

A nation shamed

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

In return for their service in war, our wounded troops are entitled to the nation's heartfelt thanks and the best medical care money can buy. The nation has betrayed this contract in the past, and now we're failing again.

The Washington Post reported last month that Walter Reed Army Medical Center, which delivers world-class surgery and trauma care inside its hospital, has forced outpatients to suffer months or years of neglect as they try to recover from their injuries.

Housing for wounded troops, which was situated across the street from the base commander's living quarters, was infested with mice and roaches. Mold covered its walls. Plumbing leaked.

More broadly, indifferent nurses and untrained bureaucrats have been losing patients and ignoring ailments. Distraught family members, if they weren't going bankrupt after benefits were denied, have been rescuing soldiers to hotel rooms and taking over nursing duties.

Official reaction to the Post's reporting has been swift. Congress held hearings. President Bush fired the Army secretary. Two commissions will evaluate care for wounded troops. The Army is sending inspectors to 11 hospitals in seven states.

Yet, as the dust settles upon the scandal, the scope of Washington's failure continues to challenge our capacity for outrage.

Problems go beyond Walter Reed - and military officials have known for years. So have some members of Congress. Even Joyce Rumsfeld knew, after the wife of then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld attended a meeting with spouses of wounded soldiers. Yet until the Post got involved, national leaders ignored media reports of disgraceful treatment going back to 2003.

The danger is that officials will settle for patching holes and killing mice in outpatient housing. Instead, the Pentagon's crushing bureaucracy must be reformed.

President Bush didn't count on an extended war with substantial casualties. Now it's clear that military administrators and Congress failed to beef up services for the 1.5 million troops who have fought in Afghanistan and Iraq.

By most accounts, military doctors remain the world's finest at treating battlefield trauma. Problems surface at the hand-off to long-term care.

Some say the Veterans Administration should get involved sooner, as military budgets naturally lean toward war-fighting capability. Yet the VA is struggling, too. The agency has a backlog of 400,000 benefit claims. And 184,000 war veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan have sought health care.

Whatever his course, President Bush must fix this system. Further failure is not an option.

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