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FACE THE NATION

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GUESTS: Senator CARL LEVIN (D-MI)
Chairman, Armed Services Committee

Senator JOSEPH LIEBERMAN (I-CT)
Armed Services Committee

ANNE HULL
The Washington Post

MODERATOR: BOB SCHIEFFER - CBS News

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**FACE THE NATION - CBS NEWS
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BOB SCHIEFFER, host:

Today on FACE THE NATION, what happened to the veterans at Walter Reed Hospital? After The Washington Post revealed the appalling conditions in which our wounded war veterans have been living, heads have begun to roll. First, the hospital commander was fired, then the secretary of the Army. But now what? We'll talk to Senators Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and Joe Lieberman. They have very different views on the war, but they are both outraged over the hospital scandal. Even so, doesn't Congress share some of the responsibility? We'll ask them.

We'll also bring in Anne Hull, one of the Post reporters who broke this story. Then, I'll have some personal thoughts on all of this. How America treats its veterans on FACE THE NATION.

Announcer: FACE THE NATION, with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now, from CBS News in Washington, Bob Schieffer.

SCHIEFFER: Good morning again. Joining us now from Detroit, Senator Carl Levin. With us here in the studio, Senator Joe Lieberman. And we begin this morning with a story that we should not be reporting, because it's a story that should not have happened. Over the last two weeks, Washington and the nation have been shocked to learn, from The Washington Post, of the appalling conditions in which some of our wounded war veterans are living at Walter Reed Military Hospital. Rat and mold-infested rooms in various states of disrepair. When the story broke, the military rushed in to make repairs, but first tried to blame it on low-ranking enlisted men. But as the pressure has mounted, the hospital commander, General George Weightman, was fired; and Friday, the secretary of the Army, Francis Harvey, was forced out. Senator Levin is joining us from Detroit. He is the chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

Senator, I know that you and Senator Lieberman went out to Walter Reed Friday. Is getting rid of these two top officials enough, or is there going to be more things that have to be done?

Senator CARL LEVIN (Democrat, Michigan; Chairman, Armed Services Committee): There's got to be a lot more done, both on the physical situation in various buildings, but, equally important, there's got to be some changes in the bureaucracy, changes in the way that there's an assessment of disability. There's real, deep concern about different standards that exist to assess disability of our troops that are wounded and--between the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration. There's a lot of complaints about bureaucracy not responding. They're understaffed. We need people to be advocates for our wounded, to make sure they get their appointments on time, that they can get there. There's a lot of things that need to be done here.

But, basically, I believe this disgraceful neglect has been the result of a--two things. One is a lack of accountability. There's been a real shortage of accountability in this administration, particularly at the higher levels, for mistakes which have been made. And you'd go all the way back to before

9/11, when the warnings that we got were not heeded, and nobody was held accountable to Abu Ghraib, to all the other mistakes which have been made. There've been no--almost no high level people have ever been held accountable...

SCHIEFFER: Well...

Sen. LEVIN: ...until Secretary Gates came along. And I give him credit for probably--for finally really holding some people accountable.

SCHIEFFER: Senator Lieberman, do you think this is something--one thing that's happened, or is this the tip of the iceberg here?

Senator JOSEPH LIEBERMAN (Independent, Connecticut; Armed Services Committee): I'm afraid, Bob, that it's the--it's the tip of the iceberg. And I think, ultimately, we're going to look back and say that that extraordinary Washington Post investigative series, which drew all our attention because of the mold on the wall and the rodents on the floor at that one building, 18, at Walter Reed, did something much larger. You--you--you could fix the walls and get rid of the rodents, but what that series has uncovered, I believe, is that we are not keeping the moral responsibility we have for the men and women who are fighting for us in the war on terrorism, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. We--we never have--have made the national commitment commensurate with going to war to give our soldiers the best medical care they can receive from the battlefield to back home. In fact, we're giving them the best possible care on the battlefield and in a lot of the inpatient services at places like Walter Reed. But there's too much paperwork, and the Veterans Administration--when the--when the handoff from the Department of Defense to the VA occurs, the VA is just overwhelmed and not giving the kind of first rate treatment to our veterans when they get home that they need, including, particularly, those who are suffering from posttraumatic stress syndrome, psychiatric effects of war, and traumatic brain injury. And this is what we, together, have to do urgently.

I just want to add one more word. It's a very important thing you said at the beginning, Bob. Carl Levin and I are good friends. We have different positions about the war in Iraq, but there is not an inch between us on the question of fulfilling our responsibility to the soldiers who are fighting that war, and we, in Congress, have to now get it right.

SCHIEFFER: Senator Levin, do you think any of this is because Walter Reed was actually on the list of bases that are--were proposed to be closed, and they were going to shift a lot of this responsibility over to the Bethesda Naval Hospital? And do you think that is still a good idea to eventually close down this facility?

Sen. LEVIN: Yeah. I don't know whether or not these problems were caused by that. I think they preceded that. I think the basic problem here, in addition to a lack of accountability, which sends the wrong signal to people about their responsibility, is the over-optimism which just symbolized this administration right from the beginning of this war. That the mission was

accomplished, well, you don't prepare for this kind of a problem. If, in fact, the insurgency is just about over, as we heard last year from the vice president, it's on its--in its last throes, the vice president says; that when the president says we're absolutely winning, which was just a few months ago, the signal that this sends to the people who are responsible for care is, "Hey, we don't have to plan for a big problem, for big numbers of wounded." Now, maybe it's hard to exactly connect those dots. But when that kind of a message is sent throughout this four year period, it reduces the level of concern and planning which is so essential. I think those are kind of the fundamental flaws.

I don't know whether or not the proposal which has been adopted to close Walter Reed and to shift to Bethesda is--was the cause of this. It may be necessary that we continue to do that in order to have the best possible care. But we're going to look into both of those issues. The Veterans Committee, headed by Danny Akaka, and I, as heading the Armed Services Committee, with Joe Lieberman on that committee and others, we're all interested in making sure that the best possible care is given, not just to inpatients...

SCHIEFFER: Well...

Sen. LEVIN: ...not just on the battlefield, but to our outpatients as well. So we're going to have joint hearings to look into the very questions that you've identified.

SCHIEFFER: Senator Lieberman, anybody who saw the documentary that Bob Woodruff--who was badly injured in Iraq working for ABC--the one hour that he put on about how the Veterans Administration, number one, seems to be sort of de-emphasizing, they're trying to play down the number of people who've actually been injured in Iraq. And--and they are--seem so out of touch with their own system that they're sending soldiers with injuries to the wrong hospitals to get the treatment they need.

Sen. LIEBERMAN: Right.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think he should step down as secretary of Veterans Affairs?

Sen. LIEBERMAN: Let me answer that question. Actually, I want to say first about Walter Reed, I--I think this--this second look at Walter Reed, brought on by The Washington Post investigation, ought to lead us to take a second look at the BRAC decision to close Walter Reed. The fact is we're going to be in this war on terrorism for some time to come. It's going to give us more veterans. We need to decide, frankly, whether we want to expand and improve Walter Reed as opposed to closing it and consolidating it up at Bethesda.

Second, I'm--I'm not prepared to say that the secretary of the Veterans Administration ought to be let go. But I can tell you this, that Veterans Administration needs an urgent review from the president, from the White House, from Congress. It's not doing the job we need it to do. We've already had hundreds of thousands of new veterans coming out from Iraq and Afghanistan. The numbers are going to grow. That administration is not

prepared to give them the treatment that--that we have a moral responsibility to give them. Let me say something else, Bob. It's not going to be done on the cheap. These--these men and women are putting their lives on the line for the rest of us Americans. We've got to be willing--even if it requires a special tax increase--to support more services for our veterans, to give them the best from the battlefield to when they get back home.

SCHIEFFER: You're ready to raise taxes to give these veterans a better...

Sen. LIEBERMAN: I am. I am in a moment. You talk about the fact, as people have said since 9/11, that a very small percentage of Americans have actually sacrificed for our security in a war against radical Islam. That's right. The rest of us ought to sacrifice a little bit more to take care of those who are sacrificing, less than 1 percent of our population.

SCHIEFFER: You know, Senator Levin, it is clear now that the government is keeping two sets of books, it seems, on the number of non-fatal casualties. What is it--the Defense Department says about 25,000, something, 30,000, in that range, have been wounded. Now we had the head--head of the Veterans Administration admitting that 200,000 have come there for treatment. He tried to play it down by saying, I think his quote was, 'some of them just to get dental work.' But I think he may want to rethink that a little bit. What's going on here?

Sen. LEVIN: Well, what's going on is that there are two different standards, one by the Department of Defense, one by the Veterans Administration for what represents disability, what represents a sufficient situation which is difficult for a soldier or a veteran so that they're not prepared to return to duty. There's--there is bureaucratic snafus. You know, the administration tried to cut the--the Veterans Administration budget by a couple billion dollars a few years ago, and it took Congress to restore that needed money. It's just been, I think, a fiasco in terms of the way this administration has dealt with this war. And part of it has been the lack of planning and preparation for the casualties of war. And that's something which absolutely needs to be corrected, and we're determined to correct this now. We've got, again, the committees in the Senate are going to come together and hold joint hearings, because we believe it's so essential that we--we eliminate the differences and standards, and that we fill in these cracks that exist between the two agencies.

SCHIEFFER: Let me--let me--I want to come back to this in a little while, but I do want, while you're both here, I want to ask you, Senator Levin, what is the next step in the Senate? Now, you're coming back into session this week. Will Democrats try another approach to constrain the president on the war? Or where do you go from here?

Sen. LEVIN: Well, there's going to be a resolution which we believe will get the support of almost every Democrat and, hopefully, a few--a few Republicans, because it should not be a partisan issue, which will modify the authorization so that our mission in Iraq is more limited. It will not be combat in the middle of Baghdad. It will be a transition to a more limited mission of

supporting the Baghdad army training and logistics of that army. And we will, of course, have a limited presence for a targeted counterterrorism mission, as well as trying to see if we can't provide some support for the--the out--the borders of Iraq. But we--we feel that the...

SCHIEFFER: Do you think that has--let me just ask you...

Sen. LEVIN: ...fundamental issue has got--sure.

SCHIEFFER: ...do you think that has any chance of passage?

Sen. LEVIN: If we can avoid--if we can avoid two things. Number one, reauthorizing the war, which will not pick up a lot of votes. And if we can avoid repealing the previous authorization which creates all kinds of legal problems of retroactivity. But if we can focus on--on this purpose, keeping American troops out of the middle of a civil war, if we can just focus mainly on that with the understanding that there needs to be a limited mission that remains after that, I believe we could get all the--almost all the Democratic votes, plus we can pick up some Republican votes. But that should be our goal. The American people do not want us to get in deeper militarily into Iraq. They want to truly change course. We ought to have a vote which gives us that opportunity. It should not--if it's filibustered then you got a whole different problem. If the Republicans are going to continue to filibuster the effort to simply have a vote as to whether or not we support a surge into Baghdad, more military troops, then we have a real problem...

SCHIEFFER: OK.

Sen. LEVIN: ...because then the Republicans are stopping us from doing that.

SCHIEFFER: And would that--with what you're talking about, would that be binding or nonbinding?

Sen. LEVIN: It would be binding and it should be binding, it seems to me.

SCHIEFFER: All right.

Well, let's--let me ask Senator Lieberman, what--what's your reaction to that?

Sen. LIEBERMAN: Well, obviously I'm--I'm against it. I--I don't think the resolution makes sense in so far as--look, if people want to stop this war, the way that the Constitution gives Congress authority to do it is to stop the funding. They won't do that because there's not the support for it, and they--and they don't want to seem to be not supporting our troops, so I think what--what Carl is talking about, to me doesn't make sense. Because if you say the troops can't be involved in combat, but are involved in counterterrorism, the terrorists, al-Qaeda, are there trying to stir up the sectarian violence that we're trying to stop and are doing with some success in Baghdad today. Here--here's my hope. I wish instead of going into this kind of trench warfare, parliamentary partisan battling in Congress off and on for the next few months, that instead we do two things. One is concentrate on

something all of us agree on, which is fixing the unacceptable immoral gaps in our treatment system for the veterans who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, we've got in Iraq now a new plan, additional troops, a new general. The general has said to us by the summer he'll have a clear idea of whether this is working or not. So, as I've said, let's have truce in the political war here in Washington over the war in Iraq so we can give our general and our troops the opportunity to show some success in the real war in Iraq. I--respectfully, I don't believe any of the things that're being talked about by Carl Levin or Jack Murtha or others in the House have a chance of passage. And if they don't, why waste time? Let's keep our eye on what's happening in Iraq, let's help our vets, let's increase the size of the Army and the Marines, and--and let's hope that our troops succeed.

SCHIEFFER: All right. Well, thank you very much, gentleman. We'll be back in a minute to talk to the reporter who broke that story out at Walter Reed.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: And joining us now is my new hero, Anne Hull of The Washington Post who, along with her partner Dana Priest, uncovered this awful mess at Walter Reed.

You all spent a lot of time on this story, didn't you? I mean, what was it like, Anne, to--to hear these stories?

Ms. ANNE HULL (The Washington Post): Well, it was a very humbling experience, number one. But it was infuriating for both Dana and I to listen to these stories, and each individual story was heartbreaking. But taken together, it was a pretty bad indictment of how the Army was treating the wounded.

SCHIEFFER: How did you get on this story?

Ms. HULL: We received a tip at the paper, just someone phoned and said they were very concerned about how the outpatients at Walter Reed were being treated. Not the patients in the hospital, but those who were released into outpatient status. And there were 700, 800 of these people living on the post for years.

SCHIEFFER: When you found these stories and you checked them out, did you--did you go to the Army immediately about this, or how did you go about putting this story together?

Ms. HULL: We worked under the radar for four months. We didn't want to go to the Army. We didn't go to Walter Reed's public affairs office. We just wanted to hear the unvarnished and truthful stories of the soldiers and Marines living there. We didn't want any spin. We wanted to hear what they had to say. And normally, they might not have been as frank talking to us, but no one was listening to them for years about their problems. And so they were ready to talk.

SCHIEFFER: The thing that got everybody's attention at first were these rat-infested, moldy rooms. But the problem, the real problem was the way these people are being treated, wasn't it? Not--not the housing.

Ms. HULL: That's right. We--we looked at Building 18 as sort of the symbolic heart of darkness, but the real problem is the bureaucracy that these guys have to deal with. They're literally languishing for a year or two there. They have to prove they were in Iraq. The Army is in disarray. They had four years of casualties. We had one soldier who had to bring his Purple Heart to prove that he even served in Iraq. We had a medic who served three tours and had to bring in pictures of herself in Iraq to prove she served. And every day these small insults added up to just a very hard experience for people living there.

SCHIEFFER: Well, how did this happen?

Ms. HULL: The Army has had five years of casualties coming back. And, as the senators said before, the medical treatment has been phenomenal from the battlefield to Walter Reed. It's this next step where people have been lost, and the Army wasn't prepared to have any infrastructure to deal with all these wounded that they'd inherited.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think this was something that stands alone, or do you think it's just the tip of the iceberg? How--because we have a lot of these hospitals around the country.

Ms. HULL: Right. Walter Reed is not an isolated experience. There are other outpatients living on military posts around the country in less than good living conditions and dealing with the same bureaucracy and the same fight with the Army over their disability ratings. That's the real battle for most of these folks.

SCHIEFFER: And it also extends beyond the military hospitals into the VA, as we have seen from this remarkable reporting that Bob Woodruff and ABC did about how these people with these serious brain injuries, they're being shuttled off to hospitals where there's no treatment for them. I mean, it's just the more you think about it, the more inexcusable it all becomes.

Ms. HULL: Right. I mean, the big surge is going to be the traumatic brain injury, and the PTSD folks looking for services for the VA. What we found at Walter Reed is that the Army would tell these soldiers, 'The VA will take care of you,' and the Army was giving them zero disability ratings quite often. They were very eager to hand these soldiers off to the VA system.

SCHIEFFER: Do you think these soldiers are in the right frame of mind, and especially some of them that we know of with--with brain injuries, when the Army is coming to them and presenting them with these decisions that they have to make about should they try to stay in the Army and get the service there, should they be willing to leave the Army and go on disability? That's the part that kind of troubles me.

Ms. HULL: We heard of one instance where there was a captain from the 101st Airborne, he was being discharged from the hospital. He had just hit his morphine pump for pain, and the VA woman came in to explain his disability package. They are heavily medicated there while they're getting very important messages given to them, and they are not in the right frame, often, to make these crucial decisions. And they don't have enough advocates and caseworkers to help them through the system.

SCHIEFFER: Anne, I want to thank you very much for what you did, not just for these soldiers, but for the country. You have performed a great public service here.

Ms. HULL: Thank you.

SCHIEFFER: And you deserve our thanks, from all of us.

Ms. HULL: Thanks.

SCHIEFFER: We'll be back with a final word on this in just a minute.

(Announcements)

SCHIEFFER: Finally today, when I was in the Air Force long, long ago, I was told there were only three acceptable answers when the commander called you on the carpet: 'Yes, sir'; 'No, sir'; and 'No excuse, sir.' And nowhere is 'No excuse, sir,' more appropriate than in response to the disgraceful treatment we now know that many of our wounded soldiers have been getting. No excuse, sir, across the board, from an administration that forgot "support the troops" is more than a bumper sticker to a military that tried to blame it all on low ranking sergeants to a Veterans Administration whose leaders tried to play down the number of serious injuries, yet were so unfamiliar with their own system that too many times the injured were sent to facilities unequipped to treat their particular injuries, and yes, to a Congress and a news media that should have uncovered this long ago.

Only three people rise above this mess: Washington Post reporters Dana Priest and Anne Hull, who you just met, and the remarkable Bob Woodruff of ABC News. The Posties did what the rest of us should have. When they heard the rumors, they took the time to check them out. Not rocket science, just the first obligation of journalism. And then there is Woodruff, who went to Iraq to get one story, was badly wounded and, after months of treatment, recovered to find another, the unacceptable way that many who suffered the kind of serious brain injury he suffered were lost in a nightmare of red tape and going without the treatment they needed.

The rest of us should have paid more attention. We can only be grateful to three who did.

That's it for us. We'll see you next week right here on FACE THE NATION.