

Opening Marine Infantry to Women A Civil-Military Crisis?

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Abstract: In 2016, the secretary of defense directed all U.S. military Services to work toward the inclusion of women in all roles, including combat occupations. The United States Marine Corps has shown more resistance to this directive than other Services, particularly with respect to infantry. This article discusses the history and extent of the civil-military gap between the Marine Corps and American society and analyzes different dimensions of this gap. Using a framework that describes different drivers of military resistance to change, it argues that the nature of the civil-military gap in the Marine Corps makes mandated gender integration a multifaceted threat to the Corps' identity and institutional culture—and a greater threat than in other Services. The inclusion of women in infantry training is thus a crucial issue for the health of the civil-military relationship, as it pits effective civilian oversight against Service culture.

Keywords: civil-military relations, civil-military gap, gender integration, United States Marine Corps, USMC, women in the infantry, civilian control, Service culture, institutional culture

The case of integrating women into Marine Corps infantry is a useful example of civil-military tension in the twenty-first century. Although typically framed as a matter of civil rights by its proponents and of military effectiveness by its critics, it is in fact a flash point in a much deeper disconnect between the civil and military worlds. The degree to which each party invests in forcing its own desired outcome therefore represents something much more

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substantial about the health of the civil-military relationship today. Similarly, any approach, solution, or mechanism that enables the resolution of this issue has the potential to shed light on, or even ameliorate, this strained relationship.

It is not a new insight that warrior culture has been indivisible from masculinity for much of recorded history. The *virtues*, which included physical courage and valor, the sine qua non of being a warrior, come from the Latin word *vir*, meaning “man.” In a very real sense, not just in the linguistic sense, to be a good warrior was to be a good man, and vice versa, until quite recently.¹ Since the early years of the Cold War, the U.S. military has created various permanent roles for women in response to perceived recruiting necessities, and especially due to directives from civilian authorities. The patterns of both gender integration and resistance to it that have emerged among the different Services indicate that Service culture, an understudied variable in the civil-military relationship, acts as an intervening factor between civilian authorities and the military Services.

This article examines gender integration as a point of conflict in the civil-military relationship, using the United States Marine Corps as a case study. Whether gender integration is harmful or beneficial to military effectiveness, the Corps, like the other Services, is bound by the directive of the secretary of defense to implement this change; yet, the Corps has shown more resistance than its sister Services. By using existing frameworks for analyzing civil-military gaps, this article shows how the mandate from Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to integrate women fully into the Corps presents challenges in all the major arenas usually discussed in the literature of civil-military relations. It considers existing work on the circumstances in which military forces are most likely to resist civilian pressure to change and evaluates this case in light of those insights. Finally, the article examines a broader way of conceptualizing civil-military dissonance and concludes by discussing the importance of gender integration not as a goal in itself, about which this article takes no position, but as an example of the magnitude and relevance of the tension between the Marine Corps (and the military more broadly) and civilian leadership.

Although masculinity remains part of the individual identity of the warrior today, and of the identity of military organizations, each institution and each age manifests this phenomenon differently. The Marine Corps in the years since the Second World War is no exception; it construes masculinity, femininity, and the definition of a “good Marine” in ways that differ, sometimes slightly but sometimes profoundly, from the definitions found in other Service cultures, and by an even greater degree from those definitions in civilian culture. Each of the Services evolved a new understanding of recruiting and force generation during the transition to the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), and the Corps chose to emphasize masculinity and martial elitism in its self-representation to the na-

tion.² Understanding gender as it is seen through the lens of the culture of the Marine Corps is therefore necessary to see exactly how and why it has resisted civilian mandates to integrate women fully.

On 3 December 2015, Defense Secretary Carter announced that all military occupations and professions would be opened to women beginning 1 January 2016. The stated reasoning behind this decision was twofold: to create a thoroughly meritocratic institution in which ability to do the job is the only criterion for acceptance and to draw more fully upon all the human capital available to the U.S. military.³ While the Services were permitted to request exemptions for specific roles, along with a justification for why women should continue to be barred from them, the U.S. Army had already opened its elite and physically demanding Ranger School to women and graduated three, and the U.S. Navy had begun accepting applications from women for its SEAL selection process, though none had yet qualified to start the course. The Marine Corps alone, under the direction of then-Commandant of the Marine Corps General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., requested an exemption for some military occupational specialties (MOSs), particularly those related to infantry and reconnaissance. This exemption was denied, meaning that for the first time all positions within the U.S. military are nominally open to women, all Services are required to make sincere efforts to integrate women into these roles in as timely a fashion as possible, and General Dunford, now the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, must oversee the implementation of a policy he had previously, as Commandant, opposed.⁴

The implementation of a policy mandated by civilians over the objections or reservations of the military is the crux of civil-military relations. One tool for diagnosing the health of the civil-military relationship is the question of whose preferences prevail when the Services and civilian oversight differ.⁵ By this metric, gender integration and the bureaucratic and political struggles around it represent a weakness in the current civil-military relationship in the United States—efforts to lift various exclusions imposed upon women's service began in the early 1990s, but they are not yet fully realized.⁶

Women in the U.S. Military

Women have participated in combat, and worked in combat theaters, among the U.S. military since, and in fact before, the nation's inception, serving alongside men during the American Revolution and after. Largely restricted to administrative and nursing roles until the Second World War, they were given the opportunity to fill a wide range of noncombat roles in that conflict, including responsibility over others and for aircraft and ships, primarily to act as a force multiplier during times when manpower was in short supply.⁷ Because traditional American views considered women to be a reserve labor force in times of emergencies, these roles were closed to women after World War II. These

actions within the military paralleled the civilian workforce; due to fears about the return of the Great Depression, women left their jobs, voluntarily or with pressure, to make available private sector jobs for the men who had gone to fight.⁸ Strict limits were imposed by the Department of Defense on how many women could join the ranks or hold a commission after the war. It was not until a generation after the Second World War that military service, particularly as a career, became a viable option for women. The postwar 2 percent cap on women in the military was lifted in 1967, and Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs admitted women in 1972. Consequently, the Service academies opened to women in 1976.⁹

Although a permanent role for women in the regular and reserve forces was codified in law for all the Services in 1948, participation remained low. The creation of the AVF in 1973 created new opportunities for women to serve and also prompted the Services to actively recruit them to counter dwindling interest in military service society-wide. Beyond lifting caps and opening up Service academies, however, much of the change related to integrating women more widely into the military was at the discretion of the Services, each of which approached the challenge differently, and with differing outcomes.

There are a number of different benchmarks by which to evaluate the degree that women have been integrated in each Service. Two benchmarks of particular relevance are the extent to which women are admitted into job fields that lead to the highest ranks and assignments and the proportion of the Service that is made up of women. The former indicates the degree to which women are likely to reach positions from which they can lead at the institutional level, while the latter reflects how much the full participation of women in the Service has been normalized. If the Services fall on a spectrum on both these indicators, then the Marine Corps is at the far end of the spectrum, both with respect to the number of fields open to women and representation at all levels.

In the U.S. military as a whole, as of October 2017, women make up 16.25 percent of the force, 17.7 percent of officers, and 15.9 percent of enlisted ranks.¹⁰ While the Marine Corps has the lowest proportion of women, the Air Force and Navy have the greatest proportional participation of women. In the U.S. Air Force, women represent 19.5 percent of enlisted, 21 percent of officers, and 7.2 percent of general officers. Pilots and air crew are perceived by some within the Air Force as the most prestigious occupations and are statistically overrepresented at the general officer level; the Air Force opened pilot training to women in 1976, navigator training in 1977, and fighter pilot training in 1993, with the first female fighter pilot going on to become the first female fighter wing commander in 2012.¹¹ As of 2015, 99 percent of Air Force positions were open to women, with 6 job fields (out of more than 4,000 total) restricted to men. The Air Force has indicated it will not seek an exemption

and has begun the process of opening up these remaining fields to women.¹²

Women in the U.S. Navy currently represent 19.4 percent of enlisted, 18.5 percent of officers, and 9.1 percent of flag officers. The most desirable assignments, and those considered most likely to lead to promotion, are in the surface warfare, submarine, and aviation communities. In 1979, a woman earned carrier aviation qualifications, and another woman earned surface warfare qualifications. It was not until 2011 that women began service aboard submarines as officers. The first woman took command of a Navy ship in 1990, the same year that a woman was the commanding officer of a naval aviation squadron.¹³ Currently, all Navy ratings and communities are in theory open to women, although enlisted women are only now beginning to serve on submarines. While the first women attempted SEAL training in late 2016, none have yet completed the course.¹⁴

The U.S. Army is the largest of the Services, and it has the largest number of women in absolute, though not proportional, terms. Women currently make up 14.3 percent of Army enlisted, 14.1 percent of officers, and 5.6 percent of general officers. Prestige occupations within the Army tend to be marked by highly competitive selection processes, with an emphasis on extreme physical endurance; this includes ground combat arms and special operations forces (SOF). Although all artillery and combat engineer MOSs were opened to women in 2012, 2016 is the first year that infantry and SOF were accepting applications from women, with 22 women commissioning as infantry and armor officers in the summer of 2016.¹⁵

Women are underrepresented in the Marine Corps by comparison, both as a total fraction of servicemembers and the proportion of female officers compared to the proportion of female enlisted personnel. This is consistent throughout the history of the Corps in the post–Second World War period.¹⁶ Today, women make up 8.5 percent of enlisted Marines, 7.5 percent of officers, and slightly more than 1 percent (1 out of 85) of general officers. Though combined operations using all elements of the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) have been the backbone of Marine Corps operations throughout the twenty-first century, the heart of the Corps is the infantry, and so far only one woman has passed the Infantry Officer Course (IOC) and joined the fleet with that officer MOS, opening up the possibility for women to enlist in that branch. A small number of enlisted women have completed the program of instruction at the School of Infantry (the training that follows boot camp for those enlisted Marines seeking to join the infantry) as part of an experiment. These Marines passed when measured against the same standards in place for male students, but their participation in training was never intended to be the first step to serving in the infantry.¹⁷ The IOC is considered the most grueling program in the Corps. While it was opened to women in 2012, so far, of the 33

women who have attempted it, 1 has completed the course, another was able to continue beyond the second week of the 12-weeklong program of instruction before subsequently being dropped, and more than half were eliminated from the course on the first day.¹⁸

The fact that only one woman completed IOC after many cohorts attempted it is particularly striking given the recent graduation of 3 women (out of 19 who attempted the course, in the first cohort to include women) from the Army's Ranger school, another famously grueling test of physical and mental strength and endurance. One significant factor is the practice in Ranger school of allowing candidates (male and female) who cannot succeed in a given phase to make multiple attempts, with the three women who have completed the course to date receiving several "recycles," although not an unprecedented number for previous graduates, who were all male.¹⁹ This ability to reattempt all, or part, of the course is not typically offered to candidates at the Marine Corps' IOC.²⁰

The Marine Corps, then, lags behind the other Services dramatically with regard to women at every level, both in absolute terms and proportionally within the organization. It has the most career paths closed to women, particularly those likely to lead to senior positions later in a Marine's career.²¹ While the relative importance of musculature and physical strength are attenuated through technology in many occupations in the Air Force and Navy, the physical requirements of ground combat are largely the same across Services, so the differential in women's participation between the two ground forces is particularly significant. What factors explain why, given more than four decades of civilian-directed pressure to increase the role of women in the AVF, the Marine Corps has responded differently from the other Services?

The Marine Corps and the Postwar Civil-Military Relationship

The seminal texts in civil-military relations agree that there is a fundamental disconnect between civil authority and the military but disagree as to its significance and desirability. More recent work in the field has opened up new lines of inquiry into how the civilian authorities seek to direct the military and how the military responds, but they maintain the concern expressed by earlier scholars that the health of this relationship cannot be taken for granted. In the context of the Cold War, Samuel Huntington, a political scientist who spent much of his career at Harvard, argued that the unique mission of the military inevitably resulted in a different set of values and orientation from those of broader society—and that this was necessary and arguably positive.²² By contrast, Morris Janowitz, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, agreed that while a divergence in culture between the groups is inherent in the nature of

the institution of the military, the divergence is potentially worrisome with respect to the continued subordination of the military to civilian leadership.²³ More recent evaluations of the civil-military relationship suggest that the two spheres can, and sometimes do, interact in more nuanced ways. Rebecca Schiff, who has studied civil-military relations in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, proposes a concordance theory, arguing that the military and the civilian world, comprised both of the citizens writ large and the state's leadership, can agree to negotiate decision making on particular issues according to their expertise, which bridges the gap regardless of its source.²⁴ Treating the interactions between the military and civilian oversight as a principle-agent relationship exposes the ways in which the military can exploit its information advantage to resist civilian direction, whether or not that direction reflects expertise or wisdom.²⁵ The dynamic through which militaries are resourced by the state can also inform how both parties negotiate disagreements as to policy and execution; while the military has an information advantage over civilian oversight, civilian institutions exercise power over funding levels and recruiting policies, and can choose to regulate military personnel and spending quite closely.²⁶

Taking these more abstract discussions and applying them to the Marine Corps, two separate but related questions must be considered. First, in what ways and along what dimensions do the Corps and civilian leadership differ, particularly on the question of the integration of women into combat MOSs? Second, in what ways do these gaps contribute to the Marine Corps' resistance to implementing the policy wishes of civilian oversight? One recent taxonomy of civil-military gaps presented by a group of researchers in *Armed Forces & Society* suggests that there are four ideal types of mismatch. Even though most issues will touch upon elements of more than one type, it is nonetheless useful to consider how any given problem yields different sorts of gaps between the two groups. The four dimensions in which civil-military gaps can be evaluated are cultural, demographic, policy preference, and institutional disconnects between the civilian and military worlds.²⁷

The Cultural Divide

Cultural gaps exist when attitudes and values, in the aggregate, are substantially different between the military and civil society. While the range of opinions and values held by military members is similar to those of broader society, the distribution of those opinions and values is not, as strikingly illustrated in a recent Military.com study.²⁸ Military elites in particular, and members more broadly, often characterize civilian society as weak and corrupt, and they perceive this state of affairs not as a natural consequence of a different function but as a flaw that would be remedied by bringing civilian culture closer to that of the military.²⁹ Although less overt contempt characterizes the civilian view of

the military, a case can also be made that the frequent testaments of respect for, and faith in, the military conceals a mistrust of the military by civilians, rooted largely in the increasingly small proportion of the American public with first- or secondhand knowledge of military life and culture, and also in decreasing public confidence in major institutions in general.³⁰

In particular, the cultural gap between the Marine Corps and broader civilian culture is significant. The relationship between the individual and the broader community of the Corps is among the first values imparted to new recruits, from the insistence that recruits refer to themselves in the third person, to repeated inculcation of the need to subordinate individual desires, even individual survival, to the greater good of mission accomplishment.³¹ This stands in increasingly stark contrast to the orientation of Americans, particularly from Generation X onward, toward their work lives, which shows a consistent trend of valuing compensation, personal gratification, recognition for their accomplishments as individuals, and the ability to subordinate workplace demands to better meet their other social and personal needs.³² While American society has grown more individualistic, the Marine Corps continues to inculcate collective and group values.

Demographic Differences between American Society and the Corps

Demographic differences between the Marine Corps and American society are comparatively easy to identify. Ethnically, Caucasians and Native Americans and Pacific Islanders are slightly overrepresented (Caucasians are 62.1 percent and Native Americans and Pacific Islanders are 1.4 percent in the general population, and 65.9 percent and 1.9 percent in the Corps, respectively) while African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians are underrepresented (13.2 percent, 17.4 percent, and 5.4 percent in the general population, and 10.3 percent, 15.8 percent, and 3.4 percent in the Corps). The more striking disparity is along gender lines: women make up 50.8 percent of the general population and 43.5 percent of the current American workforce. With respect to either measure, the proportion of women in the Marine Corps does not parallel the civilian world, with women making up only 7.7 percent of the Service. Women participate in the military at far lower rates than they do in the general labor market, but the Marine Corps has a markedly lower rate than the Army (14.1 percent), Navy (18.0 percent), and Air Force (19.1 percent).³³

Other demographic and political differences exist between the U.S. military and the U.S. population at large, although for these factors, little information exists to differentiate the Corps from the rest of the military. Military officers, in particular, are both more socially conservative and more likely to identify as, and vote, Republican than the general population.³⁴ Recruits are drawn in disproportionate numbers from southern and southwestern states.³⁵

Both enlisted and officers are more likely to come from middle-class and upper-middle-class homes than from the poorest quintile, and when controlling for age, military personnel are more highly educated than their civilian counterparts.³⁶ Notwithstanding reports of evangelical activity within the military, religious identification of military members corresponds quite closely to that of the general public, with Catholics, evangelical Protestants, nonevangelical Protestants, and “other” (which includes atheists) within roughly 1 percent of their proportion in the general public.³⁷

Culturally, the generational differences provided for different perspectives on work ethic and values, but generational continuities are significant and gendered. As of 2000, the majority of new recruits (although not officers) had fathers who were veterans, despite the number of veterans in the general population then being quite low.³⁸ More recent work suggests that an orientation toward public service is a strong predictor of reenlistment among military members in the twenty-first century.³⁹ Studies on previous generations have also shown a small but significant difference between Marines and members of other Services with respect to Charles Moskos’s institutional-occupational orientation. Writing in the 1980s, Moskos, a sociologist who shaped much of the study of institutional culture in the U.S. military, suggested Western militaries were in the process of transitioning from an institutional model, in which motivations were generally altruistic, patriotic, or normative, to one that was occupationally oriented, in which motivations were more likely to involve pay, training, and career benefits in the short and long term.⁴⁰ Applying this theory to the U.S. Services, the research shows that Marine survey responses indicate a slightly higher degree of institutional motivation rather than occupational motivation at the level of the individual Marine.⁴¹ While the majority of the nation is pursuing individualism and personal gratification, a small segment of society, heavily influenced by the experiences of male parents, chooses to do the opposite.

Policy Preferences of the Services and Civilian Leadership

A gap in policy preference has emerged quite clearly in the years since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks (9/11), particularly in light of the protracted, costly, and minimally effective interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan that followed those attacks. There is no unanimity among either military or civilian decision makers and elites as to how to counter existing threats, prepare for future threats, or even what the threats of today and tomorrow are, but there are nonetheless observable trends around the circumstances in which each group, broadly, supports intervention, and what sorts of intervention they envisage. With respect to the most senior members of both groups, there is a consistent preference among civilians for the more frequent use of limited force, for the

purposes of pacification, stability operations, and nation-building, while senior military officers by contrast consistently believe the appropriate use of military force should be infrequent, much less limited, and used for countering direct threats to national interests and security.⁴²

In terms of policy preference differences among the Services, it is impossible to generalize and ascribe an orientation to any particular style of warfighting to the whole of either ground Service; however, there are discernible differences in the aggregate between the two. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Army had large constituencies supporting investment in counterinsurgency (COIN), even at the expense of continued training and development of counterforce capabilities, as well as those arguing precisely the opposite—that COIN is a “lesser included” role that can be ably carried out by a conventionally oriented force.⁴³ When considering the lines of effort emphasized in *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24, which was predominantly shaped by the U.S. Army, and contrasting it both with more empirical work on COIN as well as with Marine Corps experiences in Iraq prior to the surge, a picture emerges of a preference within the Army for stability, capacity-building, and policing elements of COIN, with a diminished emphasis on direct and supporting military actions on the part of the intervening power.⁴⁴ Since 2011, the Army has reorganized in ways designed to facilitate conventional warfighting and decreased the weight given to COIN and stability operations in its education and research institutions.⁴⁵

The preference gap between Services is slight but perceptible when viewed through the lens of different theoretical approaches to COIN. More broadly, Marine Corps publications discussing anticipated future roles and capabilities emphasize, by contrast, forcible entry, forward seabasing, and amphibious assaults—all more traditional and counterforce-oriented types of military activity.⁴⁶ Although small wars and stability operations are part of the Corps’ heritage, institutional identity is converging on amphibious assault as the primary mission for the Corps, in part to distinguish it from the role it played in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) as a second land army.⁴⁷ The most recent Marine Corps Operating Concept document, updated in 2016, also emphasizes the combat orientation of the Service; the Commandant says in it that “[t]he Marine Corps exists to defeat our Nation’s enemies.”⁴⁸

Institutional Issues

An institutional civil-military gap exists when major civilian institutions, such as the media, the world of higher education, and branches of government are at odds with the military, as reflected by policy, values, and identities. In this regard, there are mixed indicators of whether a gap exists between the military

and civilian society, and there is insufficient research to differentiate among the Services. With respect to education, the increased presence of ROTC programs on campuses in recent years suggests increasing alignment, or at least a decreasing disconnect, although these programs are still less numerous than before Vietnam. There is, however, more criticism of the military and current conflicts by faculty and students, although again, not to the extent seen in the 1970s.⁴⁹ In terms of whether a state of harmony exists between the executive branch and the military, the Barack H. Obama administration may represent a low point, with public disagreements between Obama and senior military leaders about troop levels in Afghanistan, culminating in the firing of the senior commander in Afghanistan after his staff derided the administration on the record.⁵⁰ In the broader context, it was one of a series of presidencies in which mutual disrespect, colored largely by unfamiliarity on the part of most administration officials with military institutions and culture, hampered effective civil-military cooperation and communication.⁵¹

The initial months of the Donald J. Trump administration have complicated the civil-military relationship by drawing an unprecedented number of cabinet and senior officials from the rolls of recently retired senior officers, which has polarized public opinion. A 2017 survey of the military found that approval for the new president was at 47 percent among enlisted members, with 16 percent neutral and 37 percent disapproving. The numbers are nearly the inverse among officers, with slightly more than 30 percent approving, 16 percent neutral, and more than 53 percent disapproving. Other divisions show up in military support for the current president: only in the Marine Corps does a majority have a favorable opinion of him, while in the Air Force and Navy a plurality has an unfavorable view of the president. As in the civilian population, women and minorities are far less likely to have a favorable view of the president compared to men and Caucasians.⁵²

Mass media has been criticized for being uncritically supportive of the military and for fearmongering that drives support for war.⁵³ The media has also been accused of sensationalistic reporting on military scandals and wrongdoing, driving reflexive opposition to the military.⁵⁴ If the media is a window into how Americans perceive the military, it reveals an ambivalence on the part of public opinion. In terms of broad values, millennials—influenced by but also influencing media and education ecosystems—consciously reject gender essentialism, which is the view that there are capabilities, temperaments, and traits that are determined by biology; embrace egalitarianism over hierarchies; and are comfortable with ambiguity. These value orientations are, to put it mildly, antithetical to military culture.⁵⁵ How military culture will reflect the values of the millennial generation when this cohort makes up senior leadership cannot be predicted; will this cohort change the military, will the military change

millennials, or a bit of both, with respect to these attitudes and beliefs? While this cohort remains among the more junior ranks and grades, though, this gulf remains wide.

There are, then, clear gaps between the U.S. military in the twenty-first century and the civilian society it serves and is controlled by. In addition, with respect to culture, demographics, and policy preference, the Marine Corps is positioned slightly differently from, and further from the civilian sector, than other Services. The existence of a gap does not intrinsically lead to dysfunction, though; power struggles arise only when civilian control of the military is hampered, or at the extremes threatened, by these gaps.

Strength of Resistance

There are four main ways a civil-military gap manifests. The degree to which these differences generate resistance to civilian leadership is another issue, with this variation best explained by the degree to which the military (or Service) feels threatened. Scholars examining innovation imposed by civilians upon militaries identify four variables that explain when, and to what degree, militaries will resist change. These variables are professional identity, operational routines, autonomy, and budget. Professional identity describes in this case not only the notion of military professionalism in the general sense but also in the identity of Marines, an explicitly warrior culture, and a group that defines itself as the “first to fight.”⁵⁶

Operational routines are threatened by mandated change when that change would require disruption to existing routines not only for planning and fighting wars but for recruiting, training, and equipping servicemembers. Threats to autonomy lead to institutional resistance not only because stakeholders feel their resources or influence are threatened but also because it is through the exercise of autonomy that institutions, particularly those faced with the unexpected or the risky, which characterizes the military, can rapidly adapt. The fact that threats to budgets, or to control over budgets, as a result of forced innovation, results in institutional resistance does not require much explanation.⁵⁷ The more the military or Service perceives a threat to any of these spheres of its identity and activity, the likelier it is to resist imposed change.

The Corps' Interests, Gender Integration, and the Civil-Military Gap

Despite the success of thousands of individual women in the Marine Corps, the conflation of Marine identity with masculinity within Corps culture is omnipresent. A linguist studying communication within the Corps—both official, in the form of statements and publications, and also casual or informal speech—found that patterns and word choices traditionally coded as feminine

are treated as intrinsically inappropriate, while styles of communication that correspond to more typically male patterns are praised and emulated. In other words, “I statements” (beginning sentences with “I”) and the use of modifiers implying emotion, coded as feminine, are frowned upon, while the more masculine style of speaking impersonally and with brevity is encouraged. Male and female Marines alike used the term *pussy* to describe a Marine who complains, and *weak sister* to characterize a Marine who is frequently injured or ill, without reference to the gender of the object.⁵⁸

The inclusion of makeup classes in boot camp for women (and the issuing of official cosmetic brushes) may be almost two generations in the past, but concern that women in the Corps appear not simply neat or uniform but attractive still echoes in the lengthy and often ambiguous official guidelines that exist today with respect to women’s physical appearance, while the guidelines within which men’s grooming must fall are brief, specific, and narrow.⁵⁹ The appearance of men in the Corps matters in that it is uniform; the appearance of women is framed, by contrast, in the language of aesthetics, in a manner reminiscent of the “femininity quotient” imposed on women in the military during World War II, designed to reinforce differences at both the cosmetic and visceral level.⁶⁰

From boot camp—which is conducted in single sex units, unlike in other U.S. Services—Marines, both male and female, are cautioned that women in the Corps fall into one of three categories: “you’re [either] a bitch, a slut, or a dyke,” as one recruit reports being cautioned during her initial training.⁶¹ The experiences of women in the Corps indicate that while men and women are both instructed about appropriate boundaries and behavior, in practice women feel maintaining these boundaries in their interactions with male Marines is a responsibility that falls disproportionately upon them.⁶² Until 1975, women in the Corps were formally referred to as Woman Marines, and although this label today is considered unacceptable for official use, it persists colloquially; the modifier confirms that the default Marine is a man.⁶³ The conflation of “Marine-ness” with masculinity persists in other arenas, often insignificant in isolation, but part of a systematic identification of the virtues being inculcated as inhering in men. The language used to describe illness, injury, or the inability to meet physical standards suggests both femininity and failure.⁶⁴ The physical uniformity imposed from the very start of the military experience—with respect not only to clothing but bodies themselves—“displaces idiosyncrasy, individuality, and particularity,” and the ideal standard is masculine, particularly in the Marines.⁶⁵

Marines frequently describe themselves, implicitly or explicitly, as Spartans. The reference shows up in histories of the Corps, in the required reading list published by the Commandant, in tattoos on Marine bodies, and in the logos

of gyms in which they hone their bodies—even in exhortations to Marines to be more energy efficient and environmentally friendly, as shorter supply trains, and the ability to live off the land, will make them more resilient, lethal, and austere—like the Spartans.⁶⁶ The evocation of an exclusively male, infantry-based and elite force from history finds a mirror in a modern-day slogan that is one of the best-known maxims of the Corps: “Every Marine a rifleman.” All the Services have weapons proficiency tests required of all recruits and officer candidates before graduating from initial training. Only the Marine Corps requires all members, regardless of whether their MOS is likely to expose them to combat, to recertify at regular intervals throughout their careers, due to both combat considerations and the centrality of the rifleman to Marine identity.⁶⁷ This has cultural significance in illustrating the primacy of the infantry to the Corps’ history and identity, and it also serves to maintain a level of alterity, in reinforcing that even though a woman in the Marines must be proficient with weapons, she cannot, as long as she is barred from infantry MOSs, be a part of that cadre.

The duality embodied here—that female Marines are riflemen (in that they are qualified with rifles) but are intrinsically unable to serve as Riflemen (the name of the primary infantry MOS, 0311)—reflects an ambivalence about women and combat in the Corps. Few Marines, regardless of their opinion on integration, today speak about “women in combat,” as the nature of twenty-first century war has ensured that anyone in theater is (or at least can be) in combat.⁶⁸ Rather, the debate is framed about whether women should be assigned combat MOSs. It is a point of pride for the Corps that, in their folklore, the ambush and capture of a convoy that included Army Private First Class Jessica Lynch would have played out differently had its target been Marines, with every mechanic, logistician, and driver a skilled shooter, regardless of sex.⁶⁹ At the same time, many express concern that the integration of women—more capable of self-defense than their counterparts in other Services, per Marine mythos—into infantry units would place these units in greater peril.⁷⁰

Threats to identity are perhaps the most obvious source of resistance to gender integration in the Corps, but they can overlap with threats to operational routines. Some of these issues might seem pedestrian, such as concern about the infrastructure changes required to provide privacy—or the cultural changes required in the absence of privacy—with respect to sleeping, changing, and hygiene facilities, which in the field are frequently minimal. The need to develop procedures for meeting personnel requirements in light of unexpected pregnancies is a more concrete example of a threat to routine presented by gender integration.⁷¹ Some threats to routines can even come from within, though they may be prompted by externally mandated change: Lieutenant Colonel Kate Germano, the commanding officer of the training battalion for all enlisted

women, was relieved in 2015 after investigation into complaints about her efforts to hold women recruits to a higher standard, one more closely aligned with the standard for men. Her critics allege a toxic command environment, while her defenders argue she was working to minimize the distinctions between the sexes in the Corps, from the ground up. In any event, Germano's approach to raising standards—in part in an attempt to accommodate a new requirement for female recruits to do pull-ups—resulted in her relief on the grounds of “a poor command climate and the loss of trust and confidence” in her ability to do the job.⁷²

Concerns about cohesion in infantry units also are tied to threats to existing routines and habits. The crudity and vulgarity of barracks life, according to Lieutenant General Gregory S. Newbold, are part of the cement that bonds infantrymen into a band of brothers, and the changes that he believes would result from including women would invariably erode that cohesion, as would the jealousy, gossip, and tension that would result from the sexual relationships that would inevitably follow when young, fit men and women live and work in close quarters.⁷³ While in most other settings, such an argument would be discredited for putting the onus only on women to prevent these complications, in much of the military sphere this belief holds sufficient credibility to be accepted as part of the debate.

More analytical work based on studies of integration in other workplaces and cultures, meanwhile, has found that in at least some cases, the presence of women in formerly all-male units has harmed both cohesion and performance, at least during the initial period following integration.⁷⁴ A preliminary report on a Marine Corps study in which all-male groups, groups with a low proportion of women, and groups with a high proportion of women were asked to perform the same combat-related tasks showed that the all-male groups consistently performed better than mixed groups by a significant margin during those trials.⁷⁵ While the methodology of the study has been criticized for the construction of the experiment, as well as the absence of an all-female control group, and a non-random and nonuniform selection of study participants, these results are taken by opponents of integration to substantiate concerns that military effectiveness might be harmed by gender integration, whether through threats to cohesion or by some other mechanism. It is perhaps relevant that critics of racial desegregation of the military also argued it would harm cohesion and thus combat effectiveness; 50 years of research on the racially integrated military has shown this supposition to be untrue.⁷⁶

Threats to routines and effectiveness bleed into threats to autonomy. The Marine Corps' in-house study found that when standards are lowered to allow women to qualify for combat MOSs, cohesion and effectiveness are harmed even further. In recent years, there has been a push from civilian leadership to

do precisely that, as exemplified by Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James's decision to waive traditional requirements for pilot training in the interests of achieving "diversity and inclusion requirements."⁷⁷ Navy Secretary Ray Mabus has made an even more pointed statement about how he would like to reengineer the composition of the Marine Corps, stating that one-quarter of recruits should be women, which would represent, depending upon end strength numbers, roughly quadrupling the number of women in the Corps as it exists today, and which does not reflect research into the feasibility of this proposal.⁷⁸ Given the traditional attrition rates for women in Marine training compared to men, this would de facto amount to a mass lowering of standards. The potential loss of control that would result from externally mandated changes to standards in the recruitment and training of future Marines presents a grave institutional threat to the Corps' autonomy.

Other indications exist that not only will gender integration be imposed but that the manner in which it is conducted will be directed by civilians outside the Corps. Secretary of Defense Carter, who never served in the military, joined Mabus in dismissing the results of the internal study showing reduced combat effectiveness in mixed infantry units, and Mabus has repeatedly expressed a desire to force the Corps to desegregate genders in boot camp for men and women.⁷⁹ When Carter announced the end to all combat exclusions for women in December 2015, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, who as Commandant of the Marine Corps had recommended against integration, was (pointedly) absent from the press conference, a departure from similar press conferences in the past, in which the chairman typically appears alongside the secretary of defense.⁸⁰ With the change in administration in January 2017, Americans inside and outside of the Marine Corps have been particularly eager to see how recently retired Marine General James N. Mattis will influence policy and implementation around these issues. So far, attempts at integration of women into infantry commissions and ranks have been sustained, and their first successes achieved in the graduation of a woman from IOC, which makes it possible to assign enlisted women who have graduated from the SOI to be given an infantry MOS.

There are threats to budgets caused by gender integration of combat occupations for the Marine Corps. The costs of modifying facilities and equipment, while real, are not expected to be significant. Costs related to those Marines who are not ready to deploy in the form of "increases to the training, transient, prisoner, and patient (T2P2) population, medical separations, non-deployability rates, attrition, and recycling or reclassification, will be more significant."⁸¹ Given increased health care utilization rates among women veterans returning from OIF and OEF, future health care costs will also rise as the participation of women increases, and particularly as it increases in com-

bat roles, although this is a military-wide cost and is non-Corps specific.⁸²

Savos's model suggests military resistance to externally mandated change is more likely to arise when identity, routines, autonomy, and budgets are threatened by that change. The integration of women into combat occupations in the Marine Corps presents threats in all four domains. According to the taxonomy of types of civil-military gap discussed earlier, gender integration resonates with the tensions caused by cultural, demographic, and policy preference gaps between U.S. society in the twenty-first century and the Corps, even more so than in the other Services.

With respect to Service culture, the emphasis on the needs of the Corps over those of the individual, and the contempt for the perceived civilian preoccupation with personal and material benefit, clash with many of the arguments for opening combat MOSs to women as a matter of individual equity, career advancement, or the fulfillment of individual ambition to serve in the infantry.⁸³ Gender essentialism, increasingly rejected in the civilian sphere, has a robust constituency in the Corps, which sees its role primarily in terms of combat, and the norms of chivalry are still invoked to make a normative case against women in the infantry, an argument that would be rejected, even mocked, in industry, academia, or politics.⁸⁴ The demographic gap, more acute in the Corps both in absolute numbers and in the number of roles closed to women relative to other Services, adds volatility to mandated gender integration, as it represents a bigger change in personnel and routines, associated costs are correspondingly higher, and the cultural shift required is more dramatic.

Policy preferences cast perspectives on the integration of women in an interesting light, given the capabilities needed for institutions and individual Marines in various sorts of military interventions. While the military in general, and the Marine Corps in particular, have been quietly reorienting themselves toward more traditional military missions, the U.S. government, in a trend that predates the 9/11 terrorist attacks, increasingly sees the military as a force-in-being for deterrent purposes and a force to be deployed in humanitarian, stabilization, and peacekeeping missions. This trend can be observed in administrations of both parties.⁸⁵ Much of the discussion touting the success and relevance of women in combat zones in the twenty-first century draws upon female engagement teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which women were integrated with forward-deployed combat units to interact with the local population in ways that male troops could not.⁸⁶ There is even a school of thought that for humanitarian missions, women are not only as capable and fit as men for all military roles, but they are in fact intrinsically superior.⁸⁷ One need not accept this gender essentialist position to see that a civilian sector that sees military intervention as a tool to remedy humanitarian crises, exercise the responsibility to protect, or keep the peace, will have a different view of gender integration and

its possible consequences than does a Marine Corps that sees invasion of other states and the defeat of other militaries as its primary mission.

A Modern Service in the Age of the Postmodern Military

The differentiation of a general civil-military gap into specific kinds of mismatch shows that the U.S. military, and the Marine Corps in particular, is in many ways far apart from the society that it serves, and this indicates how the role of women in the Corps illustrates these specific differences. The analysis of the myriad forms of institutional threat shows how externally mandated gender integration of women provokes resistance from the Corps. Another framework, though, is helpful in illustrating a broad philosophical and possibly ontological difference between civilian elites in the twenty-first century and the Marine Corps.

The nature of militaries evolves, as does the character of war, and this evolution influences, among other spheres, how militaries as institutions view their members. Moskos suggests that the militaries of the Western world are in transition from a late-modern age (1945–90) to a postmodern age.⁸⁸ While a postmodern military continues to define their identity and mission in terms of the primacy of the nation, the traditional basis of national sovereignty has been functionally eroded by the globalization of finance, trade, communication, and transnational identities.⁸⁹ Moskos presents a chart listing attributes typical of modern, late-modern, and postmodern armed forces. Major characteristics of postmodern militaries include the transition to subnational threats, new missions centered around humanitarian concerns, and the full integration of women.

What is striking about his schema is that in many ways the Marine Corps, rather than drawing closer to the postmodern ideal, is in fact somewhere between the modern and late-modern ideal types, and actively resists moving toward the postmodern attributes of other militaries and other U.S. Services. Where late-modern militaries are oriented toward a perceived threat of nuclear war, the Corps, even during the Cold War, focused primarily on maneuver warfare and conventional war; where late-modern militaries envision the officer as a manager or technician, rather than a combat leader, Marines still emphasize combat leadership as the foundational quality; and because modern militaries include women in a separate structure, if at all, while late-modern militaries involve them to some degree, it could be argued that the Corps' current approach to women falls between the two, and is nowhere near the postmodern, full integration.⁹⁰

The utility of this conception of the source of the conflict in the matter of gender integration of the combat arms of the Marine Corps lies in its more

holistic view of the two groups—the Corps and the society that it defends, and which finances and supports it—as being rooted in fundamentally different worldviews, or perhaps different eras. This does not invalidate either the previously discussed taxonomy of the gap or Savos’s theory of predictors of institutional resistance. Rather, it positions them as symptoms and/or indicators of this fundamental worldview mismatch. The role of identity and masculinity in the Corps also suggests that, despite the content of so much of the debate on the issue, matters such as how many pull-ups an infantryman must be able to do, how much more prone women are to stress fractures from long hikes under heavy loads, or how feasible it is to prevent sexual relationships from developing among people living and working in close quarters are not really relevant to the real dispute, and perhaps even distractions from it, as they have not been an obstacle to the integration of women in the U.S. Army’s Ranger School or in Army infantry.⁹¹

Conclusion

The crux of the problem during the last decade of the ongoing clash between an administration that will see women fully integrated, and a Corps that wishes to carry this out on its own terms, lies in the different orientations of each sphere, both civilian and military, and the challenge of harmonizing across gaps that exist in many dimensions, especially when the Corps feels itself threatened by change. While the Trump administration has signaled a different attitude toward the military, policies around gender and combat MOS assignments have not changed.

If the demographics of the military were somehow to become perfectly aligned with those of society with respect to gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and education, there would still be profound differences between its structures, values, and policy preferences, characteristics that are themselves continually in flux in both the civilian and military worlds. An organization that relies upon subordination and hierarchy seems destined to be dissonant from broader Western society in the twenty-first century under any circumstances as individualism and debate are increasingly preferred to top down or authoritarian management. An organization trained to apply (and withstand) violence in the interests of a greater good will view the use of force differently than a society that prizes individualism. Because the demographics of the military are in some key dimensions not representative of the broader society, and are not likely to become so in the near future, differences will persist.

Although the Marine Corps works to implement policy decisions from the secretary of defense, it should work to better communicate its reservations about the effects of integration on its doctrinal role, military effectiveness, and

cohesion.⁹² To have a healthy civilian-military relationship, it is essential that the Corps obeys instructions from civilian leadership. More broadly, beyond the compliance it owes, the military can help the civil-military dynamic to function better by educating a civilian government that is increasingly more divorced from firsthand military experience about its culture and concerns. Equally, when civilians determine that the military must change, they will achieve their aims more readily, and with fewer unintended consequences, if they account for military culture and interests, and specify the changes they seek while leaving the military to determine the how to implement these changes.

There is another dimension unique to the Marine Corps that influences attitudes and implementation around gender integration. As Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak said, America does not need a Marine Corps, it wants a Marine Corps.⁹³ The sort of Marine Corps the nation wants may be more like the Marine Corps of the past, the force famous for combat victories like Belleau Wood and Iwo Jima. Perception and identity, so central both to military and broader American culture, weigh more heavily on the Corps than on the other Services because of their greater differentiation from American society, which may contribute to the tension around the integration of women into Marine infantry.

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