

Army Secretary resigns, soldiers gagged

Washington tries to quash scandal over neglect of wounded troops

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In an increasingly desperate bid to quell a raging scandal over the gross neglect of severely wounded troops, US Secretary of the Army Francis Harvey resigned Friday, just one day after he himself had fired the commanding officer at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

President Bush, meanwhile, announced that he is forming a bipartisan commission to investigate medical care provided at Walter Reed as well as to wounded soldiers and military veterans in general.

The resignation and firing came a week and a half after the *Washington Post* published a series of articles detailing the appalling conditions in Walter Reed's outpatient facilities and the bureaucratic abuse that confronts the war-wounded, many of them recovering from amputations, severe head wounds or psychological disorders resulting from the carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Army issued a statement Thursday declaring that it had "lost trust and confidence" in Maj. Gen. George Weightman, who had occupied the top post at the facility for just six months. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, however, issued a subsequent statement Friday accusing "some in the Army" of failing to recognize "the seriousness of the situation pertaining to outpatient care at Walter Reed."

On the same day as General Weightman's firing, the *Army Times* published an article revealing that the Pentagon has imposed a gag order on the wounded at Walter Reed, ordering them not to talk to the media.

Soldiers also told the newspaper that new procedures requiring them to wake at 6 a.m. each morning and submit to room inspections were being instituted. "Some soldiers believe this is a form of punishment for the trouble soldiers caused by talking to the media," one wounded patient told the *Army Times*.

The paper further reported that wounded soldiers are being moved out of Building 18, a squalid former motel across the street from the Walter Reed complex that was the focus of the *Post's* series, and into a barracks inside the medical facility's grounds. It noted that to get into the new facility "reporters must be escorted by public affairs personnel." The article further revealed that the Pentagon has "clamped down on media coverage of any and all Defense Department medical facilities, to include suspending planned projects by CNN and Discovery Channel."

Amid the hypocritical bipartisan expressions of outrage over the unconscionable treatment of maimed and traumatized young soldiers, this is the essence of the official response to the revelations—scapegoating, retaliation and cover-up.

There is ample reason for this vindictive response. The exposé has appeared as military officials in Iraq are reporting mounting concerns over falling morale among US occupation forces under conditions in which the vast majority of the American public has turned against the war. Moreover, a sharp increase in US casualties is anticipated as the Bush administration's "surge" in Baghdad goes into effect, throwing an increased number of US troops into bloody urban combat.

The conditions revealed at Walter Reed not only exposed appalling incompetence and indifference; they also gave the lie to a central ideological pillar of the criminal wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both major parties—Democrats as much as Republicans—ceaselessly justify their continued support for these wars in the name of "supporting the troops."

Both parties treat any suggestion that funding for these wars be cut off as unthinkable. According to this twisted logic, the only way to support the soldiers and marines deployed in Iraq is to keep them in a dirty war in which more and more are being killed and maimed daily, while taking them out of harm's way—and ending an occupation that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis—would constitute some kind of betrayal.

What has been revealed at Walter Reed only confirms the obvious—official Washington could not give a damn for the troops. They are invoked only as needed in the attempt to suppress popular opposition to the war within the US itself.

Drawn overwhelmingly from working class backgrounds, they are viewed as mere cannon fodder for American imperialism's wars of aggression and conquest in Central Asia and the Middle East, a disposable commodity that once damaged can be thrown onto the scrap heap.

And scrap heap, as the *Washington Post* series demonstrated, is no rhetorical exaggeration.

"Signs of neglect are everywhere: mouse droppings, belly-up cockroaches, stained carpets, cheap mattresses," the *Post's* Dana Priest and Anne Hull wrote in the articles published last month. The outpatient facility housing hundreds of maimed soldiers just five miles from the White House is also marred by holes in the

walls, floors and ceilings and mold in the patients' rooms.

"Many soldiers with impaired memory from brain injuries sat for weeks with no appointments and no help from staff to arrange them," the *Post* reported. "Many disappeared even longer. Some simply left for home."

The report recounted the case of one 19-year-old soldier who returned from Iraq with post traumatic stress disorder, who was found dead in his room from alcohol poisoning. Others just wandered away from the facility, and two were killed in a high-speed car crash last November after leaving the hospital.

Woefully understaffed, the hospital has assigned wounded soldiers—many of them facing their own psychological problems—to supervise other patients, some of whom are suicidal. In an attempt to maintain some semblance of military discipline, the wounded troops are compelled to fall in each day for roll call.

"Soldiers limp to an old Red Cross building in rain, ice and snow," the *Post* reports. "Army regulations say they can't use umbrellas, even here. A triple amputee has mastered the art of putting on his uniform by himself and rolling in just in time. Others are so gorked out on pills that they seem on the verge of nodding off."

The worst of it is that the wounded soldiers are kept in this facility on average for 10 months and some for as long as two years, waiting for the military's medical boards to render a decision as to whether they will be returned to duty or discharged. If it is the latter, this bureaucracy must further determine how much compensation the soldiers will receive—if any—for their disabilities.

As the *Army Times* points out, in 2001, before the Bush administration launched the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, 10 percent of military personnel who were medically discharged received permanent disability benefits. By 2005, with the number of wounded steadily mounting, this ratio had fallen to just 3 percent. A similar decline was registered among reservists, with those receiving such benefits falling from 16 percent to 5 percent.

The paper further points out that the staff assigned to handle such claims has been drastically reduced. It cited testimony by a senior Army personnel officer, who told a House panel in 2005 that three Army evaluation boards with a total staff of just 70 had handled 15,000 cases in 2004. He pointed out that the last time the military had confronted such a caseload was in 1972 during the Vietnam War. At that time, the Army had six boards with a total of 260 employees.

The result, the *Post* report indicates, is the fumbling of paperwork and delays in the process that lead many to walk away from the process in despair. Large numbers of those rendered physically or psychologically disabled are denied benefits, often on the grounds that their problems stem from preexisting conditions and cannot be attributed to the effects of combat.

The most telling signal of the contempt of the White House and the Pentagon for these wounded soldiers is the decision to replace the sacked General Weightman with his superior, Lt. Gen. Kevin Kiley, who had previously commanded Walter Reed and is blamed by many for doing nothing to ameliorate the squalid conditions that were already well known when he was in charge.

Kiley, who is now surgeon general of the Army and chief of the

US Army Medical Command, was the commander at Walter Reed until 2004. He still resides at the facility, inhabiting plush quarters across the street from Building 18, with a clear view of the ramshackle outpatient facility.

Public criticism of Kiley's interim appointment was widely seen as a probable motive for Harvey's being forced to resign as Army secretary. On the same day as the resignation, the Army hastily named another senior medical officer, Gen. Eric Shoomaker, as a permanent appointment to the senior post at Walter Reed.

Various Democratic politicians have seized upon the Walter Reed scandal for political purposes, seeing in the issue an opportunity to attack the Bush administration while posing as champions of "our troops," and, by implication, of militarism in general.

Typical of this response was New York's Senator Hillary Clinton, a front-runner in the emerging contest for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. Calling for an investigation into "what Army leaders knew and when they knew it," Clinton wrote, "Our nation has a duty to honor and support those who have served and sacrificed so much in the defense of our nation. Yet these recent news reports indicate that for nearly four years, since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began, not enough has been done to assist these courageous men and women in recovering from the wounds of battle."

Clinton, of course, voted in October 2002 to authorize the war and thus bears a direct responsibility for the deaths of nearly 3,200 troops, the wounding of nearly 25,000 as well as the slaughter of an estimated 655,000 Iraqis. Moreover, as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, she was charged with oversight of the military, something which proved of precious little use to the amputees and other wounded languishing in Walter Reed's outpatient facility.

That the Democrats intend to do nothing to halt this carnage was spelled out once again this week, with the announcement by Democratic leaders in the House of Representatives that the party intends to push through a budget offering \$98 billion to continue waging the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—\$5 billion more than was requested by the White House.



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