Women in Combat: Rationale and Implications

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/08/women-in-combat-rationale-and-implications/

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The decision by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey to open combat positions to women culminates four decades of changes in the utilization of women in the U.S military. While his decision was historic, ending a long-standing restriction on women serving in combat, it can also be seen as the final and perhaps inevitable step in the evolution of the military's stance toward women's service.

Why was this decision made now, rather than a year or five years ago? What are the likely consequences on military capability and readiness, if any?

Rationale

At its most basic level, this decision is about fairness. As Secretary Panetta said when he announced the change,

"[Men and women] serve, they're wounded, and they die right next to each other…The time has come to recognize that reality….If they're willing to put their lives on the line, then we need to recognize that they deserve a chance." (ABC News, January 24, 2013)

The fairness issue—especially men and women dying next to one another—has become a major problem through the combined effects of two unrelated developments. First, many military jobs have been opened to women over the past two decades, including combat support units. Second, the nature of modern, asymmetric conflicts as experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan does not allow a clean separation of units on the battlefield.

In 1988, the adoption of the "risk rule" by Secretary Weinberger opened many positions to women that had been closed, particularly combat support positions in the Army, many types of Navy surface ships, and most non-combat aircraft. In 1994, Secretary Aspin issued a new directive opening all military jobs to women except "assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is…direct combat on the ground…" (Burelli, 2012)

This policy opened virtually all Navy and Air Force jobs to women (except Special Operations forces), leaving Army and Marine Corps with the only large number of combat positions closed to women.

The Army had additional policies that specify what types of support units can accept women, and according to its policies, support units that might have to defend themselves in a ground conflict should be closed to women. According to a 2007 report by RAND, however, it was hard to implement this self-defense requirement under the conditions presented in the Iraq war (Harrell, et al 2007), and therefore women in combat support units were frequently required to engage in self-defense, clearly a form of ground combat.

During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the Army and Marine Corps were the only services affected by the combat restriction. Women fly combat aircraft, women serve on combat ships including aircraft carriers and submarines, and women serve in combat support units in both the Army and Marine Corps. As such, these women are exposed to risk of death and capture, and indeed over 100 women soldiers died in Iraq, most due to hostile action.

In 2011, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission, created in 2009, recommended that DoD and the Services

eliminate combat restriction policies "to create a level playing field for all qualified service members" (Burrelli, 2012). The Secretary's and the Chairman's decision to open all jobs to women finally implemented this recommendation.

Consequences

When the Volunteer Force policy was implemented in 1973, women comprised approximately two percent of the active enlisted force and four percent of active officers, serving primarily in clerical, medical, logistic, and other HQ support positions. During the early years of the AVF, manpower shortages led to increased utilization of women to fill a large variety of non-combatant positions. By the mid-1980s women comprised about ten percent of the active enlisted and officer forces. For the enlisted forces, the Marine Corps were lowest at five percent while the Air Force was highest at 12 percent.

The 1988 risk rule and the 1994 policy changes led to further increases in the percentage of women serving. By the late 1990's women comprised about 14 percent of the total active enlisted and officer forces. The Air Force had the highest enlisted rates of women (18%), the Marine Corps the lowest (6%). The Army and Navy were in between at 15% and 13%, respectively (DoD Pop Rep, 2011).

The percentage of women in the enlisted forces continued to rise until it reached 15% in 2002, and then, somewhat unexpectedly, it stopped growing and even dropped slightly. For the last ten years, the number of enlisted women has been declining, and the percentage of women dropped to 14%. This reversal affected all forces except for the Marine Corps, which grew slightly from about 6% to 7%.

The women officer corps, however, continued to grow, reaching 17.5% in 2011. Interestingly, while the Army and Air Force have about 16% women officers, the Marine Corps has the highest rate at 19% and the Navy is lowest with only 6%. Clearly, the Marine Corps has been successful in its campaign to attract increasing numbers of women officers.

There is no definitive explanation for the halting and slight reversal of the trend for enlisted women. There are a number of possibilities. One could be the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, which led to an increase in demand for combat troops. Recruiters would hesitate to add or fill existing billets for women since they could not serve in combat jobs.

Another reason could be the difference in women's propensity for military service, which has been established by DoD youth surveys taken over the past several decades. Historically, young men are about three times more likely to volunteer for military service than young women; thus the supply of men is considerable higher than the supply of women. When asked about their likelihood of volunteering in a time of war, about 12 percent of men say they would definitely enlist compared to less than 3 percent of women, a more than four to one ratio (Armor, 2013).

A third reason could be the oft-reported problem of sexual assault and harassment of women in the military. Starting in 2005, Congress required the DoD to issue an annual report on sexual assaults. In 2011, over 3,000 sexual assaults were reported, nearly all women (DoD Sexual Assaults, 2012). Moreover, sexual assaults have been increasing since 2005, when about 2,400 complaints were received. The 2011 number yields a rate of about 1760 assaults per 100,000 women, which is dramatically higher than the rate of 52 forcible rapes per 100,000 women in the civilian population (US Census, 2012). Even acknowledging that the DoD definition is somewhat broader than the civilian definition, it is clear that sexual assaults on women is a vastly more serious problem in the military than in the civilian population.

Now that the combat restrictions are lifted, are more women expected and if so, how many? The attitude surveys on propensity and the experience of other countries without the combat restriction suggest that while some women might choose—and qualify for—combat specialties, the numbers are not likely to be large.

For example, Canada has not had a combat restriction for decades, and they have about the same percentage of women serving in their active forces (14%). However, only 2.4% serve in combat positions (MacDonald, 2013). Even Israel, which is the first country to draft women into military service, reports that women occupy only 3% of

combat jobs (Christian Science Monitor, 2013).

One of the factors that will affect the rate of women in combat jobs is physical standards. The Army currently has less stringent physical fitness requirements for women, but the current standards did not contemplate that women would face the rigors of ground combat (Western Illinois University, 2013). Women are trained for self-defense in combat support jobs, but this training is not as rigorous as that for fully mobile infantry, armor, or artillery specialists.

The Army has been testing and studying a new Combat Readiness test, according to some reports, but at this writing it has not been adopted (Scholog, 2011). With the opening of all combat jobs, it is possible that the Army and Marine Corps will require women who apply for a combat job to face the same or nearly the same physical fitness standards as men. To do otherwise could jeopardize unit capability and readiness.

Conclusions

The decision to open U.S. military combat jobs to women is the culmination of many years of DoD policy changes regarding women service members. The opening of Army combat support jobs to women, together with the unconventional insurgency wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, put women close to combat operations and exposed them to the risks of injury, death, or capture that the combat restrictions were intended to prevent. Ultimately, the Secretary's and Chairman's decision recognized that opening all jobs to women was the only fair and equitable choice.

The opening of more military jobs to women led to a steady increase of women participation in the active forces, growing from 2 percent in 1973 to 15 percent in 2003, the year that the Iraq war started. Since that time women participation has actually dropped slightly to 14 percent in the past year or two. The reasons for the end of this trend are complex, and it is unclear whether opening combat jobs to women will resume the trend.

First, from a historical perspective, the propensity to serve in the military is considerably lower for women than men. Second, the experience of other countries suggests that only a relatively small proportion of women will volunteer for combat specialties. Third, the Army in particular will have to establish fitness standards for women in combat jobs.

Finally, and perhaps the biggest challenge, the military may have to reduce its sexual assault and harassment rates before large numbers of women will take full advantage of the new jobs open to them.

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