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Care of vets can't be 'overblown'

Cincinnati Enquirer, The (OH) - March 22, 2007

Editorial

"Overblown"?

Rep. Jean **Schmidt** 's characterization of the story of lousy living conditions and inconsistent care for wounded veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns may be the worst word choice in political commentary since, since ...

Well, since she used the word "cowards" in a famous floor speech aimed at a proposal by Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., a decorated veteran of the Vietnam War.

Schmidt , R-Miami Township, brought up the controversy over conditions at **Walter Reed** Army Medical Center in Washington in a posting Monday on her official Web site.

"While I believe that this building is beneath the standard of what is acceptable, I think it is wrong to suggest that mold found behind an air conditioner somehow is an excuse to say that all of our veterans are receiving substandard medical care While I found the situation at **Walter Reed** to be overblown by both politicians and the media, I hope that future accounts will bring more light to the real issues," the column said.

People have been quick to jump on the "overblown." Veterans groups and local and national Democrats have accused **Schmidt** of insensitivity and/or ignorance. Even Republican Rep. Steve Chabot from **Schmidt** 's neighboring district was quick to back away from the term. "I continue to believe that this is a very serious issue, and the press is doing its job in reporting it," he told The Enquirer.

The building **Schmidt** referred to is Building 18, an ambulatory care annex to the hospital that was featured in a series of recent Washington Post stories. Those stories used mold and rodent infestations in the building to illustrate a wider set of concerns over care for wounded veterans.

Those concerns exist far beyond **Walter Reed** , where indeed, most patients receive excellent care. The wider issues involve hardships and bureaucratic insensitivity too many veterans suffer in dealings with the military medical services and the Veterans Administration. Many of these problems have been known and ignored for years.

The stories were eye-opening to the public and embarrassing to the administration. To his credit, newly appointed Secretary of Defense Robert Gates didn't find the accounts overblown at all. He recognized them as symptomatic of larger problems and insisted on immediate action, including the forced resignation of the secretary of the Army and the dismissal and retirement of two senior generals.

A bipartisan task force has been created by the administration to look at veterans' care, and Congress also is investigating.

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Schmidt apparently does recognize that there is a problem that goes well beyond the annex at **Walter Reed** . As a full reading of her column reveals, she supports a bill in the House that will provide an additional \$3.5 billion in improvements for veterans' health care.

What is unfortunate is that so many people are willing, or eager, to reduce this debate to a bit of mold behind an air conditioner, or to the artless expression of a single congresswoman.

Those simplistic approaches do a disservice to the veterans who need our help and who should be the only focus of non-partisan action to improve the situation.

Schmidt 's statement

To read Rep. Jean **Schmidt** 's statement, go to www.house.gov/apps/list/press/oh02_schmidt/walter.html

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