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Should Women Serve in Direct Combat Roles?

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27 November 2007

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Politics of Women Serving in Combat (MSG Aldenberg).....

The issue of women serving in combat has been a point of ongoing debate in the U.S. military since its establishment. Female Soldiers today often find themselves embedded with combat units supporting the War on Terrorism. Congress has examined the issues surrounding females in combat at several levels. However, the current policy, established in 1994, is no longer relevant. Many institutions have conducted studies to evaluate the physical prowess of females and almost unanimously, these studies have concluded that with the proper training, females can meet the Army's combat arms specialty standards. It is the determination of this research group that given today's asymmetrical battlefield, the Army should give females the option to serve in combat military occupational specialties as long as they meet the requirements.

In February of 2005, President George Bush announced from the Oval Office that he was opposed to women in direct combat roles. A few days later, after much public discussion, he backed off his statement and said he was comfortable with the current role that females have in our military. Women serving in combat has been a political issue since Jan. 13, 1994, when then Secretary of Defense Les Aspin established the policy "Aspin Rules." This policy restricts female Soldiers from serving in smaller Direct Ground Combat (DGC) units. These are units that traditionally conduct direct and deliberate offensive operations against the enemy. The current policy of the Department of Defense (DOD) excludes women from assignments to units that are below the brigade level who engage in direct combat. Since that time, there has been much discussion on this subject but not much action.

In the current war that the U.S. is fighting, the War of Terrorism, everyone who is deployed is serving in what we have come to know as in harm's way. When it comes to DGC units, such as the infantry, engineers, and special operations units that engage in direct offensive operations, you will not find any female Soldiers assigned. Where you will find them is flying Apache helicopters, being convoy commanders for resupply missions going directly into the most dangerous sections of Iraq and Afghanistan, and serving as military police during house-to-house searches along with convoy escort missions.

So why has it become such a political issue with the American public? Is the issue that Americans do not want to see their wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers on the front lines fighting close combat operations, or is it that society believes that females in general cannot handle close combat operations due to the extreme physical and mental pressures placed on our Soldiers on the front lines?

Congress has paid little to no attention to the issue of American women in combat in our Armed Services. In 1991 over 16 years ago, the Senate Armed Service Committee (SASC) was the last committee to hear any testimony on this subject. The commission has not heard or took action upon any testimonies or issues concerning the 1992 Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Services, except for recommending that women not be allowed to serve in DGC units.

In 1993, the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) did hear five minutes of testimony from former commissioner Elaine Donnelly about the Presidential Commission report. On May 19, 2005, the HASC briefly debated and approved legislation regarding women in or near land combat. However, legislation never made it to the house floor (Center for Military Readiness, 2007).

The sixth anniversary of 9-11 just passed, and it is appropriate to ask about the current policies dealing with female Soldiers in uniform. Never in America's history have military service women faced greater risk and heavier burdens than the female Soldiers serving since Sept. 11, 2001.

With current transformation and restructuring, the Army continues to assign its female Soldiers to combat service support and combat support companies that are in direct contact with infantry line companies. The Soldiers assigned to these companies are in high demand, low-density MOSs, such as military police, fuel handlers, and civil affairs. These companies are not directly assigned to an infantry battalion, but are assigned to a support battalion or brigade and are attached to a line infantry company for a particular time or mission.

Members of Congress have expressed some concern after receiving reports of women being in direct combat situations in Iraq. In 2006, Congress directed then Secretary of Defense

Donald Rumsfeld to prepare a report that would detail the current situation American women assigned to combat units currently face. The purpose of this report was to find out if there were any violations of the 1994 DOD policy. On August 7 of this year, the Pentagon released the RAND Report. The RAND report concluded that the U.S. Army and DOD are following the policy barring the assignment of women in combat units.

This past summer, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates testified in front of Congress that the Armed Forces are in compliance with the current policy that was adopted in 1994. Elaine Donnelly, who is now serving as the president of the conservative think tank Center for Military Readiness, believes that DOD is circumventing the current policy.

“The rules are being circumvented; they’re being deliberately broken; they’re being redefined without authorization by the secretary of defense and without the required notice of Congress,” she said (Nation Public Radio, 2007).

The Army is ordering women to serve in support units that are co-located or embedded with all-male infantry units, which is a direct violation of the Aspin Rule of 1994. Bill Carr, the deputy undersecretary for military personnel policy, said he believes the policy remains relevant despite the fact that women are finding themselves in combat situations every day (Newsmax, 2004).

Each time an issue arises with female Soldiers in combat zone, the political atmosphere of this nation takes over and everyone wants answers to a situation that they believe is a problem. In May of 2005 after the 507th Maintenance Company and the Abu Ghraib prison situation, the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the House Armed Service Committee approved a provision barring women from serving in any company-sized unit supporting combat battalions and their

companies. Congress eventually removed this provision from the 2006 Defense Spending Bill due to lack of support on both sides of the House.

When the Aspin Policy came out in 1994, it referenced ground combat as taking place in a forward battlefield in what is known as conventional warfare. The battle space had a front and a rear. The Army is currently operating in an asymmetrical battle space against an enemy that is anything but conventional. Politicians and the ones who make policy virtually pay no attention to what is actually happening on the battlefield. The reality is what women have risked and accomplished since the War on Terrorism began in 2001. The other reality is that nearly 100 women deployed to the Middle East have lost their lives while fighting the War on Terrorism.