

# Congress Probes Coverup Of Iraq Casualties

by Michele Steinberg

Veterans' organizations and the families of U.S. soldiers in Iraq have been making their way to Capitol Hill in recent weeks, as anger builds against the Bush Administration's callous disregard and coverup of the high number of casualties in Iraq. This occurs as the number of daily attacks against the U.S. occupation mounts. In mid-October, a group of senior Democratic Congressmen went to Walter Reed Hospital to talk to the wounded soldiers themselves. Now, sources close to veterans' groups tell *EIR* that a bipartisan grouping in Congress is talking of holding hearings that could blow the situation wide open.

When my father, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran of World War II, was buried, a day after Memorial Day in 2002, an honor guard of young Marines paid tribute in a graveyard ceremony to his service to the United States. Though it had been more than half a century since he was a soldier, the honor guard was, in the words of President Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, "altogether fitting and proper."

On Oct. 21, *Washington Post* reporter Dana Milbank reported that "In March, on the eve of the Iraq war, a directive arrived from the Pentagon at U.S. military bases, 'There will be no arrival ceremonies for, or media coverage of, deceased military departing from Ramstein [Germany] airbase or Dover [Delaware] base, to include all interim stops,' the Defense Department said, referring to the major ports for the returning remains." A Pentagon spokeswoman scurried to say the policy dated back to November 2000—another Administration! But, the directive was unquestionably "March 2003," and is an indictment of the Administration "chicken-hawks."

Milbank notes that Presidents Reagan, Carter, and Clinton all personally attended the arrival ceremonies at military bases in the United States when the remains of dead soldiers returned. Whether the press was there or not, the Presidents were there to honor the families.

Equally appalling is the coverup of the magnitude of the casualties, which are *not tallied* by the Pentagon press office spin doctors, on *orders* of the "civilians." The only reports so far have been in the press, but these have been harrowing.

In a piece called "America's Near-Invisible Wounded: Survivor-Iraq," in the Oct. 13 issue of *The New Republic*, reporter Lawrence Kaplan wrote, "Visiting the Walter Reed Army Medical Center" is like being at "a civil war hospital" because of the large number of those without legs. In Germany, *EIR* staffers have reported that the hospitals at

Ramstein Air Base are overflowing, but no reporting of this is allowed.

According to Kaplan, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has tried to hide this tragedy by flying the wounded in C-17 and C-141 aircraft to Andrews Air Force Base "under cover of darkness," where there are no TV lights to guide the wounded to their ambulances. He notes, "Pentagon officials have rebuked public affairs officers who release casualty figures, and until recently, U.S. Central Command did not regularly publicize the injured tally either."

Estimates in the press put the number of soldiers in Iraq wounded at about 1,900, an increase of 300-600 over what Kaplan reported in his article. Kaplan concludes: "The numbers tell a truth about the situation on the ground in Iraq. . . . Every day, guerrillas wound an average of nearly ten Americans, many of them grievously. . . . As a result, the sheer number of wounded soldiers exceeds anything Americans have seen since Vietnam."

## The Wounded Live in Squalor

Another investigative reporter, Mark Benjamin, writing for United Press International, exposed that sick and wounded soldiers are being held in squalor at Fort Stewart, Georgia. He writes: "The National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers' living conditions are so substandard, and the medical care so poor, that many of them believe the Army is trying push them out with reduced benefits for their ailments. One document shown to United Press International states that no more doctor appointments are available from Oct. 14 through Nov. 11—Veterans Day."

Benjamin quotes several soldiers, who report the lack of facilities, and the impossibility of getting diagnosis or care. One said he felt that he was being "treated like a third-class citizen." Benjamin continues: "One month after President Bush greeted soldiers at Fort Stewart—home of the famed Third Infantry Division—as heroes on their return from Iraq, approximately 600 sick or injured members of the Army Reserves and National Guard are warehoused in rows of spare, steamy and dark cement barracks . . . waiting for doctors."

They are on what is called "medical hold," while the Army decides how disabled they are, "and what benefits—if any—they should get as a result," Benjamin writes.

"Most soldiers in medical hold at Fort Stewart stay in rows of rectangular, gray, single-story cinder-block barracks without bathrooms or air conditioning . . . dark and sweltering in the southern Georgia heat and humidity.

"Soldiers make their way by walking or using crutches through the sandy dirt to a communal bathroom, where they have propped office partitions between otherwise open toilets for privacy. A row of leaky sinks sits on an opposite wall. The latrine smells of urine and is full of bugs, because many windows have no screens. . . . Soldiers say they have to buy their own toilet paper."

Is more of this, what the \$87 billion for Iraq will buy?