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Air Force Officials Blamed for Lapses in Sexual Assault Reporting

By R. Jeffrey Smith, Washington Post Staff Writer

The Defense Department's top internal auditor yesterday said Air Force leaders over the past decade had failed to acknowledge the severity of sexual harassment at the service's academy in Colorado, causing them to delay appropriate monitoring and corrective action that might have prevented a spate of assaults that burst into public attention last year.

A report by Inspector General Joseph E. Schmitz for the first time pointed fingers at specific Air Force officials who he said shared responsibility for creating, contributing to or tolerating an inadequate program for reporting sexual assaults. Although Schmitz did not name the officials in a public summary of his report, he told lawmakers on Capitol Hill that they include numerous superintendents of the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

After allegations of widespread sexual harassment and assaults there arose in early 2003, a total of 142 cadets reported being sexually assaulted at the academy over the previous decade. An internal Air Force investigation initially assigned much of the blame to the behavior of cadets, but a panel appointed at congressional insistence later found flaws in that probe, which it said inappropriately shielded top Air Force leaders from responsibility and criticism.

Schmitz, in a letter to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld dated Dec. 3, said that "we found many leaders in positions of authority who could have been better role models, could have been more vigilant in inspecting those placed under command, failed to guard against and suppress sexual misconduct between and among cadets, . . . and failed to hold cadets accountable for such misconduct."

The summary of Schmitz's report said he found shortcomings in actions by eight Air Force officers and two legal counsels, which helped keep "the magnitude of the problems from becoming visible to USAF leadership, and prevented effective criminal investigations." But it also said investigators are still assessing "recent evidence that some senior officials may have been notified of sexual assault issues as early as July 2002."

The report said the outcome of this review could affect Schmitz's preliminary conclusion that the current Air Force leadership, based here, took aggressive action to deal with the problem after learning of it in January 2003. Schmitz is still examining who may have been responsible for reprisals against some cadets who reported assaults.

“We consider the overall root cause of sexual assault problems at the Air Force Academy to be the failure of successive chains of command over the last ten years to acknowledge the severity of the problem,” Schmitz’s report said. He cited in particular a flawed internal reporting system that led to increasing delays in prosecution and did not insulate investigations adequately from “command influence and interference.”

The report noted that multiple probes had found “a problematic cadet subculture” that included “negative male attitudes and actions towards women” and a level of order and discipline “significantly below the level expected at a premier military institution funded at taxpayer expense.”

At the time many of the assault reports surfaced, the academy had a sign near the entrance – since removed – that stated: “Bring Me Men.” Air Force Secretary James G. Roche told a Senate hearing on March 26, 2003, that outsiders did not understand the “military culture” prevalent at the academy, which had an enrollment of 84 percent men and 16 percent women.

A month later, in an e-mail to a senior official of the Office of Management and Budget, Roche said, “I’m off to speak yet again with my Little Darlings at the Academy.” But Air Force Vice Chief of Staff T. Michael Moseley told reporters yesterday that Roche’s comment was not focused “necessarily” on female cadets, and was instead meant to disparage any cadets “who believed themselves above the law.”

David S.C. Chu, the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, said in response to the report that the Air Force planned to review each of the 10 individuals cited by Schmitz for possible punitive action. But he emphasized that the service has already taken steps to improve its reporting system and promised that additional changes would be made throughout the Defense Department by Jan. 1, a deadline set in recent congressional legislation.

A report released yesterday by the Miles Foundation, which assists military personnel who are the victims of sexual assault, indicated that the problem is not confined to the Air Force. It said that 273 sexual assaults have been reported since August 2002 among U.S. troops deployed in Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Bahrain, including 119 in the Army and 32 in the Navy.

Gen. Moseley said the Air Force had accepted 13 of 14 recommendations made by Schmitz, including improving victim support and giving added authority to the Air Force investigators responsible for probing sex crime allegations.

But Chu said the department differed with Schmitz’s conclusion that confidentiality for those who alleged sexual assault had helped contribute to poor awareness of the problem within the Air Force. He said it had decided instead to back “a strong confidentiality policy” – as urged by the Miles Foundation and some women’s groups.

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