

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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A Sex Change for Military Culture?

A Survey of Recent Articles

The war over the role of women in the military has broken out anew, as accusations of sexual harassment and worse have battered the U.S. Army, hitting targets ranging from drill instructors at Aberdeen Proving Ground to the service's highest-ranking enlisted man, with hundreds of other soldiers in between. The fact that the complaints are so widespread has ignited fresh debate over whether the integration of women into the military has gone too far—or not far enough.

“The time has finally come to cease examining these issues solely from the perspective of how the military culture should adjust itself to women,” declares James Webb, a former secretary of the navy and a Vietnam veteran, writing in the *Weekly Standard* (Jan. 20, 1997). There is no excuse for sexual harassment and misconduct, he says. The culprit, however, is not the military culture but “a system that throws healthy young men and women together inside a volatile, isolated crucible of emotions [such as] a ship at sea or basic training.” Military commanders know this, he says, but they also know that to speak out would cost them their careers.

Feminists such as Madeline Morris, a law professor at Duke University, however, argue that military culture nurtures attitudes toward women that make rape more likely. The culture therefore needs to be changed, through complete integration of the sexes, “from basic training through combat,” as Morris puts it in the *Duke Law Journal* (Feb. 1996). As long as women are excluded from “a range of combat positions,” and as long as there is not a much greater proportion of women in uniform, she contends, the “hypermasculinity, hostility toward women, [and] adversarial sexual beliefs” are likely to persist.

“The presence of women as full members of the fighting forces,” Morris writes, “would be inconsistent with a military culture in which women are viewed as the ‘other,’ primarily as sexual targets, and in which aggression is viewed as a sign of masculinity. The very presence of women as military equals would call into question such views.”

A panel appointed by Secretary of the Army Togo D. West, Jr., to review policies on sexual harassment in the wake of the Aberdeen accusations includes many proponents of removing the restrictions that bar women from ground combat. It is widely expected to urge precisely that course later this spring in the interest of ending sexual harassment and misconduct in the army.

There are plenty of skeptics. The claim “that soldiers can be trained properly to conduct themselves in an asexual, professional manner” in the brutal and stressful environment of ground combat is, for the most part, “a Utopian fantasy,” writes U.S. Air Force second lieutenant Laura Boussy in *Proceedings* (Nov. 1996). Sexual tensions and misconduct would be sure to increase, and unit morale and cohesion would suffer, she says.

Most army women apparently have no desire for combat jobs. (Most army men may feel the same way, but they aren't necessarily given any choice.) Though more than 70 percent of some 900 army women surveyed by Laura L. Miller, a military sociologist at Harvard University, thought that women should be able to volunteer for combat posts, only 11 percent of enlisted women and 14 percent of officers said they would opt for such positions themselves. When Miller asked 472 women about the effect of opening up combat billets to females, reports the

New York Times (Dec. 29, 1996), 61 percent agreed that sexual harassment would increase.

Everyone in the military knows, even if few will say so publicly, that incidents such as those at Aberdeen “are bound to recur,” observes Stephanie Gutmann, a New York-based writer, in the *New Republic* (Feb. 24, 1997). “In a military that is dedicated to the full integration of women, and to papering over the implications of that integration as best it can, sex and sexual difference will continue to be a disruptive force. And regulating sex will become an ever more important military sideline, one whose full costs in money, labor and morale we will not really know until the forces are called on to do what they are assembled to do: fight.”

Women now constitute 14 percent of America’s military, up from two percent when the Vietnam War ended. And 20 percent of new recruits are women—compared with 12 percent a decade ago. After Congress repealed the combat exclusion law in 1993, the Pentagon allowed women to fly combat planes and to serve on combat ships; today, women are excluded only from “direct ground combat” units and from submarines.

After Tailhook, the notorious 1991 convention of naval aviators that became synonymous with debauchery, the navy, hoping to nip sexist attitudes in the bud, Gutmann says, began training female recruits at “gender-integrated” boot camps. The army followed suit. “The result,” she says, “has been a kind of feel-good feminization of boot camp culture, with the old (male) ethos of competition and survival giving at least partial way to a new (female) spirit of cooperation and esteem-building.” At Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for instance, evaluations of soldiers’ skills put more emphasis on those such as mapmaking and first aid, at which female recruits excel.

To mute the difference in strength between men and women, writes John Corry, a senior correspondent for the *American Spectator* (Aug. 1996), the armed services “have introduced ‘dual standards’ and gender-normed training requirements. . . . Even the tough-minded Marines have succumbed.”

“The misbegotten campaign to place women in combat units has damaged all the services,” asserts Corry, a former *New York Times* reporter, “but the conditions of ship-

board life have made the navy most vulnerable.” Of the 400 women on the first gender-integrated warship, the *USS Eisenhower*, according to Gutmann, 24 were “non-deployable” due to pregnancy at the start of a Persian Gulf tour and 15 others were evacuated once on the water.

“Pregnancy must be kept in perspective,” argue retired Navy captain Georgia C. Sadler, of the Women’s Research and Education Institute, and Patricia J. Thomas, of the Navy Personnel Research Group and Development Center, San Diego. “Most Navy women, especially junior women, are in their prime childbearing years and some will become pregnant,” they write in *Proceedings* (Apr. 1995). “Nonetheless, the overall impact on the Navy is manageable. The solution is . . . to reduce the number of unplanned pregnancies, especially in the operational forces.”

Although pregnancy poses a problem for the services, it is no longer a blot on an unwed servicewoman’s record. In fact, writes Gutmann, pregnancy now so little adversely affects careers that soldiers sometimes use it “to get out of ‘hell tours’ like Bosnia, to go home.”

But while the presence of women in the military presents new sorts of problems for commanders, Harry G. Summers, Jr., a retired army colonel and syndicated columnist, argues that there is no going back. “The real reason for the dramatic increase in the number of women in the post-Vietnam military,” he writes in the *Washington Times* (Feb. 13, 1997), is that after the draft was ended in 1973, the armed forces became “unable to maintain the educational and intellectual standards essential to today’s high-tech military through male accessions alone. Since reinstating the draft was not politically possible . . . dramatically increasing female accessions and expanding duty assignments open to military women” became the answer. The performance of the 31,000 women who served in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, he says, showed “the wisdom of that decision.” He still favors the exclusion of women from ground combat units, however.

Unpleasant as the job of “regulating sex” among the young men and women in the services may be, Summers observes, “the alternative—trying to field a high-tech military capable [of] winning on the battlefield with a substandard male-only force—would be far more unpleasant.”