
Defense Report

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Doctors Obstructing Plans for Combat Medical Care—Soldiers' Lives Are Held Hostage.

By the time World War II ended, about 300,000 beds were available in military hospitals in the United States, but, as the size of our forces declined over the years, so did our capacity to treat combat casualties. During the Vietnam conflict the hospitals of the Army, Navy and Air Force were stretched beyond their capacity to treat the casualties of that relatively small war. Today, there are just 18,000 beds available in all our military medical facilities and the Department of Defense has been attempting to get commitments from civilian hospitals that would set aside 50,000 beds to supplement the military capability, if necessary.

Based on the growing sophistication and efficiency of new conventional weapons and experience gained in the Arab-Israeli war, our military medical planners forecast heavy personnel casualties in the early stages of a battle such as that which might erupt in Europe. American casualties would have to be brought home for treatment, and the military treatment facilities could be quickly overwhelmed. Unless a coherent, workable plan is developed ahead of the need, thousands of wounded soldiers might die untreated.

Amazing as it may seem, a group of politically active physicians opposes this plan. They say that to be so ready for handling mass casualties would be an open invitation to escalate the battle to the tactical nuclear level. The Department of Defense, rebutting the doctors, agrees that the prospect of nuclear war is abhorrent but maintains it is not inevitable. The department points out that nuclear weapons have been in existence for almost 40 years but have not been used in any of the hundreds of conflicts since 1945.

Despite the endorsement of the DoD plan by the American Medical Association and the American Hospital Association, this group of physicians, who call themselves Physicians for Social Responsibility, are actively seeking, with some success, to persuade hospitals to stay out of the plan. Although sworn to the preservation of human life, they have put political goals ahead of concern for the lives of fellow citizens who happen to be wearing uniforms of the nation's armed forces.