



Many soldiers get boot for 'pre-existing' mental illness

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WASHINGTON — Thousands of U.S. soldiers in Iraq — as many as 10 a day — are being discharged by the military for mental health reasons. But the Pentagon isn't blaming the war. It says the soldiers had "pre-existing" conditions that disqualify them for treatment by the government.

Many soldiers and Marines being discharged on this basis actually suffer from combat-Related problems, experts say. But by classifying them as having a condition unrelated to the war, the Defense Department is able to quickly get rid of troops having trouble doing their work while also saving the expense of caring for them.

The result appears to be that many actually suffering from combat-related problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries don't get the help they need.

Working behind the scenes, Sens. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., and Barack Obama, D-Ill., have written and inserted into the defense authorization bill a provision that would make it harder for the Pentagon to discharge thousands of troops. The Post-Dispatch has learned that the measure has been accepted into the Senate defense bill and will probably become part of the Senate-House bill to be voted on this week.

The legislation sets a higher bar for the Pentagon to use the personality-disorder discharge, and also mandates a review of the policies by the Government Accountability Office. Bond said it also would "force the Pentagon to stop using this discharge until we can fix the problem."

Bond said he learned of the practice from returning Iraq veterans. He called it an "abuse" of the system and "inexcusable."

"They've kicked out about 22,000 troops who they say have pre-existing personality disorders. I don't believe that," Bond said in an interview Friday. "And when you kick them out, they don't get the assistance they need, they aren't entitled to DOD or Veterans Administration care for those problems."

Obama said the practice is "deeply disturbing" because "it means that those who have served this country aren't getting the care they need. ..."

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Todd Vician declined Friday to discuss the matter because it was related to current legislation.

Defense Department records show that 22,500 cases of personality-disorder discharges have been processed over the last six years.

Jon Soltz, an Iraq war combat veteran who founded the group VoteVets.org, said untreated psychological problems were contributing to the highest military suicide rate in a quarter-century and to growing homelessness among veterans, he said.

If such widespread mental problems really existed before people joined the military and saw combat, they would have been uncovered when the recruits were enlisting, Soltz said.

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The issue of personality-disorder discharges is a window into the broader problem of psychological damage to Iraq veterans, which experts say has three main causes:

- Multiple and longer deployments.
- The stress of fighting an insurgency with no breaks and everyone always on the front line.
- Better and faster medical care that helps troops survive horrific physical injuries that often leave psychological scars.

"You land in Iraq, and you're on the battlefield, whether you're a quartermaster or a medic or a cook," said David Segal, director of the Center for Research on Military Organizations at the University of Maryland. "All you have to do is get on the highway to go somewhere from the airport."

The military and lawmakers are only slowly coming to grips with the consequences, Segal said.

"I think we have failed to recognize the extent of the problem," he said. "We've produced a problem that's going to be plaguing us for generations."

Past wars, through the Persian Gulf war, produced three casualties for every fatality, while now in Iraq "we're up to about 16-to-1," Segal said. Those killed are "really the tip of the iceberg" as far as the toll on soldiers, he added.

One Republican congressional staff member who works on military issues said the rationale behind the Pentagon's practice was: "We didn't break you, you were already broken. You're not our responsibility."

"One soldier I know received a diagnosis for a personality disorder after a 45-minute talk," said the staffer, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He'd been in the military 10 years, had made it his career, and then he was told he was being shuffled out in a couple of weeks. We keep getting these stories."

In the House, Rep. Phil Hare, D-Ill., is leading the effort to get similar legislation approved.

"It defies logic to think that tens of thousands of our servicemen and women slipped through the cracks during the pre-screening process," Hare said. "We have a moral obligation to review the discharge process and ensure we are getting it right."

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