

Newsline The military

Valor database idea stirs interest

By John Hoellwarth

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Last year, President Bush signed into law the Stolen Valor Act of 2005, which punishes those who boast of awards and decorations they didn't earn, even if they don't physically wear those medals.

But a growing coalition of private citizens, veterans' organizations and government officials are claiming that Stolen Valor is only half the battle. They're advocating the establishment of a publicly accessible, national database of valor awards recipients to preserve the deeds of legitimate heroes while making it easier for citizens to check the facts when they think someone might be telling tall tales.

Right now, those who want to expose phonies need to try their luck navigating the bureaucracies of the individual services, or submit Freedom of Information Act requests that may or may not be answered.

Based on a series of interviews with members of both chambers of Congress, the idea of a central

database appears to be gaining steam in both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs and Armed Services committees, where lawmakers universally support preserving the integrity of military awards.

But despite strong support in principle, as of Sept. 14 no one in a position to move the initiative forward had signaled an intention to take action.

On the Senate side, presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, said in a statement that those who claim decorations they don't rate "disrespect all of America's veterans who have defended our nation with honor and courage," and vowed to "maintain the integrity of their awards." Sen. John Tester, D-Mont., also a committee member, said the committee "should consider this database."

Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., of the Armed Services Committee, called the idea of creating a national database "reasonable" and made clear that "those who are fraudu-

lently claiming to be recipients of combat medals deserve to be prosecuted," but expressed initial reservations because "there may be privacy issues involved."

His concerns were echoed by many lawmakers in both chambers who favor hearings on the issue to answer privacy questions before any legislation is drafted.

The Veterans Affairs Committee's chairman, Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, who also sits on Armed Services, may be the initiative's most powerful supporter in the Senate because the decision to hold hearings in the Veterans' Affairs Committee is his to make, though it remains unclear whether he'll exercise this prerogative.

"I am deeply distressed to hear that there are some individuals who would stoop so low as to masquerade as recipients of medals that our nation awards to those who have served with valor in the military," he said. "While I realize that creating a database of those who have received medals of valor would be a huge undertaking for

[the Defense Department], something must be done to curb this abuse. We must protect the legacy of America's heroes."

'Makes perfect sense'

On the House side, where the Stolen Valor Act had its genesis, the congressman who introduced it feels "it makes perfect sense for him to carry legislation as a follow-up to Stolen Valor," said Rick Palacio, spokesman for Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo.

Republican members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, including Colorado's Rep. Doug Lamborn and ranking member Rep. Steve Buyer of Indiana, each called the nationwide service faker trend "appalling" and expressed support for a digital database of legitimate recipients to combat it. The privacy concern was also shared by Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., on the Armed Services Committee. Another committee member, Rep. Madeleine Bordallo, D-Guam, called the database "a good idea."

But the issue seems to be gaining the most traction among members of that chamber's Armed Services Committee, such as Rep. Patrick Murphy, D-Pa., the House's only Iraq veteran.

"I strongly support a digital database of valor awards so that we can enforce the law and protect legitimate heroes," he said.

In a telephone interview with Marine Corps Times, Rep. Mike Conaway, R-Texas, said "clearly a hearing is the least we could do." He reiterated Thune's privacy concerns, but said he expected less "pushback" because information about a service member's military awards and decorations is already available to the public upon request through the Freedom of Information Act.

Ultimately, whether hearings come to fruition in the House Armed Services Committee will depend on Rep. Susan Davis, D-Calif., who chairs the subcommittee on military personnel, where any motion on the issue must start.

At press time, Davis' spokesman Aaron Hunter said the chairwoman could not be reached for comment. "But I have a feeling we will be talking in the future." □

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