Waving a white flag over our wounded

by Charita M. Goshay

There's something deeply, fundamentally wrong with a culture when a depressed pop tart gets more attention for shaving her head than do wounded soldiers living in disgraceful conditions at the world's most famous military hospital.

The deplorable outpatient housing uncovered recently at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center has triggered about as much moral outrage on Main Street as one of those starving-foreign-kid infomercials on late-night TV.

A Washington Post investigation found that some outpatient facilities at the hospital are literally falling apart, along with infestations of rodents, black mold and roaches.

Since the war began, Walter Reed's outpatient system has become a place where paperwork, medical reports and common sense vanish into a Bermuda Triangle of dysfunction.

Our collective shrug is illustrative of the indifference with which we civilians frequently view people who choose the military. But allowing those whom we regard as heroes to be degraded by bureaucracy and incompetence is the moral equivalent of handing them a gag-gift wrapped in a yellow ribbon.

CHEAP GRACE

For fear we may be labeled unpatriotic, obstructionist, or worse - liberal - we're quick to say we support our troops, but what does that mean, exactly? More often than not, it is a bum-check sentiment we write with a flourish, knowing full well that it will cost us nothing.

When our words are not supported by action, it amounts to little more than cheap grace; do-it-yourself absolution.

Though Congress has voted itself a raise for nearly 10 years straight, we have military families relying on food stamps and church pantries.

Are we not yet ashamed?

PATRIOT GAMES

For once, people have been fired over the scandal, but no one seems to be able to explain why soldiers who served their country are getting red tape and mouse-droppings for their trouble.

President George W. Bush, who regularly visits Walter Reed (no moldy walls at those photo-ops), has convened a bipartisan panel, but he probably should hope that none of its members points out his proposed spending freeze for veterans' services in 2009 and 2010, in order to balance the budget by 2012.

According to the Office of Management and Budget, this year's Veterans Affairs budget is $33.4 billion, up 3 percent from 2006. That figure will increase to $39.6 billion in 2008. But the president wants to hold veterans' spending in 2009, to $38.8 billion. But as more injured soldiers return from the front, their needs are well likely to surpass that figure.

We're all for clipping coupons, but why must the budget be balanced on the backs of people who have already sacrificed life and limb?

Why are they coming home to backlog and squalor? And why aren't some of the people who wanted to lynch the Dixie Chicks raising even a nickel's worth of hell about it?

It took the "liberal media" to do that.

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