

## **Veteran Stigma: “What Does My Country Think of Me?”**

As if to pour salt on the physical and psychological wounds of millions of America's veterans, a recent trend has emerged in both public pronouncements and privately held attitudes that suggests that veterans returning from the 'long wars' in Iraq and Afghanistan pose a security risk to potential employers, fellow workers, and workplace patrons.

"I cannot be open about my post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with prospective employers in light of the Homeland Security debacle," says former Army Sgt. and Iraq veteran Steve Kraft. "It's like a scarlet letter." The "debacle" Sgt. Kraft refers to means comments made by Janet Napolitano, Secretary of the U.S.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS), citing a section of an April 7, 2009, DHS Report titled "Disgruntled Military Veterans" to the effect that "DHS assesses that right-wing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans...suffering from the psychological effects of war."

"Having been singled out by the media for attention, Napolitano's statement surely discourages would-be employers from considering hiring veterans applying for jobs, especially in an uncertain economy."

But while the DHS incident lingers in the minds of the public, it isn't the only highly publicized case of veterans stigmatized for their courageous and honorable military service.

A scandal at Penn State erupted in February when the University's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) department posted a contentious video on its website. Produced as part of a package to help faculty deal with "worrisome student behaviors," the video depicted an angry young veteran and a professor who felt threatened by him. Unhappy with his grade, the veteran threatens the professor and says he deserves a better grade, "or else."

Former Petty Officer 3rd Class Maggie Kwok, a 25-year-old Chinese-American sophomore and the President of Penn State's Veterans Organization was shocked by the University video.

"I can't believe they made this video about us," recalled the former Navy Corpsman of the incident when it happened.

"Veterans on campus were very upset," said the veteran of Guantanamo and Iraq.

The university responded to the veterans' concerns by removing the video.

And yet, the stigma that veterans face has, as Sgt. Kraft feels, turned into widespread employment discrimination, precisely at a time when getting a job is especially difficult.

Major Matt Tully, a New York Army National Guardsman and an attorney in his civilian life, specializes in fighting the employment discrimination faced by many veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns.

"It's a growing problem," said Major Tully, "higher now than at any other time in the past." According to a 2007 GAO Report, only 1 in 10 veterans files a Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) complaint.

"It used to be that employers didn't know that it was illegal to discriminate against veterans who served in the Reserve or National Guard," said Major Tully. "Now, employers intentionally disregard USERRA."

Due to the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, employers have taken steps to lay off those Reservists who are called up to Active Duty.

"For example, an airline pilot who deploys to Iraq for a year..." said Major Tully, "...has to be retrained upon his return, which costs a lot of money and overtime."

In recent years, the Departments of Labor (DOL) and Justice (DOJ) have taken a much harder stance against the discrimination facing military reservists now that violations are becoming more flagrant. The growing problem is also being discussed and debated in Congress.

In January 2009, Rep. Lloyd Doggett [D-TX], sponsored H.R. 466, the "Wounded Veteran Job Security Act." If passed, the bill would prohibit "...any employment discrimination or acts of

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