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Military Rape Cases Belong In Prosecutors' Hands

THE ISSUE: The Air Force has reported that at least 92 accusations of rape involving servicewomen in the Pacific were made from 2001 to 2003.

Armed servicewomen are at risk without being stationed in a combat zone. Sexual assaults within the military are occurring at an alarming rate, not only in the Persian Gulf region but in Hawaii and elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific. Results of a comprehensive review of rape accusations involving Air Force personnel in the Pacific have prompted moves to change the handling of such complaints, but systemic breaks from the past may be in order.

Servicewomen now report sexual assaults through the chain of command, and commanders ultimately decide whether the alleged assailants are prosecuted. The Uniform Code of Military Justice needs to be changed to place that decision in the hands of a career prosecutor.

At least 92 rape complaints involving Air Force personnel in Asia and the Pacific, including 11 at Hawaii's Hickam Air Force Base, were reported to military authorities from 2001 to 2003, according to the five-month review. Only 14 of the 106 alleged offenders were tried by court-martial and seven were convicted, four for rape, and were sentenced to prison for an average of eight years. More than 40 were convicted of lesser offenses and 28 were not charged.

The Navy's Tailhook scandal should have prompted a thorough Pentagon review of sexual harassment and assault in the early 1990s. Two dozen sexual-assault complaints by servicewomen in 2002 at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas, reports of more than 50 sexual assaults at the Air Force Academy during the past decade, numerous complaints by servicewomen assigned to the Iraq and Afghanistan operations and now the report about assaults in the Pacific show the problem persists and warrants strong action.

It is not new, but has increased with the numbers of women in the armed services, now about 15 percent. A survey last year by the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Iowa involving 500 female veterans who served in the Vietnam, post-Vietnam and Persian Gulf War eras found that 79 percent said they were sexually harassed and 30 percent reported an attempted or completed rape.

Prompted by reports in the Denver Post that thousands of rapists in the military had gone unpunished, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asked a month ago for a review of procedures in handling such complaints. The Pentagon says it has received 112 reports of "sexual misconduct" in the Persian Gulf. The Miles Foundation, a charity aiding military

victims of abuse, reports receiving sexual-assault complaints from 83 servicewomen in the region, including multiple victims of two serial rapists.

The Miles Foundation says three of every four women veterans who were raped said they had not reported it to a senior officer. One-third didn't know how to report being raped and one-fifth believed rape was to be expected in the military.

Too often, according to the Denver newspaper, victims who did register complaints have reported poor medical treatment, lack of counseling and incomplete investigations by the military. Some reported having been threatened for making their complaint.

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