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Editorial

Keep Spotlight on Rapes

Predictably, military commanders circled the wagons and grew defensive during a U.S. Senate committee hearing Wednesday concerning an epidemic of sexual assault and domestic violence in the ranks. But in a pleasant surprise, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee showed a take-no-prisoners attitude about the need to fix the problems.

The real test will be, however, whether committee members translate their justifiable outrage into new legislation that addresses the key issues head-on.

U.S. soldiers should not have to worry that their comrades will attack them in their own camps and barracks. Yet a nine-month investigation by The Denver Post found numerous cases where women in the U.S. military were raped by their fellow soldiers while on duty in Iraq and even in their posts and bases in the United States.

Public attention had been drawn to the problem of unpunished sex crimes in the military largely because of the rape scandal at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. But the Post's investigation showed that the military has a far more extensive and deep-seated problem with sexual assault and domestic violence.

The assaults by themselves are disturbing enough. Even more alarming, though, is the military's unwillingness to properly investigate and punish offenders.

Moreover, some women were victimized by their commanders, yet the military forced the victims to continue reporting to the same predators. Since the military considers the chain of command to be sacrosanct, victims were left with nowhere to turn for help.

Fortunately, the Armed Services Committee refused to give the military brass an intentional walk on the matter. U.S. Sen. Wayne Allard, a Colorado Republican, has been pushing for congressional inquiries into the problem. Sen. Mark Pryor, an Arkansas Republican, asked the right questions of every general and admiral who appeared before the committee. Sen. John Warner, a Virginia Republican, warned the military that if it doesn't act, Congress will.

Yet the Senate committee still hasn't invited even one victim to testify. The panel should hold another hearing and let the women who have suffered these horrors speak directly for themselves.

If history is a guide - and it usually is - the military brass may be hoping that public attention to the issue fades, allowing the armed services to return to business as usual.

That's why it's so important for senators on the committee - which has direct supervision of the military - to follow up their concerns and questions with meaningful legislation.

For example, the armed services' definition of sexual assault is so badly outdated it doesn't recognize, much less punish, date rape. The senators should bring military law into the 21st century.

While the hearing was important, it should mark just the beginning of serious reform efforts.

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