



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on February 9, 2011

Feminizing Americas Fighting Force

With “don’t ask, don’t tell” scrapped by congressional vote late last year and open homosexuals now free to be all they can be in the armed forces, activists determined to force social change on America’s military have once again turned their efforts toward placing women into combat roles.

On January 14, the Associated Press reported that a military advisory commission was putting the final touches on a diversity study that includes a recommendation that the Pentagon scrap the rule that for over 200 years has kept women from serving directly in combat. While the Military Leadership Diversity Commission’s 131-page draft report, entitled *From Representation to Inclusion: Diversity Leadership for the 21st-Century Military*, offers a plethora of recommendations to address the supposed need for broader diversity in the military, its most widely publicized prescription is encapsulated in a small section (pages 74-77) recommending that women be allowed to serve in combat in order “to create a level playing field for all qualified service members.”



Then and Now

Presently women may serve in the proximity of combat in support roles, but are prohibited “from being assigned to any unit smaller than a brigade whose primary mission is direct combat on the ground,” reported the Associated Press. The Pentagon says that currently about 14 percent of the nation’s armed forces are composed of women, and of the 2.2 million service members who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, an estimated 255,000 have been female personnel.

According to Department of Defense (DOD) statistics, as of early January 2011, a combined total of 134 women service members had been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, compared to 5,700 men. Many of the women killed, as well as the hundreds of others who have been wounded and maimed during the nine-year conflict, were the victims of improvised explosive devices (remote-controlled makeshift bombs buried in roadways).

By comparison, according to the *Army Times*, some 33,000 women were deployed during the first Persian Gulf conflict, and 16 were killed, nearly all medical personnel. An estimated 7,000 women served during the prolonged Vietnam War, and 16 made the ultimate sacrifice.

Among those killed in the early days of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by U.S. forces was Lori Piestewa, a 23-



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year-old mother of two who was serving as a supply clerk when the convoy she was part of was ambushed in Nassiriya. Eleven other soldiers were killed in the attack, and several injured and captured, among them PFC Jessica Lynch, whose dramatic rescue and contrived account of heroics were used to demonstrate how effectively women could fight alongside men. In reality, neither Piastewa nor Lynch had expected or desired combat duty, and multiple accounts confirm that Lynch's wounds were too severe to permit her to fight off her captors.

Over the next few years, women personnel were killed or maimed on a semi-regular basis, and the accounts of the sacrifices they made for their country were often used to buttress the case for using women in combat.

One of those permanently disabled while serving in Iraq was Major Ladda Duckworth, who lost both of her legs when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded inside her Black Hawk helicopter. As the military's diversity commission released their draft report, Duckworth was trotted out to declare how, as quoted by NPR, she would eagerly go back into combat "in a minute for the honor of being able to serve next to some of the greatest folks that I've ever been able to serve next to. It's about the job. Women are doing that right now."

Arguments

With the enormity of the dramatic change the 31-member Diversity Commission is suggesting in combat troop makeup, it is surprising that its draft report offers nothing to counter the exhaustive 1992 study completed by the Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, convened by President George H.W. Bush after the 1990-91 Persian Gulf action. That commission came to the determination by majority vote that women had no place in direct combat on land, in the air, or on submarines and amphibious vessels.

Since America's armed forces have not been involved in any campaign since Vietnam that included large-scale and protracted battlefield involvement with the enemy, there are no relevant instances of women performing effectively in combat situations on the ground, other than a few examples from Iraq and Afghanistan where a minority of female support personnel have found themselves thrust into battle.

Nonetheless, with little to draw from, the commission forged gamely ahead to make its case. For example, ignoring the absurdity of comparing race to gender in the present debate, the commission report states:

One frequently-cited argument in favor of the current policy is that having women serving in direct combat will hamper mission effectiveness by hurting unit morale and cohesion. Comparable arguments were made with respect to racial integration, but were ultimately never borne out. Similarly, to date, there has been little evidence that the integration of women into previously closed units or occupations has had a negative impact on important mission-related performance factors, like unit cohesion.

Arguing that the military's exclusion of women in combat roles is out of sync with the realities of present-day warfare, the commission noted that "some of the military women deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have already been engaged in activities that would be considered combat-related, including being collocated with combat units and engaging in direct combat for self-defense."

Lory Manning of the Women's Research and Education Institute insisted the move to put women in combat is "a logical outcome of what women have been doing in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the Army and Marines have been essentially ducking the policy. They come up with the [term] 'attaching'



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someone to a unit as opposed to 'assigning,' but they've been doing it for nine years now."

But Lieutenant Colonel Robert Maginnis (U.S. Army, retired), a senior fellow for national security with the Family Research Council (FRC), pointed out that like many others anxious to make a case for placing women in combat, Manning has mistaken the counterinsurgent nature of the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan with the more complex and protracted mechanics of conventional warfare. While some women, in violation of long-established DOD statutes and regulation, have been "attached" (but not assigned) to ground combat units in support roles, Maginnis said he was unaware of women "conducting the tough counter-insurgent ground operations" that male soldiers did, particularly in the early days of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Few women have truly been in ground combat" in Iraq and Afghanistan, Maginnis told The New American, and those who were pressed into service did so out of the necessity of the moment, not because they were part of a cohesive team of fighting soldiers. "Being present in hostile engagements or hit by a roadside bomb is dangerous, but not like taking the fight to the enemy," he explained. "Few women should — or have been asked to — take the fight to the enemy whether he be hiding in rocks outside Afghan villages or inside mosques in Fallujah. That is an entirely different proposition."

Battlefield Necessities

Of course, all military personnel serving in hostile locales such as Iraq and Afghanistan can be considered in harm's way. But the peril in which those serving as combat support find themselves is far different than that faced by the brave men who, as Maginnis noted, take the battle to the enemy.

In a March 2008 report on women in combat, the Center for Military Readiness (CMR) recalled the launch of America's 2003 invasion of Iraq, when "infantry, armor, artillery, Special Operations Forces, and Marines led the fast-moving ground assault to liberate Baghdad." Over a year and a half later, in November 2004, "the same troops, fighting door-to-door and street-to-street, cleaned out Fallujah, an enemy stronghold." Those intense battles, and many others waged by U.S. troops throughout the region, are a true reflection of direct ground combat, which, noted the CMR report, "involves more than the experience of being 'in harm's way.'"

Contrary to the arguments of proponents of placing women in combat, "the offensive missions of direct ground combat units, such as the infantry, have not changed," noted another report from the CMR, whose president Elaine Donnelly served on the 1992 Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces. "Our female soldiers are indisputably brave, but the military cannot disregard differences in physical strength and social complications that would detract from the strength, discipline, and readiness of direct ground combat units. These troops attack the enemy with deliberate offensive action under fire.... No one's infantryman son should have to die because [a] support soldier nearest him cannot lift and single-handedly carry him from the battlefield if he is severely wounded under fire. Most male soldiers have that physical capability. Female soldiers, no matter how competent and brave, do not."

Another member of the 1992 commission, Colonel Ron Ray (USMC, retired), a decorated veteran of the Vietnam conflict and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration, noted that there is significance behind the term "selective service" used by the military in choosing who will join America's armed forces. In theory, if not in practice, only the most select of individuals — physically, mentally, and emotionally — are chosen to serve. "Men and women are profoundly different and those enormous differences have military significance," Ray told The New American. "Across the world men and women do not compete together in sports in the high school, college, Olympic, or



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professional levels of sport, and it is solely because their physical differences are substantial.”

What holds true in athletics is of life-and-death importance on the battlefield. As a combat veteran, Ray lived through a brutal 1967-68 combat tour in Vietnam, including the infamous Tet Offensive. “From my own personal experience,” said Ray, “I can attest to the fact that physical combat, close combat, infantry, artillery, armor combat — all are profoundly more demanding than any sport, and there is no place there for women combatants.”

An Exhaustive Study

Following the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, as Congress was considering a repeal of the ban on women in combat, President George H.W. Bush appointed the 15-member Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, which was charged with analyzing all aspects of women in combat. Following an eight-month study, in which its members pursued the most thorough investigation that has been done on the issue to date, the commission came to the majority conclusion that the DOD should continue the ban on the assignment of women to combatant aircraft, land combat and special forces units, and most combat ships.

As the CMR noted in a review of that commission’s study, Congress held no hearings on the commission’s findings, and under the incoming Clinton administration the DOD began assigning women to combat aircraft in April 1993, which was followed by a repeal of the policy exempting women from most combat ships.

While Congress and the Clinton administration (along with the most recent commission) chose largely to ignore the commission’s report, its findings of nearly 20 years ago remain a vital epistle to present leaders, as they appear ready to welcome women into the historically male role of warrior and defender.

While the evidence arguing convincingly against women in combat is wide ranging, two factors stood out above the rest in the commission’s findings, as summarized by the CMR in a 2004 report:

Unit Cohesion: The commission heard testimony confirming that the cohesion of a military unit develops where members share common values, conform to group standards of behavior and performance, lose their personal identities, focus on shared goals, and become totally dependent upon each other — all for the purpose of meeting critical military objectives. The commission concluded that cohesion would suffer in the male-dominated combat sphere with the introduction of women. “Cohesion can be negatively affected by the introduction of any element that detracts from the need for such key ingredients as mutual confidence, commonality of experience, and equitable treatment,” noted the CMR summary.

Further factors affecting such cohesion would include the “real or perceived inability of women to carry their weight without male assistance,” the interference with male bonding that would come with the presence of the opposite sex, the natural instinct for men to protect women, and the potential for inappropriate relationships between male and female soldiers, “particularly when perceived as a way to escape from combat duty.”

One Navy Special Warfare commander testified to the commission, “Even if some women are strong enough to handle the physical demands of combat, the introduction of factors such as sexual entanglements and jealousies ... would make the forward commander’s job more difficult.” According to the CMR report, “Commanders of Special Operations Forces testified that because of unparalleled physical demands and forced intimacy, even in training, women would degrade the readiness, cohesion, and effectiveness of their units.”



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Combat Considerations: “The ground combatant relies heavily on his physical strength and stamina to survive, fight, and win,” noted the CMR summary. “The Commission heard an abundance of expert testimony about the physical differences between men and women,” differences that would disqualify women from serving effectively in combat. Among the disparities: 1) “Women are shorter, have less muscle mass and weigh less than men”; 2) “Female aerobic capacity is approximately 70-75 percent that of males”; 3) women are at twice the risk for injuries to their lower extremities and at nearly five times the risk for stress fractures, according to a 1988 Army study.

The commission found that the experience of other countries offered little reason to believe the United States could successfully introduce women into combat. For example, noted the CMR summary, “Of 103 women recruited for infantry training after Canada repealed its combat rules in 1989, only one woman succeeded in meeting the physical requirements necessary to complete the training.”

Further, the commission viewed a report from the federal Government Accountability Office showing that during Desert Shield/Desert Storm, 18 to 20 percent of female soldiers in some Army units were un-deployable. It also saw reports showing that 56 percent of personnel deployed in Desert Shield/Desert Storm with mixed-gender units said that some women in their units became pregnant just before being deployed, or even while they were in the Persian Gulf, making these women un-deployable.

“Equal Opportunity” ?or Military Readiness

Perhaps the clearest argument against women in combat can be found in the “Alternate Views” section at the end of the commission’s report, which emphasized that the key issue “in preparing to win and survive in combat is not what is best for the individual, but what is best for the unit and the military as a whole.” While civilian society may rightly forbid discrimination in many types of employment, “the military, in building fighting units, must be able to choose those most able to fight and win in battle. There is good reason for this. In a combat unit serving on land, at sea, or in the air, the inability of any member of the group to perform at levels demanded by the battlefield can present a direct risk to the lives of others and to the accomplishments of the military mission.”

For the majority of those endorsing the move, however, what is best for the nation and its fighting forces appears to have taken a back seat to what is best for women wishing to advance their military careers. With combat experience often a prerequisite for promotion to senior positions in the military, proponents call the move one of fairness. Former Marine Captain Anu Bhagwati, who serves as executive director of the Service Women’s Action Network, argued that holding them back from active combat positions represents “a huge glass ceiling for servicewomen. It is archaic, it does not reflect the many sacrifices and contributions that women make in the military, and it ignores the reality of current warfighting doctrine.”

Maginnis pointed out that the supposed “glass ceiling” that frustrates some female officers ambitious for promotion is necessary because “most high commands require commanding combatants. One should appreciate from personal experience the role before commanding such units.” Since only men serve in ground combat roles, explained Maginnis, it stands to reason that “only men will eventually command large, ground forces.” He emphasized that commanding large numbers of fighting men “is not something learned in the classroom, and tough to learn in peacetime.”

The “Alternate Views” section of the 1992 commission report noted that while all service members are free to pursue opportunities for career advancement, “when it comes to combat assignments, the needs of the military must take precedence over all other considerations, including the career prospects of individual service members.”



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During testimony the commission found itself barraged with witnesses who insisted that “the military must pay any price and bear any burden to promote equal opportunities and career progression for an ambitious few” — mainly female officers who consider the common-sense policy confining. “But military policies must be based on actual experience and sound judgment, not doctrinaire notions of sexual equality unsupported by human experience and history,” the “Alternate Views” summary emphasized.

The summary noted that in its intensive, eight-month study, the Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces concluded that assigning women to combat would: 1) “adversely affect the critical components” of combat readiness, unit cohesion, and military effectiveness; 2) “leave women exposed to the possibility of involuntary assignment to combat and conscription”; and 3) “overturn two centuries of settled law and military policy based on deeply held and commonly shared cultural assumptions defining how men should treat women.”

Most significantly, the exhaustive study confirmed to the majority of commissioners that “the military does not need women in [and] should not assign women to combat.”

Falling on Deaf Ears

As happened when the report was first released in 1992, those important lessons may continue to fall on deaf ears, as those in key positions appear willing to stand passively by while what has been allowed by default slowly becomes twisted into policy.

In a speech last November, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pointed out that over the last several years women service personnel have experienced their share of battlefield risks as they have worked in support roles. “I know what the law says, and I know what it requires,” he said. “But I’d be hard pressed to say that any woman who serves in Afghanistan today, or who served in Iraq over the last few years, did so without facing the risks of their male counterparts.” Mullen said that in much of present-day warfare “there is no longer a clear delineation between the front lines ... and the sidelines.” Speaking of those in uniform cycling back from service in the Middle East, he declared that “this will be the first generation of veterans where large segments of women returning will have been exposed to some form of combat.”

But Colonel Ray explained that the campaign to insinuate women into combat roles began several generations earlier in 1950, with the appointment of Anna Rosenberg as Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Truman administration. Recalled Ray, “Anna Rosenberg was well known as a liberal member of the Roosevelt administration, and after being appointed as the first Assistant Secretary of Defense, she initiated the creation of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), which became a feminist activist group in the Pentagon, promoting the move of American women closer and closer to the battlefield.”

According to Ray, the recent recommendations of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission represent the latest in a protracted bipartisan political campaign to feminize America’s fighting force. “This is really the culmination of a 60-year effort to promote the civilian notion of equal opportunity for women,” he said, “so that it predominates over the vital traditional and uncompromising American military standards of combat readiness, exemplary conduct, unit cohesion, and military effectiveness. And the ultimate consequences of this campaign will be the compromising of America’s historic ability to defend her vital national interests in peace and war.”



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