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Enemy Within the Gates

What does it say about the U.S. military when a servicewoman in Iraq can't trust the man soldiering at her side not to rape her? What does it say when women who are raped while in the service of their country cannot get the help they need until they return home and have access to civilian crisis counseling and services? What does it say when servicewomen training in Texas don't report they have been raped to the Air Force, but to civilian counselors off-base?

It says the agency charged with keeping the country safe still hasn't solved the problem of keeping its own soldiers from attacking one another.

The Miles Foundation, a victims' advocacy group based in Connecticut, testified to a Senate Committee last week that it had received reports of 68 cases of sexual assault during the Iraq and Afghanistan operations over the past 18 months; the military said it had 112 reports of sexual misconduct but declined to say how many were assaults.

Two dozen women have reported to a local rape-crisis center that they were sexually assaulted in 2002 while they were training at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas. Last year, the Air Force Academy in Colorado promised stricter counseling and procedures after recruits reported more than 50 assaults or rapes over the past decade.

The recent reports reveal the persistence of a dirty legacy. Thirty percent of female U.S. military veterans from the Vietnam era to the present reported having been raped or suffering a rape attempt during their military service, according to a survey last year by the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Iowa City. More than three-quarters of the 506 women surveyed -- ages 20 to 83 -- reported some type of sexual harassment during their military service; one-fifth believed rape was to be expected in the military.

Rape is not to be expected in the military, or anywhere else. Current Pentagon brass, starting with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, say it is not to be tolerated, that women should not fear to report abuse and that offenders should be punished. Some recruits and officers receive training in how not to harass, though it isn't consistent across the branches.

But that may not be enough to turn the culture, which frowns on whistle-blowers, requires reporting through a chain of command and often seems to treat sexual matters as frat boys might.

The military justice system allows commanders to decide whether their soldiers are prosecuted, but in many cases, the attacker is the servicewoman's commanding officer, according to the Miles Foundation. Imagine having to salute the person who has attacked you. Every day. In a war zone.

If the Pentagon cannot prove it can treat victims as victims and punish perpetrators, Congress should step in. Honor is one of the tenets of the armed services. To continue to dishonor the 15 percent of the enlisted ranks who are female brings shame on us all.