

Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2019

Remarks on Signing an Executive Order on a National Roadmap To Empower Veterans and End Suicide and an Exchange With Reporters

March 5, 2019

The President. Thank you very much. I very much appreciate it.

Tornadoes in Southeastern and Gulf Coast States

I'll be heading to Alabama on Friday. So I think some of you will be joining me, but we'll be going down Friday. And we'll let you know times and when we're leaving and how long we'll be there. It's been a tragic situation, but a lot of good work is being done. And we've been in constant touch with the Governor and also the Governor of Georgia. And so we'll be going to the area. We'll be—Alabama and the general area. We'll see Governor Ivey. So that'll be on Friday. Thank you very much.

Executive Order on a National Roadmap To Empower Veterans and End Suicide

And we're here today to confront a solemn crisis that requires urgent national action. In a few moments, I will sign an Executive order addressing one of our Nation's most heartbreaking tragedies: veteran suicide.

Our mission is to mobilize every level of American society to save the lives of our great veterans and support our heroes in need. We've worked very hard on choice for the veterans and so many other programs and done a really great job in so many ways. Veteran suicide is something that's been an incredible thing to watch, hard to believe. It's tragic. Today we can help end this crisis.

I would like to thank Secretary Wilkie for being here today with us. He has done a fantastic job as Secretary. He is making tremendous progress at the VA.

We are also profoundly grateful to be joined by many of our Nation's leading veteran service organizations—the best—and all of the State and local veteran leaders. And I want to thank everybody very much for being here. Thank you very much. Thank you all very much. I know how hard you've been working on this.

Veteran suicide is a tragedy of staggering proportions. Hard to believe an average of 20 veterans and servicemembers take their lives every single day. Who would believe that's possible? There are more than 6,000 veteran suicides per year. The suicide rate among veterans is 1.5 times greater than that for nonveteran adults, and the suicide rate for post-9/11 soldiers has increased significantly over the last 10-year period.

To every veteran: I want you to know that you have an entire nation of more than 300 million people behind you. You will never, ever be forgotten. We are with you all the way. I think you know that. Supporting veterans is a very, very important thing to me. And it's been very important—from my campaign, from day one, and from before my campaign—but from day one.

Supporting veterans in distress is a critical priority for our entire administration, everybody in the administration. Last year, I signed into law the largest funding bill for the VA in its history, which included \$8.6 billion for veterans in mental health services. I also signed an Executive order directing the Department of Defense, Veteran Affairs, and Homeland Security to ensure our veterans have seamless access to mental health care and suicide prevention resources. These efforts focus on veterans the first year after they separate from military service when they are at the heightened-risk area.

The White House VA hotline has fielded more than 200,000 calls and successfully resolved 93 percent of the concerns our veterans brought to them. And they work very hard. It's been very, very effective.

We secured \$206 million for VA suicide prevention programming. Every VA medical center now offers same-day emergency mental health care.

These are crucial steps, but unfortunately, most veterans who die by suicide have not been in the care of the VA. Many of them don't know about the programs that we have or the programs that we've instituted. In fact, nearly 70 percent of those lost to suicide have not received care from the VA in the previous 2 years. They're just not aware of those great strides. They're just not aware. It's just not something that's on their mind.

This grave problem can only be solved if our entire country works together to build communities that truly serve, support, and protect our veterans from the first moment they return to civilian life. It's so different. They leave a military life and they go to civilian life, and it's just much different.

We must keep our promises to those who keep us free.

Through today's action, I am launching the PREVENTS Initiative, the "President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End the National Tragedy of Suicide". This order creates a new Cabinet-level Task Force cochaired by Secretary Wilkie. The Task Force will create a comprehensive, national public health roadmap that brings together Federal and local government, along with private sector partners, to improve the quality of life for our veterans and turn the tide on this terrible crisis.

We're being helped greatly by our strong economy. Our economy is very, very powerful and makes it a lot easier for people to get jobs, including veterans. And a lot of companies are actually giving priority, at our request, to veterans, and they're very happy with the results.

The Task Force will be charged with developing a national research strategy so that we can more effectively identify, intervene, and help veterans during a time of need. By investing in research and scientific advances, we can better understand the trauma our brave soldiers face and how to restore their faith and their health.

Under this order, my administration will also work with Congress to pass legislation providing resources and assistance in the form of grants to communities so that they can empower veterans with critical information, services, and networks of total, total support. We're going to take care of our veterans. We're working so hard on this.

We're making so much progress, and we're going to take care of them like never before. Veterans are America's greatest national treasure, and a lot of people understand that; some people don't. I will tell you, our single greatest national treasure. They kept us safe and we're going to keep them safe. They courageously fulfill their duties to our Nation. Now we must fulfill our duties to them.

Here with us today is Frank Larkin. His son Ryan followed in his footsteps to become a Navy SEAL, terrific, terrific young man. Tragically, Ryan is no longer with us. Frank, we'd love to have you come up and just say a few words about your great son, please. Frank.

Former Sergeant-at-Arms of the U.S. Senate Frank J. Larkin III. Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you, Mr. President, and thank you to our warriors and veterans present today; along with the veterans service organizations, our partners who are working hard every day to make a difference for our veterans who are in need; to the other government leaders here today; and to the survivors of suicide who live every day with the pain from the loss of their loved one.

Ryan was a decorated high-performing Navy SEAL who suddenly went over the edge. In the 2 years that he tried to—that we tried to rescue him, he was prescribed over 40 different drugs. His treatment was all psychiatric- and behavioral-health focused. All along, Ryan kept saying that something was wrong with his head, but nobody was listening.

Months before he took his life, he expressed a wish to donate his body for TBI research. Ryan was concerned about his teammates and the similar struggles that they were experiencing following both training for combat and combat operations overseas. Many are burdened with invisible wounds as a consequence of going into harm's way into the service of this Nation.

After Ryan's death, we learned that he suffered from an undiagnosed, severe level of microscopic brain injury uniquely related to military blast exposure from firing our weapons systems, rockets, mortars, using explosive breaching charges, and being exposed to improvised explosive devices, IEDs.

We are currently challenged by the fact that this newly discovered pattern of brain injury cannot be seen in a living person, not unlike the contact sport players who are trying to understand the effects of microscopic CTE, which also cannot be seen in a living player.

This Executive office—order is defining a national strategy that needs to resemble a Manhattan-like Project. We need the science to illuminate our path forward. I am convinced that we can solve this. It is not because we lack the intellectual capability or capacity; in many cases, it's because of culture. We need all the relevant players to step onto the same field of play at the same time, completely focused on solving this problem. We need collaboration, integration of data, and unity of effort across DOD, the VA, HHS, DHS, academia, and the private sector.

We need a holistic approach with a heightened sense of urgency to push the scientific research. As we develop knowledge—as we experienced with the Manhattan Project and space exploration—we will inform on other disease processes and therapies that will go well beyond the veteran community and vice versa.

I receive calls almost weekly from special operators, past and present, seeking help. They want to know what is happening to them. They are experiencing unexplained changes. They want to know if the pain will get better, if the demons will go away, if they will return to being the person they once were.

I have to commend my own SEAL community and the Special Operations Command for embracing this challenge. They realized that things did not go well in Ryan's case, that he got left behind. They are working hard now to get it right, collecting exposure data, promoting a brain donation program to advance the research, increasing baseline health surveillance, and changing tactics to reduce exposures, especially in the combat training environment.

We also need to appropriately recognize invisible wounds suffered on the battlefield. The monetary cost of a Purple Heart award is low, a few dollars for the medal itself. But the emotional impact is very high to those suffering daily with these obscure injuries to be recognized for their sacrifice.

Mr. President, following this event I'm going over to Arlington National Cemetery to tell Ryan that he's still making a difference, that he's still helping his boys. We can't leave any more of our valiant men and women behind.

To our warriors, our veterans, and their families: Please do not lose hope. We will find a better way. Remember, we made a promise to take care of those who served us. Failure is not an option.

Mr. President, I thank you for the platform.

The President. Very nice. Thank you. Thank you, Frank. Thank you, Frank, very much.

Also here today with us is Thomas Winkel, a Marine Corps veteran. He is the director of the Arizona Coalition for Military Families and the creator of a nationally recognized community collaboration model called "Be Connected." And, Thomas, if I might, could you please come up and say a few words? Thomas.

Arizona Coalition for Military Families Director Thomas Winkel. Thank you, Mr. President. I greatly appreciate being able to be here and speak with you all today. To Frank, I really appreciate your words. I'm sorry about your son. He is in our hearts, and you are in our hearts, your family. And Semper Fi, brother.

Mr. Larkin. Thank you.

Mr. Winkel. Folks, the PREVENTS Initiative it exactly what this country needs. It is exactly what the thousands—the tens of thousands—of individuals across the country have been hoping for.

For the past 10 years, I've been working with States—every single State—across the country: local teams, State teams, Federal teams. And when you boil everything down—all their concerns, all their hopes, all their dreams, all their frustrations—what it really comes down to is that there needs to be a sense of coordination and collaboration unlike what we have today and unlike what we've seen before.

We're not talking about just regular old coordination and collaboration or partnership that is "partnership" in name only. But we need partnership that is true, that is consistent, that allows the organization to meet both its own metrics and its altruistic metrics. It's incredibly important. And it's incredibly valuable.

We have examples of this true partnership, little ones, all across the country. One from Arizona happens to be in 2010. The Arizona National Guard had its highest rate of suicide ever. Very, very difficult situation. Partners got together under the leadership of a collective impact initiative. And we all had the same goal in mind: How do we reduce this number or get rid of it completely?

Over the course of 36 months, we dropped the rate from the highest ever to zero. It can be done. We have the ability to prevent suicide, to make lives more empowered, to make lives have more meaning, and to be able to drive folks forward to feel the success that happens when they get a great job or they get a great spouse or they have kids.

Look, the reality is, is that we've all known someone who has died by suicide. It is hard. It is painful. And we have the ability to stop it. What our belief is, and the way that we were able to do this is that we worked with a "No Wrong Door" and "No Wrong Person" approach. A "No Wrong Door, No Wrong Person" approach. That means very single organization was engaged. Every single organization was involved that had a stake in servicemembers, veterans, and their families and their survival and their thriving.

So we have mechanics and lawyers and doctors and teachers and first responders. And we have hotel clerks; one of my favorite stories is a hotel clerk that noticed that a person that was checking in happened to be a veteran, that they were struggling in a variety of different ways. But the hotel clerk didn't know what to do. He called what we have in Arizona, called the "Be Connected" line, and talked with them. They coached him through how do you just connect with the individual.

So the clerk goes up to his room, knocks on the door, and says: "Hello, sir. I just wanted to check in with you. You seem like you might be a little distressed and I wanted to see if there was anything I could do for you." The individual said: "I'm so glad that you came up. I'm so glad that

you talked with me because I was sitting here contemplating how I was going to die. Not 'whether.' Not 'if.' So you may have just saved my life."

We hear these stories consistently, and it takes the entire community to be able to do this, everybody working off the same page. Our belief is, is that if everyone knows what to do when an individual is in trouble, they will act. And we've seen it time and time again.

So, Mr. President, we greatly support this act—or this initiative. It is an incredible thing. We deeply appreciate everything that you've put into this. It is going to make a huge difference. And I can speak on behalf of Arizona and the other States that I have spoken with that we stand ready. Thank you.

The President. So, Thomas, I heard one thing beyond all else when you just spoke so beautifully, and that was "from the highest rate ever to zero." That was a very big statement. So we're going to have to find out what you are doing. Somebody's got to get together with you. That's an incredible job. I've heard about it too. Highest rate ever to zero.

Mr. Winkel. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. That's what it's about. That's what we're up here for. There has to be something that we can do.

Mr. Winkel. There is.

The President. Twenty a day? It's hard to believe. So thank you very much. Come here. Again, thank you very much.

I'd like to ask a man who's really done an incredible job, before I sign—Secretary Wilkie—to step up and just say a few words. I'm so happy that he's our Secretary. If you look over the last fairly long time now that he has been Secretary, we've had so many good stories about what's happening, generally, at the VA.

We're extremely of proud of choice. It's been many, many decades that they have been trying to get choice, where a veteran can go out and see a doctor if the lines are long. They don't have to wait 4 days, 9 days—I always say 3 weeks, 5 weeks, 10 weeks. Never get to see a doctor. People go on line, and they're not feeling well, and they end up being terminal by the time they get to see a doctor.

And by the way, we have great doctors. I have to say, I've heard—one thing I hear: We have great doctors in the VA, a lot of people say. Getting there is tough, but when you see them, they're as good as anybody in the world. We have great doctors.

But a man who has really put it all together is Secretary Wilkie. So, Secretary, please say a few words. Please.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert L. Wilkie, Jr. Thank you, Mr. President. I've said this to you before, separate and apart from the honor of serving in your administration, but I am what passes for an amateur historian. And there has never been a campaign or an administration where the candidate and the President put veterans at the centerpiece of his campaign and his administration until you did that. And as I speak for all of us who have worn the uniform, in whatever capacity we have served, we can't thank you enough for that, sir.

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you, sir.

Secretary Wilkie. So, last week, three Department of Veterans Affairs heroes put their lives on the line to keep a fellow veteran from taking his own life. Dr. Bruce Goldfeder, Dr. Evelyn Alba, and hospital technician Navarone Johnson in the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center

risked their lives to save the life of a veteran. Two of our VA heroes were wounded, one severely. But that veteran lived.

Since 2017, VA employees—doctors, nurses, technicians, policemen—have saved 243 veterans just like the one that our heroes saved in Palm Beach. But since 2017, 19 veterans have not been saved. That is what today's ceremony is about. It is about pulling together the resources of the Federal Government, our States and localities, our charities, our nongovernmental organizations, and coming together with a roadmap and the resources to make sure that we no longer have those 19.

I have said many times that the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs is to remind our fellow citizens why they sleep soundly at night. They sleep soundly at night because of the sacrifices of a select number of their fellow Americans who have taken the affirmative step to serve in uniform.

Those—as the President said—those 20 who every day take their own lives, 14 of them outside of our VA system, most of them from my father's generation, his comrades from Southeast Asia. We deserve, for them, the last full measure of our devotion. And this begins the closing of that circle.

And, Mr. President, I thank you and your team for everything they have done on behalf of America's warriors. Thank you, sir. Thank you so much.

The President. Good job. Thank you very much.

This is very important to me and to everybody here. Thank you very much.

[*At this point, the President signed the Executive order and handed the pen to Mr. Larkin.*]

Where's Frank? Here you go, Frank.

Mr. Larkin. My son's bracelet. It's a symbol of all the veterans who have taken their lives. We've got to keep our eye on the ball.

The President. Thank you, Frank. And these are—you can pass these out, fellas. Okay. You'll pass them around.

Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

Congressional Oversight of Executive Branch

Q. Sir, your response to the Democrats who are calling for a criminal investigation into Jared Kushner's security clearance?

The President. The witch hunt continues. The fact is that, I guess, we got 81 letters. There was no collusion. It was a hoax. There was no anything. And they want to do that instead of getting legislation passed. Eighty-one people or organizations got letters. It's a disgrace. It's a disgrace to our country.

I'm not surprised that it's happening. Basically, they've started the campaign. So the campaign begins. But the campaign is actually—their campaign has been going on for the last 2½ years. So it's a shame. And the people understand it. When they look at it, they just say, "Presidential harassment." But that's okay.

No administration has accomplished—probably, you could say this with absolute surety—in the first 2 years anywhere near what we have accomplished. Whether it's the tax cuts, whether it's regulation cuts, whether it's the Veterans Administration—what we've done with the Veterans Administration with choice and so many other things that nobody thought would be possible to

get passed—no administration has done in its first 2 years what the Trump administration has done.

So what the Democrats want to do—they cannot stand the loss. They could not stand losing in 2016. I see it all the time. I see people getting on—I saw a certain person get up yesterday. The anger. The anger. And they just haven't gotten used to the fact that we won a lot of States that haven't been won by Republicans in a long time.

But essentially, what they're saying is the campaign begins. Instead of doing infrastructure, instead of doing health care, instead of doing so many things that they should be doing, they want to play games.

President Obama, from what they tell me, was under a similar kind of a thing, didn't give one letter. They didn't do anything. They didn't give one letter of the request. Many requests were made; they didn't give a letter.

It's too bad because I'd rather see them do legislation. We negotiate out legislation. We have so many things, actually things that we agreed on, like infrastructure. But they want to focus on nonsense.

So I just want to end by thanking all of the people that are in this room today. Very special people. The job you've done for the VA is incredible. And just keep up the good work. And, Secretary, you've been fantastic. Thank you very much.

Thank you all. Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, so are you surprised they are going after your business—the business partners as well?

Q. Sir, have you been truthful about Jared Kushner's security clearance, though, sir?

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:59 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Kay E. Ivey of Alabama; and Gov. Brian P. Kemp of Georgia. A reporter referred to White House Senior Adviser Jared C. Kushner.

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