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Disrespecting Women Soldiers

Showing bad timing as well as bad judgment, House Republicans chose the days before this weekend's patriotic holiday to deny needed health services to women serving the nation in the military.

On Tuesday, Republican leaders had the Rules Committee block the House from voting on two modest amendments to the military authorization bill that were intended to remove ideological barriers to providing decent care to military women who are victims of sexual assault. One amendment, offered by Representative Michael Michaud, a Maine Democrat, would have ensured that so-called morning-after emergency contraception, which can prevent pregnancy if taken within 120 hours of unprotected sex, was made available to sexual assault victims at military bases. The other, sponsored by Representatives Christopher Shays, Republican of Connecticut, and Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, Democrat of Florida, would have carved out a narrow exception to the ban on federal financing of abortions, for military women who have suffered rape or incest.

We understand why G.O.P. leaders wanted to prevent the House from voting on these measures: that would have required Republicans to go on record in favor of ill-treating female service members to placate their influential extreme-right wing.

On Wednesday, House members did vote on a perennial proposal, offered this time by three California Democrats, Representatives Susan Davis, Jane Harman and Loretta Sanchez, to permit American troops overseas and their relatives to obtain abortions at military hospitals and clinics if they pay the bills. Military doctors currently may perform abortions only in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's life is endangered. Even in cases of rape and incest, the women must pay. While women stationed in the United States who seek an abortion can at least go to public or private hospitals or clinics off the grounds of military bases, those options may not be available to many of the more than 100,000 American women living on overseas bases, including in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We ask women to put their lives at risk for our freedom, so why is it we do not support them when they require safe and legal medical services?" asked Representative Davis. That is the right question. Troubling figures released this month by the Pentagon show that the number of reported cases of sexual assault among service members continues to climb. Regrettably, this did not deter the House from defeating the amendment, 233 to 194.

Among those voting against it was Representative John McHugh, a New York Republican who, as chairman of a subcommittee looking into the military's sexual assault crisis, spoke only a year ago about the need to reassure women of Congress's "sincerity" in addressing the problem. House Republicans did back away from an effort to impose unwarranted new limits on women's service in combat support and service units. But that cannot reverse the hurtful message to female soldiers sent by the other votes. That task now falls to the Senate.