

**Statement for Delivery
Senator John D. Rockefeller**

**“The Exposure at Qarmat Ali: Did the Army Fail to Protect
U.S. Soldiers Serving in Iraq?”**

**Monday, August 3, 2009
628 Dirksen Senate Office Building**

Thank you, I deeply appreciate the Democratic Policy Committee’s (DPC) efforts to draw much needed attention to the issue of chemical exposure of our brave military personnel in Iraq.

And I am very proud that a former Staff Sergeant and medic in the West Virginia Army National Guard, Russell Powell, is here today, willing to step up and talk about his personal experiences as hard and emotional as that may be.

Some of you may or may not know this but in West Virginia, I host private, confidential roundtables with returning veterans to get the real story of their deployment and the enormous challenges of returning to civilian life. It is enormously important that our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans feel like they can speak freely about their concerns.

The story of the National Guard units deployed near Basra in 2003 must be heard and it should be a call to action.

The witnesses will tell their stories themselves, but I do want to highlight a few points.

The fact that they were deployed to provide security for contractors at the Qarmat Ali water treatment plant is part of the tough job our troops face. The fact that they were not warned of or protected from exposure to Sodium Dichromate – a dangerous chemical – is an enormously serious problem.

The exposure was not public in West Virginia until this year when I learned of the problem. I wrote both the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs for information and a report on what was being done to help exposed veterans.

I also joined my colleague, Senator Evan Bayh on his bill, S. 642, The Health Care for Members of the Armed Forces Exposed to Chemical Hazards Act of 2009.

We must care for these veterans – this has been a cornerstone of who I am as a person and a legislator throughout my career and I will never stop the fight for our men and women who serve.

Now, this is not the first time I have had to battle Pentagon officials over chemical exposure. In 1993, as chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, we investigated the possible causes of what was then referred to as “Gulf War Syndrome.”

I had to demand testimony from DOD officials, and we fought for years to call attention to the illness among our veterans. I was deeply disturbed by senior Pentagon officials’

dismissal of those serious health concerns, and today, I worry that approach may be continuing at the Pentagon.

After 17 years, the mandated Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses released a 450-page report last year at the insistence of Congress, confirming the association of illness linked to exposure to neurotoxic chemicals.

Now once again, the Department of Defense seems to be ignoring our service members' objective evidence and complaints, denying that something in the environment at Qarmat Ali has caused health problems.

What is more, the DOD's initial response to my letter on this was very disappointing.

This much is clear:

First, the Department of Defense should have been aware that members of the National Guard, including the 150 West Virginia members, were exposed to toxic chemicals and protected them better.

Second, the Department of Defense relied too heavily on the initial environmental testing conducted by Kellogg, Brown and Root.

And third, even after it evaluated the site at Qarmat Ali, the Department of Defense failed to notify exposed National Guard members in a timely fashion.

Indeed, the Department of Defense's efforts to notify each soldier of possible exposure have been inadequate at best.

It is hard to believe that with all of the department's resources, the only means it has to contact former National Guard members, according to the Secretary of the Army, is current members providing former members' addresses.

Sadly, the Department's response to Qarmat Ali seems to echo its response over the years to Gulf War Syndrome. We cannot allow this pattern to continue. I won't stand for it.

I never gave up the fight to highlight the very real Gulf War Syndrome, *now Illness*, and I will not give up on the National Guard members today who may have been exposed but not yet even told of the risks they face.

I want to thank my colleagues again for calling this important hearing, and our witnesses for sharing their stories.

With so much at stake, we must share the truth as soon as possible. Only then can we continue to track and learn about the illness to provide our veterans the care they have earned and deserve, the best care possible.