eric Newhouse. If you could recommend this book to our citizenry it would wake them up to what our actively engaged and returning troops both carry. His words spell out clearly how much stress has been put on our National Guard, most of whom never expected to be sent outside our national borders. Mr. Newhouse’s reporting of the tenuous, and often dangerous, position of women in our military would wake up our citizenry to demand better for them.

An enlightened public behind you—and that is what Mr. Newhouse is offering, enlightenment—would support your insistence from the grass roots of this country that we keep that Covenant: *Be there for us, and we will be there for you.* Public support would make that *harder right* a path quickly paved, with proper treatment, with respect, without months and months of waiting for any kind of care. They went when they were called. They did not wait months and months to stand for us. How can we do less than give them all they need, when they need it, with respect for all they have given?

I thank you for your kind attention.

God Bless you and yours.

God Bless, and guide, America.

Sincerely, Ms. Remy Benoit