

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com > Nation

» FOLLOW THE POST ON:     

Pentagon recommends Medal of Honor for a living soldier

By [Greg Jaffe and Craig Whitlock](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, July 1, 2010

The Pentagon has recommended that the White House consider awarding the Medal of Honor to a living soldier for the first time since the Vietnam War, according to U.S. officials.

The soldier, whose nomination must be reviewed by the White House, ran through a wall of enemy fire in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley in fall 2007 in an attempt to push back Taliban fighters who were close to overrunning his squad. U.S. military officials said his actions saved the lives of about half a dozen men.

It is possible that the White House could honor the soldier's heroism with a decoration other than the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor. Nominations for the Medal of Honor typically include detailed accounts from witnesses and can run hundreds, if not thousands, of pages. The review has been conducted so discreetly that the soldier's family does not know that it has reached the White House, according to U.S. officials who discussed the nomination on the condition of anonymity because a final decision is pending.

Pentagon officials requested that The Washington Post not name the soldier to avoid influencing the White House review. Administration officials declined to comment on the nomination.

[\(Photos of the past six Medal of Honor recipients\)](#)

The nomination comes after several years of complaints from lawmakers, military officers and Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) that the Pentagon had become so cautious that only troops whose bravery resulted in death were being considered for the Medal of Honor. Gates "finds it impossible to believe that there is no one who has performed a valorous act deserving of the Medal of Honor who has lived to tell about it," said Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell, who declined to comment on specific nominations.

[George W. Bush](#) similarly lamented during the latter days of his second term as president that he had never had an opportunity to present the award to a living recipient.

The presentation of a Medal of Honor to a living soldier would be an important moment for [President Obama](#), whose relationship with the military has been complicated in recent

GALLERY 



Medal of Honor recipients

A look at the past six recipients of the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor, from Iraq and Afghanistan.

» LAUNCH PHOTO GALLERY

Network News MY PROFILE

Friends' Activity

[View More Activity](#)

Network News PROFILE

[View More Activity](#)

Highest honor

No living recipient has been awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military decoration, since the Vietnam War.

| | Total medals awarded, by war | Number posthumous |
|--------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Iraq | 4 | 4 |
| Afghanistan | 2 | 2 |
| Gulf War | No medals awarded | |
| Somalia | 2 | 2 |
| Vietnam | 246 | 154 |
| Korean War | 133 | 95 |
| World War II | 464 | 266 |
| World War I | 124 | 33 |

SOURCE: U.S. Army Center of Military History
The Washington Post

TOOLBOX

 [Resize](#)  [Print](#)  [E-mail](#)

 [Reprints](#)

WHO'S BLOGGING powered by [sphere](#)

» [Links to this article](#)

U.S. Privacy No. 08-50345 archived on September 2, 2010

months by controversy over the administration's Afghan war deliberations in the fall and the recent firing of [Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal](#) for remarks that belittled senior Obama administration officials.

The honor would also mark an important moment for a military that is exhausted after nine years of repeated deployments and increasingly worried that the rest of the country has tuned out the wars and their service. "There has been a certain emotion that is almost like martyrdom within the military," said Richard Kohn, a military historian at the University of North Carolina. "It's a feeling that they are sacrificing a great deal while the rest of the country is going about its business."

Obama presented a posthumous Medal of Honor in September to the family of Sgt. 1st Class Jared Monti for his heroism in exposing himself to enemy fire to retrieve a wounded comrade. But honoring a living soldier with the nation's highest award for valor would give the president an opportunity to ease some of the military's feelings of estrangement from the rest of U.S. society.

Such a ceremony also would allow the president to honor military heroism and virtue, sentiments that Republicans say Obama does not celebrate frequently enough.

The award has the potential to produce something increasingly rare in today's wars: a recognizable hero in uniform. "The Afghan and Iraq wars really haven't produced heroes with a face," said Peter Feaver, a professor at Duke University who served in the Bush White House. In World War II, Medal of Honor winners such as Audie Murphy and John Basilone came to represent the ideals of the U.S. fighting force.

CONTINUED 1 2 [Next >](#)

Network News MY PROFILE

View More Activity

© 2010 The Washington Post Company

Ways you can get us

- Mobile
- Newsletter & alerts
- RSS
- Facebook
- Twitter

- Podcasts
- Widgets
- Post Store
- Photo Store

Website

- About Us
- Work for us
- Site map
- Topics Index
- Search terms
- Make us your homepage
- Corrections

Newspaper

- About The Post
- Subscribe
- Home delivery service
- Topics Index
- e-Replica
- PostPoints

Company

- Post Company web sites
- Advertise
- In the newspaper
- On the web site
- Feedback
- Contact the Ombudsman

Partners



U.S. v. Alvarez, No. 08-50345 archived on September 2, 2010

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com > Nation

» FOLLOW THE POST ON:

Page 2 of 2 < Back

Pentagon recommends Medal of Honor for a living soldier

Some senior Bush administration officials worried that the lack of visible heroes made it tougher to convey the importance of the Iraq and Afghan wars to the American people, Feaver said. Early efforts by the Pentagon to weave heroic narratives out of the lives of soldiers such as former NFL football player and Army Ranger Pat Tillman collapsed when early military accounts of battlefield valor proved to be untrue. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star.

Six posthumous Medals of Honor have been awarded for heroism in the Iraq and Afghan wars. The honorees exposed themselves to enemy fire to call for reinforcements or pull wounded colleagues to safety. Three of the six jumped on grenades, sacrificing their lives to save their fellow troops.

In response to the paucity of Medals of Honor awarded since 2001, the House Armed Services Committee directed the Defense Department to conduct a formal review of its award policy. Pentagon officials insist that the criteria for awarding the Medal of Honor hasn't changed since Vietnam.

But the nature of battle has changed, said Eileen M. Lainez, a Pentagon spokeswoman. Precision bombs and lethal attack helicopters typically give U.S. troops a huge firepower advantage over lightly armed insurgents on the battlefield. To compensate, fighters in Afghanistan and Iraq have relied heavily on roadside bomb attacks and ambushes that lasted for only a few minutes. Previous Medal of Honor recipients have typically displayed extreme bravery in battles that last for hours.

There are at least three Medal of Honor nominations, including the one at the White House, working through the system. The three nominees served in sparsely populated valleys in eastern Afghanistan that U.S. troops have abandoned in recent years.

The valleys, which are within 30 miles of each other, are dominated by treacherous, mountainous terrain that frequently allowed enemy fighters to move within close range of U.S. forces before launching their attack. The remote nature of the valleys meant that troops often had to fight for an hour before attack helicopters arrived on the scene to drive back the enemy.

GALLERY

Medal of Honor recipients
A look at the past six recipients of the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for valor, from Iraq and Afghanistan.
» LAUNCH PHOTO GALLERY

U.S. v. Alvarez, No. 08-50345 archived on September 2, 2010

Network News MY PROFILE

Friends' Activity

[View More Activity](#)

Network News PROFILE

[View More Activity](#)

Highest honor

No living recipient has been awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military decoration, since the Vietnam War.

| | Total medals awarded, by war | Number posthumous |
|--------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Iraq | 4 | 4 |
| Afghanistan | 2 | 2 |
| Gulf War | No medals awarded | |
| Somalia | 2 | 2 |
| Vietnam | 246 | 154 |
| Korean War | 133 | 95 |
| World War II | 464 | 266 |
| World War I | 124 | 33 |

SOURCE: U.S. Army Center of Military History
The Washington Post

TOOLBOX

[Resize](#) [Print](#) [E-mail](#)
 [Reprints](#)

WHO'S BLOGGING powered by **sphere**

[» Links to this article](#)

Senior military officials described the fighting in those valleys as some of the toughest since the Korean and Vietnam wars. "It is a very, very challenging fight," said one military official. "It is sustained lengthy ground combat."

The relatively large number of potential Medal of Honor nominations emerging from this remote area of Afghanistan also reflected a war strategy that asked U.S. commanders to do too much with too few resources, military analysts said. Frequently troops were overextended in hostile terrain.

"We should be stationing our troops in places where they won't be earning the Medal of Honor because the population and terrain favor us and we have quick access to air support," said John Nagl, one of the authors of the Army's counterinsurgency doctrine and president of the Center for a New American Security, a defense think tank.

Staff writer Anne E. Kornblut and staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.

[< Back](#) [1](#) [2](#)

top **Network News** MY PROFILE X

[View MbreActivity](#) >

© 2010 The Washington Post Company

Ways you can get us

- Mobile
- Newsletter & alerts
- RSS
- Facebook
- Twitter

- Podcasts
- Widgets
- Post Store
- Photo Store

Website

- [About Us](#)
- [Work for us](#)
- [Site map](#)
- [Topics Index](#)
- [Search terms](#)
- [Make us your homepage](#)
- [Corrections](#)

Newspaper

- [About The Post](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Home delivery service](#)
- [Topics Index](#)
- [e-Replica](#)
- [PostPoints](#)

Company

- [Post Company web sites](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [In the newspaper](#)
- [On the web site](#)
- [Feedback](#)
- [Contact the Ombudsman](#)

Partners

[Slate](#) [THE WASHINGTON POST GOV](#) [express](#) [CAPITAL BUSINESS](#) [El Tiempo Latino](#) [ROOT](#)

© 1996-2010 The Washington Post Company | [User Agreement and Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights and Permissions](#)

[Help](#) | [Contact Us](#)

U.S. v. Alvarez, No. 08-50345 archived on September 2, 2010