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Editorial

Confronting Rape in the Military

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An Air Force general who took it upon himself to look into the festering problem of sexual assault in the military has come up with a deeply troubling picture of his command: scores of rape accusations, a rising trend of reported abuses and the most basic shortcomings in tracking the crime and attending to its victims. "I found it disturbing; we've got to take this on," said the general, William Begert, commander of Pacific Air Forces, in an interview about the results of the study he had ordered.

Finding at least 92 rape reports from 2001 to 2003 among his 34,000 troops, the general ordered training changes to deal more determinedly with a problem too often stowed as the barracks' dirty secret. The problem is hardly confined to General Begert's service branch, so his praiseworthy initiative needs to be emulated across the armed forces. The military is too disorganized in confronting a rising wave of sexual assault reports at bases at home and abroad, and at training academies.

The fact that servicewomen who become pregnant as a result of rape are forced to pay for their abortions is one of the more appalling signs of the callousness toward the problem.

In the war-front Central Command of Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait, there have been at least 112 reports of rape and other sexual abuse in just the past 18 months. The problem may be far worse. Confidential surveys have found that up to 30 percent of women veterans reported being victimized in sexual assaults while in the military. Three out of four said they had not dared to report being assaulted because of concerns about privacy and career advancement. Confidentiality remains an overriding problem, according to the Miles Foundation, a private victims' services group.

The military created the role of victims' advocate a decade ago, when women veterans made rape accusations after Desert Storm. General Begert's study suggests little improvement since then, with the military even now lacking a centralized, efficient way to monitor abuse reports. Congress needs to prod the Pentagon more. It should consider creating a stronger, independent office of victims' advocate with firm authority to guarantee privacy to victims fearful for their careers.

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