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Women in Combat?

Assimilation of women is a controversial topic within the Army today. One predominant question has emerged -- should women serve in combat? The debate is complex and emotional. Perspective is lost amid a myriad of tangential considerations. Exhaustive research, studies, and surveys have been inconclusive because basic issues defy empirical analysis. Solution requires reaffirmation of the nature of the military profession in a democratic society, and its role in an increasingly technologically complex world.

Present consternation is symptomatic of an historical, world-wide trend. History suggests three stages in the evolution of women's sociological role, directly attributable to environmental conditions: Neolithic hunters survived via cohesiveness and logical sexual division of labor; agricultural eras fostered utilitarian practices of early marriage and maximum maternities; and the Industrial Revolution emancipated women into the labor force.¹ The phenomenal acceleration of change suggests we are now on the threshold of the fourth anthropological stage of women's utilization. Their military service has expanded, commensurate with the evolution of women's role within our society. Women will assume an increasingly significant military role. Extensive evaluations have not provided a solution to the question of women in combat. Studies have involved physiology; opinion polls of civilians, military personnel, and senior officers; and progress evaluations of women. The utility of further study is minimal.

Physiological differences between men and women have been analyzed ad nauseum. The elbow, the center of gravity, various cardiorespiratory and anthropometric factors, and menstruation have been extensively reviewed. Results have only further categorized women.

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Opinion surveys are influenced by complex psychological and sociological factors. Attitudes are malleable and preconceptions of traditional roles for women have been conditioned, perhaps genetically imprinted. Women are generally perceived as vulnerable and the concept of them dismembered in "body-bags", or "closing with and destroying the enemy" is incomprehensible. Resulting primeval chivalrous chauvinism is difficult to understand or modify, and sometimes excruciatingly patronizing. Until human behavior and motivation are better understood, unquantifiable variables invalidate opinion surveys. Furthermore, the average citizen understands little about the Army, its jobs, or the nature of war. The military community is perceived as a leashed, protective monster, but an embarrassment, a testimonial by the necessity of its very existence of our violent world. Public concern and participation should determine the nature of a democracy's military establishment. But a large percentage of our citizenry fails to vote in presidential elections. For them to understand the issues regarding composition of our armed forces seems unattainable.

Surveys of military personnel in the combat arms are influenced by perceptual human frailties -- resistance to change and a "rites of passage" philosophy. Credentials and experiences are exaggerated. The firefights' intensity and individual actions are remembered as greater than actuality. Soldiers' war stories, like fishermen's tales, grow with time. Access to combative specialties is deemed appropriate for a chosen few -- a last bastion of stereotypical machoism. Other professions welcome and develop their interns, but military recruits have been traditionally harangued under the auspices of "discipline" and "attention to detail" for the purpose of eliminating those subjectively deemed unworthy. Surveys of senior military officers result in a predictable consensus. Their demographic profiles reveal a conservative bureaucracy. They are human, also subject to conditioning and resistance to change. A senior combat arms

officer in a normal career pattern spends very little time "with troops" -- the closest association, as company commander, being years ago, in a different society. Has any male General Officer endorsed total integration of women? Published opinions of General Officers regarding a combat role for women are invariably negative. Generals disagreed with women entering the U.S. Military Academy and the opportunity would not now be available to women had it not been coerced by Congress. The Academy has continued functioning, with benefits such as more mature, professional cadet deportment.

The progress evaluation methodology has been inconclusive because women have been integrated into a complex, male-dominated, milieu with a myriad of handicaps. Perception of expectations becomes a "self-fulfilled prophecy" and one can invariably predict "how they're doing". Minorities are treated like minorities. Trends somewhat parallel racial integration in the military. Executive order muted further conjecture on that subject and resulted in a successful program -- a model for the civilian community. Despite favorable performance in jobs on the more traditional side of the continuum, intangible variables continue to obscure basic issues regarding a combat role for women. The basic problem remains one of attitudes -- our perception of women, and women's concept of themselves.

Because various categories of tests and surveys have been predictably inconclusive, further study of this "problem" is inappropriate. The volume of taxpayer money already expended on such research is phenomenal. The issue is unquantifiable.

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"Every study indicates that qualified women soldiers can serve in any capacity. But each time the Pentagon receives a report confirming this conclusion, it ...simply commissions another study.

Women should be accepted as soldiers and not as females. If the Army would only take its own advice in this regard, it would provide equal employment opportunity for all soldiers and a stronger defense for the nation."²

The Army should resolve the capability issue by simply specifying requisite qualities for each job, then considering all qualified applicants. Women should not be categorized, but treated as individuals. Men do not categorically have access to every Army job. Standards of entry must be attained, then acceptable levels of performance maintained as evidenced by periodic evaluation reports. Institutional discrimination can be eliminated by ensuring that established, definitive entry standards are in fact needed, and not speculate what might be required "in combat", or impose subjective value judgments about what women categorically "can" do. Only minimum standards should be established because human assessment is complex and measures of predictive validity should always be suspect, but also because future combative tasks are highly speculative. The issue should not be whether "women" are capable of performing a job, but whether an individual of either sex is so capable. Much conjecture involves peripheral issues such as adjustments in policies. Operations should not be determined by support requirements. Unquestionably, some women are capable of performing any job in the Army. Those individuals should have the opportunity to compete for the position. The solution is simple and commensurate with basic tenets of equal opportunity.

Women's capability recurs as the predominant, unresolved issue in this chaotic debate. "Can" women serve in combat? What must be "proved"

to attain a logical conclusion? If physiological research determines 98% of all women lack sufficient "upper body strength" to load a tank round within the prescribed time standard, what should be the conclusion? Are women to be precluded from assignment as tank loaders? That datum may assist recruiters to direct advertising monies for optimum return, but precluding women in general from competing for the job is illogical, illegal and unfair. If a woman within the 2% with requisite abilities wants the job, she has a right to compete for it. Is not that right self-evident?

The civilian community seems to be accepting that rationale. In January 1978 three courts banned sex discrimination in school athletic programs. U.S. District Judge Rubin ruled that girls be allowed to compete with boys in high school sports, to include football if "suitably qualified". He said a woman may become "the greatest quarterback in professional football history. Of course the odds are astronomical against her, but isn't she entitled to a fair chance to try?" The Massachusetts Supreme Court also ruled that girls, if they have the ability, may compete with boys in athletics, to include football and wrestling.³

Similarly, New York Supreme Court Justice Helman has ruled that a ban on women boxers violates equal protection clauses of the U.S. Constitution. Responding to the State Athletic Commission's contention that it had "insufficient experience with women", Judge Helman said "if lack of experience were upheld as a ground for refusal to modernize existing procedures...individual rights of citizens might well be affected and much needed changes would never take place".⁴

The capability question is even less significant when attempting to project tasks required in a future war. The military is often accused of preparing to fight the past war. It above all other establishments should

be progressive and adaptive. Existence may literally depend upon those attributes. Is it not ominously ironic the military has evolved into a highly conservative bureaucracy? Educators have pondered curricula validity for years, and agonized over the apparently low correlation between academic performance and later occupational success. The composition and training of our military should emphasize abilities needed on the future battlefield -- not yesterday's or even today's.

Future wars are almost unthinkable. The devastation of advanced weapons systems and the complexity of command and control procedures stupefy the most imaginative and competent professional soldiers. The future battlefield will require unprecedented technical expertise. Maneuverable craft, hovering command modules, "smart" bombs, laser guns, spaceships, missiles, neutron bombs, satellites, "brain waves", and biocybernetics will be involved.⁵ Even on today's lethal battlefield, "what can be seen, can be hit -- what can be hit, can be killed".⁶ Civilian population centers will be targets. The present policy of permitting women to work near a combat area, but not close enough to be susceptible to direct fire weapons is illogical. Human considerations -- organization, structure, doctrine, and training -- must keep pace with technological innovations of weapons systems.

Endless debate whether women "can" fight yesterday's war is irrelevant. The nature of tomorrow's war will be unlike trench warfare. Brute strength will be relatively insignificant. Even in the low-intensity environment of Vietnam, an infinitesimally small number of soldiers participated in close, hand-to-hand combat -- certainly fewer than the average police woman. Soldiers continue to be trained on bayonet courses, but probably no soldier on active duty has ever participated in a bayonet fight. War is becoming increasingly detached, impersonal, mechanistic.

In addition to concern about maintaining technical proficiency, human effects must be considered. Future war will be more susceptible to inhumane, evil applications. Society would do well to ensure representative participation by all its segments.

The strategic environment is more complex than ever before. The technological advantage once held by the United States is rapidly diminishing. Nations are interdependent. The military competes with industry and multi-national corporations in the labor market. But discussions regarding women's assimilation continue to dwell on adaptive, managerial considerations relevant to today's, or yesterday's, state of the art. The problem is the future. What will be the tasks required of future soldiers, representatives of future society? General Hoisington, former director of the Women's Army Corps has said, "the average woman is simply not physically, mentally, and emotionally qualified to perform well in a combat situation for extended periods."⁷ But the characteristics of a future combat situation is conjecture, and conditions and characteristics of the "average" woman today are irrelevant. Individual women are now astronauts. Women marathon runners do not "hit the wall" after approximately 20 miles (as do men) as a result of glyrogeen depletion.⁸ The nature of future war may in fact favor many "average woman" characteristics such as less mass and more long range endurance.

The question of capability is moot. No serious analyst can support that rationale as justification for denying equal rights to qualified women. The real issue is should women be combatives -- a moral, ethical, even a religious question. Women are excluded from combat specialties not by law but by what the Army believes is the intent of Congress and the "national will". By so doing, are we not guilty of imposing our own opinions upon others? Rationale, pro and con and fraught with emotionalism, is

pronounced daily. Advocates cite civil liberties and provide historical examples of female participation in combat. Progressive theologians philosophize that combat is dehumanizing for all participants and emphasize that little is to be gained by choosing between brutalizing our young men or brutalizing our young women.⁹

Margaret Mead has suggested that masculinity is most guarded where it is most ambiguous and emphasized that historically the relegation of any activity solely to women, or the arrogation of any activity wholly by men, has never had beneficial results. She further suggests:

"It is possible that the historic refusal to give women weapons...may be due not to a rejection of putting the power of death into the hands of those who give life, but rather because women who kill...are more implacable and less subject to chivalrous rules with which men seek to mute the savagery of warfare. It may be that women would kill too thoroughly and endanger the negotiations and posturings of armies, through truces and prisoner taking, with which nations at war eventually manage uneasy breathing spaces between wars."¹⁰

This subject transcends civil rights, the women's movement, systems management, and perceptual psychology. It deals with the nature and role of the military profession. The source of our resistance to the idea of female combatives could be a deep fear of ourselves. We rationalize with rhetoric about physiology, and capabilities, and chivalry; but by relegating war to a select few, we complacently ignore and condone it. Could that be why the average citizen cares to know so little about the military? Soldiers, like morticians, make us uncomfortable. They exemplify the nature and condition of mankind. In almost 3500 years of recorded history, only 268 have been without war.¹¹ Is aggression inborn? Is war inevitable? The concept of those who bear life professionally destroying it is indeed disturbing, as should be the concept of anyone destroying life. In a

world dizzy from future shock and geometrically increasing technological change, threat of war has unprecedentedly profound implications. Women have a vested interest, a right, a responsibility to participate. We may realize considerable gain. Benefits may transcend our systems management, even our national security. Implications may include better understanding of ourselves, our civilization, even hope for the future.

Americans are proud of their civil liberties. "Human rights" have become international relations considerations. However, the mission of the profession of arms is combat, and equal opportunity does not exist within the military unless all jobs are available to all individuals qualified to perform them. Women remain relegated to support jobs in the Army, denied access to those jobs concerned with the Army's *raison d'etat* -- ground combat. Further research and study have reached a point of diminishing return. The decision is difficult. Implementation and stabilization will be difficult. But an Army of a truly democratic society has no recourse. The combat exclusion policy for women should be eliminated.

"The responsibilities as well as the privileges of a nation should be shared by its people. My respect for the individual person, and her or his own decision-making ability convinces me that women and men are to be afforded equal opportunity and equal responsibility -- even in the battle zone."¹²

NOTES

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