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Gender Perspectives and Fighting

Robert Egnell

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ABSTRACT: Many concerns related to women in combat roles stem from two related assumptions: (a) the existing structure and culture of the armed forces are well adapted to the requirements of combat; and (b) politically imposed change is harmful to the professionalism and effectiveness of the military. These can be dangerous assumptions. Instead, the traditional “truths” about the nature of unit cohesion and the optimal capabilities of individual soldiers and officers need to be periodically examined. Doing so can maximize the effectiveness of military organizations in a changing environment.

The response to former Defense Secretary Panetta’s recent decision to eliminate the ground combat exclusion rule for women in the US military obviously differs widely within the armed forces, from service to service, unit to unit, and individual to individual. However, with the risk of painting with a broad brush, there is clear apprehension about the consequences of this decision.¹ Notable scholars like Martin van Creveld have provided fierce opposition, arguing that women in the military—not just in combat roles—is “part symptom, part cause, of the decline of the ‘advanced’ military.”²

The concerns come in numerous shapes and forms, from practical and administrative issues regarding latrines, housing, and maternity leave, to the more serious concerns about the impact on the combat effectiveness of units. What will the inclusion of women in combat roles mean for the armed forces, and especially the organization’s “fighting power”—its effectiveness in the field of operations? After all, the main purpose of military organizations is to defend the constitution either as a deterrent force or by fighting and winning the nation’s wars.

This article challenges two common concerns related to the impact of women on combat effectiveness: (1) the idea that women, in general, are not fit for war; that their often lower physical abilities and/or supposed lack of mental toughness put at risk the combat effectiveness of the units; (2) the inclusion of women and gender perspectives will change the organization’s combat culture to reflect a civilian rather than a military ethos.

While these fears are understandable, they are based on a flawed assumption and are misguided. Their key assumption is that the existing military structure and culture are already well adapted to perform with

1 Dan Lamothe, “Two more female Marines flunk infantry officers training,” *Marine Corps Times*, April 2, 2013, <http://www.marinecorpstimes.com/article/20130402/NEWS/304020020>; a typical critique is provided by R. Cort Kirkwood, “Women in Combat: War for and Against Women” *The New American*, April 12, 2013, <http://www.thenewamerican.com/culture/item/15012-women-in-combat-war-for-and-against-women>.

2 Martin van Creveld, “To wreck a military,” *Small Wars Journal*, January 28, 2013, <http://small-warsjournal.com/jrnl/art/to-wreck-a-military>; Martin van Creveld, “The Great Illusion: Women in the Military,” *Millennium* 29, no. 2 (2000): 429-442;

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excellence in war; that the military organization looks like it does because of the objective requirements of warfare, or what Samuel Huntington has referred to as the functional imperative of the armed forces.³ Any changes—especially politically imposed changes like women in combat or the repeal of “don’t ask don’t tell”—therefore pose a danger to what is perceived as a functioning system.

Due to this assumption, including women in direct combat roles becomes a necessary evil: how can it be limited to avoid damage to the existing order. Even supporters of women in combat and gender perspectives ask how this can be achieved with as little damage to the organization as possible. Women who have served with combat units in the field proudly speak of the moment they were accepted as “one of the boys.” Commanders and soldiers who have served with or under women highlight that it is not a big deal and that it really does not change anything as long as they are competent. Integrating women with the aim of minimizing damage to the existing structure and culture of the organization provides a negative starting point for these processes. Instead, the introduction of women in combat units—or the implementation of a gendered perspective in military organizations—should be seen as an opportunity to revise the culture and structure of the armed forces for increased effectiveness in contemporary warfare. It should, therefore, be accomplished with the aim of maximizing the effectiveness of what the organization is supposed to be good at—using force, or the threat of force—for security, stability, or plain victory.

The Case of the Marine Corps’ Infantry Officer Course

Since the decision to lift the ban on women in direct ground combat units, much media attention has been directed at the Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course at Quantico. This gruesome training regimen has seen four women enter and none come close to finishing. Though its students tend to be top performers in basic officer training, more than one in five candidates are dropped during the infantry course. Interestingly, this 13-week course, considered among the toughest in the US military, is also described as “part of the Pentagon’s ongoing effort to determine which additional jobs in combat units should be opened to women.”⁴ Indeed, the Marine Corps began recruiting female volunteers for this course in 2012 as part of a broader effort to assess how female Marines might perform in assignments whose primary mission is ground combat.⁵ This means the Infantry Officer Course is seen as a viable test or indicator of the suitability of women in combat roles.

The greatest concern at Quantico appears to be the risk of lowering physical standards to accommodate women. The commander of the Infantry Officer School and the Basic Officer Course has categorically stated this will never happen. “They [the standards] are gender-neutral now. . . . They aren’t hard to be hard. These are the things they need to

3 Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 2.

4 Lamothe, “Two more female Marines.”

5 James Dao, “Women (and Men) Face Big Hurdles in Training for Marine Infantry Units,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/30/us/marines-test-women-for-infantry-roles.html?pagewanted=all>

be able to do to be infantry officers.”⁶ Clearly, the working assumption of military leadership is that existing physical standards are appropriate. Correspondingly, there is a distinct belief that the Infantry Officer Course, including the timed obstacle course of the first day that eliminated three of the four women, is a fairly accurate reflection of the physical requirements of infantry combat. Thus, if the course, or the physical standards it serves to test, is altered, it will presumably have a direct impact on combat effectiveness.

A Marine Corps major has argued that “[w]hile certain things that occur at Infantry Officer Course replicate combat, the worst days of infantry combat are much, much worse.”⁷ While this statement was clearly made in support of the nature of the course, it unwittingly also challenged it by raising the question why the standards, and the contents of the infantry course, are not *raised* to reflect the worst days of infantry combat. The simple answer is, of course, that there are always compromises involved. Raising entry standards, or making the course tougher, will lead to lower recruit numbers, increased risks of injury during training, and perhaps the need to lower other standards such as education, analytical capability, and problem solving. In the end, the major’s statement highlighted the fact that an obstacle course, or an entire training program, can never replicate the exact demands of combat and leadership in the field. Instead, these standards will always be based on a combination of lessons learned, tradition, organizational culture, and the availability of candidates. Indeed, how did we arrive at the current physical and mental standards and the contents of training courses? How long has it been since these were revised and updated based on objective assessments of combat effectiveness in the field?

This raises the question of why the physical standards are treated as sacrosanct. Other standards were lowered in 2005-06 to meet the Army’s recruitment goals, and while it was certainly discussed, the level of resistance was limited compared to lowered physical standards. Two standards changed at that time were the elimination of the high school graduation requirement and acceptance of lower aptitude scores.⁸ However, given the complexity of contemporary warfare, the notions of “three-block warfare,” and broad skillsets, as well as the importance of the “strategic corporal,” this reduction was remarkable. Why would these changes be acceptable if lowered physical standards are not? What do combat after-action reports highlight as the main problems in failed or successful combat situations in Iraq and Afghanistan? We need a clearer and more objective understanding of whether it is physical or cognitive capabilities that make a difference in combat.

British Lieutenant General Sir Robert Fry, then Deputy Commander of Multi-National Force – Iraq, argued that one of the greatest problems in Iraq was the failure to translate tactical behavior into operational effect in the pursuit of strategic goals.⁹ Despite what seemed to be a number of tactical victories, the intended effects at higher levels were

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Elise Cooper, “Women in Combat: the Soldiers Speak,” *American Thinker*, February 21, 2013, http://www.americanthinker.com/2013/02/women_in_combat_the_soldiers_speak.html

9 Robert Fry, “Expeditionary Operations in the Modern Era,” *RUSI Journal*, 150, no. 6 (December 2005), 62.

missing. Solving these issues has little to do with physical standards or even combat effectiveness—it is about something much more subtle and intangible—understanding how certain events and conduct impact the local situation in a culture very far from home.

It is intellectually convenient to assume that our current standards, as well as the training and testing methods of our military organizations, are well adapted to the nature of modern warfare. It is also dangerous, however, as these assumptions may well be flawed and may seriously undermine the effectiveness of the organization. Instead, organizations seeking to perfect their conduct of warfare must constantly reconsider and adapt their standards. They must also be willing to experiment.

It may indeed be the case that the worst days of combat are worse than the Infantry Officer Course, or that the standards tested are perfectly adapted to match the requirements of effective leadership in the field of operations. However, there is also a risk that courses and standards are based on tradition or a conventional idea of what combat is supposed to look like and how it is effectively conducted. All standards and training methods need to be questioned as to what extent they reflect the capabilities needed in the field of operations. In the wake of the administration's decision to allow women in combat roles, an objective evaluation of standards risks being tainted with the perception that they are being reevaluated to lower them for women. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that evaluations and new standards are truly objective and gender neutral. This will also mean that certain units will, in practice, be impossible or highly difficult to access for women. Then again, this exclusion will be based on objective minimum standards rather than gender bias. To grasp the problems of subjective standards, we need to take a few steps back and discuss the more fundamental questions of what military effectiveness is and how it is achieved.

Military Effectiveness and Contemporary Operations

There are two problems with the way military effectiveness is traditionally measured. First, too often military effectiveness is treated as “fighting power”—or the ability to succeed on the battlefield—and thereby separated from the larger political purpose of the military campaign. Second, within the debates about fighting power, traditional theories about military capability and effectiveness have often overemphasized physical military factors, such as troop numbers and the quality of equipment, while paying less attention to the more intangible factors that influence a state's capacity to use its material resources effectively. However, cases where the numerically and technologically weak win battles and campaigns suggest that such explanations of military capability are misleading because they fail to acknowledge the importance of the policies for which the military instrument is used.¹⁰

An effective military organization is one that succeeds in performing the core tasks that the political leadership requests. Traditionally, or ideally, this has meant fighting and winning conventional wars—defending the nation. In the contemporary strategic context, and some

10 Risa A. Brooks, “Making Military Might: Why Do States Fail and Succeed?” *International Security* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 149–191; Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

would argue this was the case in the past as well, the most common tasks involve different types of stability operations with the purpose of establishing conditions from which broader political processes can take place.¹¹ The connection between military effectiveness and the intentions of political leaders means we not only need to look at the tasks most frequently asked of military organizations today, but also the nature of civil-military relations.

This is not the place to answer the difficult question about the character of contemporary and future warfare. As already noted, this article highlights the idea that the most common forms of military engagement the last few decades, and probably in the foreseeable future, are different forms of stability operations, peace operations, counter-insurgency, fourth generation, small, irregular, “new,” asymmetric, or whatever adjective we more or less usefully place in front of the old substantive “war.” These campaigns take place amongst the people and involve both substate and supstate actors in a struggle for legitimacy and far-reaching political changes—democratization, respect for human rights, and long-term economic development. For the most part, it involves low-intensity, counterinsurgency operations between regular armed forces of the West and loosely formed networks of insurgents employing asymmetric tactics. Contemporary campaigns are drawn-out processes, often measured in decades rather than in months and years. They involve a multitude of actors fighting for the hearts and minds of the local, as well as global, population whose perceptions of the conflict often determine the outcome.

Importantly, the conduct of contemporary operations entails a much more complicated and diverse use of the military instrument. This means that “new,” or at least nontraditional, tasks are asked of military units at all levels of command. Recruitment and training has not been updated to reflect the character of contemporary warfare and it is, therefore, time to discuss not only what success means in contemporary operations, but also what successful units look like, how they are trained, what unit culture they possess, and what their cohesion is based on. At the individual level, it is also time to question traditional standards—cognitive or physical—and examine what soldiers and officers need to succeed on the “battlefield,” or what is probably better described as the complex field of deployment. While there is no doubt that certain physical and cognitive standards will be required for certain military occupational specialties (MOSS), I suspect this analysis may provide revolutionary results for the way the armed forces should recruit and train soldiers and officers. As T. E. Lawrence famously put it, “Irregular Warfare is far more intellectual than a bayonet charge.”¹²

The connection between political aims and military effectiveness means that the field of civil-military relations theory is a useful source of inspiration. The purpose of this field tends to be normative, to maximize the protective value the armed forces can provide and minimize the domestic coercive powers those same forces will inevitably possess. The foundation of most civil-military relations theory is the assumption that the military institutions of any society are shaped by two forces: a

11 Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

12 T. E. Lawrence, “The Science of Guerrilla Warfare,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1923).

functional imperative stemming from threats to a society's security and a societal imperative based on the ideologies, social forces, and institutions dominant within the society.¹³ The functional imperative is the character of war and a nation's geostrategic setting, which by necessity compels the armed forces to develop a certain structure and professional culture to be effective. Huntington argued that if the armed forces reflect only social values and societal culture, it is likely to be incapable of performing its military function. On the other hand, if it is shaped only by functional imperatives, it could become impossible to contain within the society it is supposed to protect.¹⁴

The emphasis that theorists place on the issues of military effectiveness and democratic control differs greatly. One source of the divergence is a "zero-sum" view of the civil-military problem by thinking it is only possible to maximize either military strength or civilian control.¹⁵ An obvious example is provided by John Hillen while writing about the cultural gap between civilians and the military:

If the purpose of having a military establishment in the first place is to promote cozy civil-military relations, then military culture should be forcibly brought into line with civilian culture. If, however, the purpose of having a military is to provide for the common defense, then the military must nurture the unique culture developed for that purpose.¹⁶

Equally, Huntington wrote in *The Soldier and the State* that to increase the professionalism and effectiveness of the US military, even American civil society had to adapt to the functional imperative of the armed forces and the more conservative and military values of West Point, which he describes as the military ideal at its best—"a bit of Sparta in the midst of Babylon."¹⁷

However, the very foundation of democratic societies lies in the notion that political and military leaderships are not equals. On the other side of the aisle are theorists who emphasize democratic civilian control more than military effectiveness—the societal imperative takes precedence.¹⁸ Christopher Dandeker warns "those of a liberal persuasion tend to expect the armed services to conform to civilian values and, in so doing, underestimate the unique character and demands of military life."¹⁹ Dandeker, therefore, advocates a pragmatic approach that falls midway between the two extremes:

The challenge for civilian political and military leaders is to ensure that a balance is struck between these, sometimes competing, imperatives. Furthermore, in adjusting to changes in society and international security, they have to take into account the history and traditions of the individual

13 Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 2.

14 Ibid.

15 Christopher Dandeker, "Military and Society: The Problem, Challenges and Possible Answers," in *Security Sector Reform: Institutions, Society and Good Governance*, eds. A. Bryden and P. Fluri (Baden Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003).

16 John Hillen, "Must U.S. Military Culture Reform?," in *America the Vulnerable: Our Military Problems and How To Fix Them*, eds. John Lehman and Harvey Sicherman (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2002), 168–169.

17 Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 466.

18 For a useful discussion see Bernard Boëne, "How Unique Should the Military Be? A Review of Representative Literature and Outline of a Synthetic Formulation," *European Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (1990): 3–59.

19 Dandeker, "Military and Society."

armed services, which are normally critical factors in sustaining their identity, sense of shared purpose and morale.²⁰

The conceptualization of the relations between functional and societal imperatives in zero-sum terms is misleading as it assumes that military adjustments to civilian values necessarily undermine military effectiveness, and that the focus on military effectiveness must certainly mean decreased civilian control or military nonadherence to the values of civil society.²¹ The aim should, therefore, not be striking a balance between the imperatives, but seeking *synergies* between the imperatives. One such example is provided by Morris Janowitz, who sought military professionalism and effectiveness, as well as civilian control, through the integration of military and political leaderships, and the development of officers who are aware of the military's political and social impact.²²

The integration of women in combat roles does not respond to the conventional interpretation of the functional imperative. Not many military analysts study contemporary warfare and draw the conclusion that it has changed to an extent that requires the inclusion of women in combat roles to perform effectively. It should, nonetheless, be noted that the development of Female Engagement Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan is the result of such a "needs-based" analysis. Normally, however, ending the exclusion of women in direct ground combat units is seen as a politically imposed "societal imperative." If seen through such a perspective, the integration of women in the armed forces can at best be achieved without ruining the existing, rather well-adapted military structure and culture. At worst it can ruin the very core of the military organization—its warrior ideal. It can weaken military fighting power and lose us the next war, or at least threaten the safety of fellow soldiers. Fear and rejection is perfectly understandable, albeit based on a flawed assumption about the functional imperative as a completely objective "given," provided by professional military analysis. Instead, what constitutes the functional imperative should be seen as the outcome of a much more toxic brew of tradition, organizational culture, interservice negotiations, or what can be described as highly politicized processes of bureaucracies with limited analytical repertoires, selfish bureaucratic ambitions, and standard operating procedures.²³

The Potential Positive Impact of Women on Fighting Power

The question, then, is how to marry the aims of military conduct and effectiveness with a gender perspective within the military organization and female soldiers. Too often, a gender perspective and traditional military values are seen as opposites between which an acceptable balance must be found. While one should be careful about assigning special capabilities to female soldiers and officers, this article argues that adding women to combat units, and a gender perspective to military operations

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), 420.

²³ This point is obviously inspired by the work of Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Little Brown and Co, 1971).

more generally, have the potential to add new capabilities and improve the effectiveness of operations.²⁴

Women can play a role with regard to the *means*, the material factor. Including the large numbers of women who are physically fit for military service in the armed forces allows societies to maximize the size of those forces. The emphasis on “lean and mean” organizations rather than mass in 21st century warfare indicates the potential contribution lies in how and with what conviction armed forces conduct operations.

Women can provide specific competencies and perspectives that improve the conduct of operations. Women in combat units, as well as implementing a gender perspective in the area of operations, clearly have the potential to increase the information gathering and analysis capabilities of units. Gaining access to local women not only allows a unit to develop a better understanding of local conditions and culture but improves the unit’s relationship with the community and the perceived legitimacy and force protection of troops. The most obvious examples are Female or Mixed Engagement Teams, intelligence officers, cultural analysts, and interpreters who provide access to populations and areas all-male units cannot engage or search. Another example is provided by the difficulty in achieving civil-military coordination and cooperation in campaigns involving a broad set of actors. Male dominance of the military has been pointed to as one of the cultural features that create friction between military and humanitarian organizations.²⁵ Female liaison officers could potentially build bridges between organizations. Clearly, however, the impact is limited and should not be seen as a silver bullet. Moreover, without first changing the mindset of commanders and planners, the importance of women’s perspectives, information, and analyses is likely to be undervalued within a more traditional narrative. The impact is, therefore, likely to be limited until a more general mainstreaming of a gender perspective on operations is achieved.

The UN rightly highlights female soldiers as absolutely essential for certain tasks in peace operations. As an example, they help address specific needs of female combatants during the process of demobilization and reintegration into civilian life. They can interview survivors of gender-based violence, mentor female cadets at police and military academies, and, as highlighted above, interact with women in societies where women are prohibited from speaking to men.²⁶ Moreover, female soldiers can serve as role models in the local environment by inspiring women and girls in often male-dominated societies to push for their own rights and participate in peace processes. While these competencies may be dismissed as unrelated to a traditional view of military fighting power, they may prove essential in what is the most common task of military organizations in the contemporary context—stability operations.

The more important and far-reaching consequence of adding women to combat units and implementing a gender perspective on

24 For a useful discussion on the positive impact of women and gender perspectives see Sahana Dharmapuri, “Just add Women and Stir,” *Parameters* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 56-70.

25 Donna Winslow, “Strange Bedfellows in Humanitarian Crisis: NGOs and the Military,” in *Twisting Arms and Flexing Muscles: Humanitarian Intervention and Peacebuilding in Perspective*, eds. N. Mychajlyszyn, and T. D. Shaw (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), 116.

26 United Nations, “Women in Peacekeeping” (undated), <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/issues/women/womeninpk.shtml>.

operations lies in their transformative potential. It could change the culture of combat units, the fabric of unit cohesion, and the way combat and violence is employed in military organizations. This is precisely what those who resent women in the military fear. If the starting-point is changed, however, from the idea of a perfect existing order to one that is problematic and needs improvement for operational effectiveness in the contemporary strategic context, then including women and gender perspectives provides a golden opportunity to change the way soldiers and officers are recruited, trained, and deployed for combat and stability operations. The complexity of contemporary operations means that soldiers and officers at all levels need good cognitive skills, problem-solving abilities, and a flexible mindset that can respond to a variety of challenges within a short time frame. The immature, ultra-masculine, and extremely aggressive character of the ideal warrior mindset has not done the armed forces any favors in Iraq and Afghanistan. The addition of women—and preferably in substantial numbers—may well provide a more mature and balanced unit culture. Women are not necessarily required for such adaptation, but they may help.

Conclusion

Rather than assuming the existing structure and culture of the armed forces are well adapted to perform in contemporary military campaigns, this article highlights what General Sir Rupert Smith called “the endemic flaws in the current approach.”²⁷ The failures in Iraq and Afghanistan were not simply the consequences of flawed policies or strategic thinking, but also the nature of the military instrument at the disposal of political leadership and the conduct of its operations. The culture and structure of military organizations, their policies of recruitment, training, education, materiel procurement, doctrine writing, and deployments, all need to be carefully studied and potentially reconsidered. This involves the traditional “truths” about the nature of unit cohesion and the optimal capabilities of individual soldiers and officers. The issue of women in combat should not be approached through the lens of damage control, but rather with an emphasis on maximizing the effectiveness of military organizations in the contemporary strategic context.

27 Smith, *The Utility of Force*, 307.

