

Members of Congress and the American people are deeply disappointed and justifiably concerned about the deplorable conditions that wounded American service men and women have been forced to endure upon returning from combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those who sustain life-altering injuries while answering our nation's highest calling deserve our full support and the best treatment that money can buy.

It is clear that our government is failing the soldiers it is our solemn duty to protect. Recent news of the shockingly inadequate treatment offered at Walter Reed Medical Center - which in years past has provided a shining example of the quality care that America owes its wounded veterans - is proof positive that our government needs to step up and take immediate action to remedy a situation that is nothing short of a national embarrassment.

I am encouraged to see that - for the first time since the Global War on Terror began - someone in government is being held accountable for mistakes that endanger our troops and damage our national security. By relieving Walter Reed's Commanding General earlier this month, the Department of Defense has taken an important first step, but there is still more work to be done in order to ensure that we care for our veterans properly.

In order to further understand how conditions at Walter Reed managed to decline to such abysmal levels, President Bush has appointed former Senator Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala to lead an investigative probe. I am hopeful that Sen. Dole and Secretary Shalala will further flesh out the source and scope of the reported problems, but I believe that the urgency of this matter truly requires an urgent response.

To make immediate redress of problems at Walter Reed and those of other military and veterans' hospitals, Democrats last week announced that we will include an additional \$3.5 million in the President's emergency supplemental war spending bill. The U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health, and Iraq Accountability Act provides for a total of \$100 billion for the training and safety of our active duty troops serving in Iraq as well as for the benefits and care of our returning servicemen and returning veterans by way of health care.

The need for veterans' health care services is only expected to increase as more servicemen and women return from tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since military operations began in 2003, nearly twenty four thousand U.S. troops have been wounded in action, a good number of which have been treated at Walter Reed and Bethesda Naval Hospital. When they return they deserve nothing less than a hero's welcome that includes the best health care and medical treatment available.

I am hopeful that in the coming weeks, the People's House will also act on legislation introduced by Congressman Harry Mitchell that would "ensure dignity in care for members of the Armed Forces recovering from injuries." In my estimation, the United States Congress has a moral obligation to put this legislation on the President's desk as soon as possible.

And I am also hopeful that Congress will not enact into law the massive cuts to veterans' health care called for in the President's budget submission. These cuts are reckless at worst and irresponsible at best, and they fail to reflect the priorities of a nation that is grateful for the sacrifices our soldiers make.

America's fighting men and women, whether they are deployed in the field or recovering from injuries here at home, should always be able to count on the

full support of their government. They have fulfilled their duties bravely and honorably - and they deserve nothing less than treatment and care that is commensurate with the heroic deeds they undertake.