

Are the US Armed Forces a “Rape Culture”?

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US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have produced quagmires of crime, corruption and abuse, beginning with the torture of prisoners, the creation of offshore penal colonies, and repeated airborne attacks on shepherd boys, wedding parties, TV crews and allied troops — and ending with atrocity-producing chauvinism, bigotry, night-time home invasions and indefinite detention without charges. We don't so much spread democracy as shred a mockery.

This war system has produced epidemic suicide rates, boot camp fatalities, plane and copter crash losses, friendly fire deaths, “green-on-blue insider” attacks by Afghan trainees, combat wounds and amputations, PTSD and several unknown or undiagnosed syndromes many of which are permanently debilitating. The abuse and even murder of spouses are on the rise among returning vets while sexual battery, assault and rape have reached staggering rates.

The Department of Defense's 2012 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military estimates there were 26,000 sexual assaults in the military last year, up 35 percent from 19,000 in 2011. You know that sexual predators are rampaging through the services when the president calls the rape statistics “shameful” and “disgraceful,” when Pentagon Chief Chuck Hagel calls the chronic outrages a “betrayal” and a “scourge that must be stamped out,” and when the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey says, “We're losing the confidence of the women who serve.”

Why would Dempsey admit such a thing? Because, according to Kirby Dick, director of the film “The Invisible War,” less than one percent of the 26,000 cases resulted in a court-martial conviction. Kirby's documentary reviews the scandal of military commanders — not prosecutors and judges — deciding whether to prosecute “embedded serial sexual predators.” In a recent editorial, Dick writes, “500,000 uniformed men and women have been assaulted since 1991” (the year of the Navy's Tailhook sexual assaults in Las Vegas), and fewer than 15 percent were ever reported. In 1996, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland was the site of infamous sexual assaults on female recruits. In 2003, it was the Air Force Academy in Colorado that represented the military's rape scene.

The problem of unreported and unprosecuted sexual assaults in the military is notorious. Of the estimated 26,000 cases last year, the Department of Defense claims only 3,374 were reported. Tens of thousands of victims keep quiet out of fear of retribution by superior officers and a distrust of the military court system.

One such case came to light June 1, 2013 as the Naval Academy announced that three of its football players were under investigation for the serial rape of a female midshipman in 2012. The victim's lawyer, Susan Burke, has said that after reporting her attack the

sophomore was harassed and taunted by other midshipmen and ostracized and retaliated against by the Naval Academy community. While still under investigation, the three perpetrators were allowed to play football while the victim was disciplined for underage drinking. They were formally charged June 19, 2013. In a second case, on May 1, 2013, the Air Force said it disciplined five former commanders for not reporting sexual assault allegations at Joint Base San Antonio - Lackland in Texas — where 18 sexual assault trials have taken place and 32 basic training instructors are under investigation for assaulting recruits. In addition, on May 14, 2013 Sgt. Michael McClendon at West Point was charged with secretly videotaping a dozen women, sometimes in the shower. In December 2012, a Pentagon report warned that sexual assaults reported by students at its three prestigious military academies jumped 23 percent in one year.

Three more current cases — beyond being too ironic for words — telegraph just how pervasive the culture of male sexual violence is in the military and how unlikely it is to be abolished by committee. First, Army Lt. Col. Darin Haas, sexual assault prevention officer at Fort Campbell in Ky., was removed from his position after being charged with and arrested for stalking and violating a restraining order procured by his ex-wife. Second, an Army sergeant first class that served as a sexual assault prevention and response coordinator at Fort Hood, Texas, is now accused of abusive sexual contact, assault, pandering and maltreatment of subordinates. Third, Lt. Col. Jeffrey Krusinski — who until May 7, 2013 was in charge of the Air Force's sexual assault prevention and response branch — was arrested on a charge of sexual battery for allegedly groping a women after midnight in a parking lot.

The case of Virginia Messick, who was raped at basic training in Texas, is grimly representative, although her assailant, Staff Sgt. Luis Walker, went to prison last July for raping 10 trainees. Messick didn't initially report being raped. She was staggered by the dilemma that the rapist was the same officer she was supposed to inform.

Under pressure from Pentagon brass, Congress rejected a bill by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand of N.Y. that would have given military prosecutors, not commanding officers, the power to decide which sexual assault cases to try. Without fear of retaliation, the law would have increased the number of reported crimes, but the generals objected, saying it would negatively affect "good order and discipline." Gillibrand didn't buy the cliché. She told the generals at a senate hearing in March 2012, "I don't know how you can say having 19,000 sexual assaults and rapes a year is discipline and order."

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