Women in the Military

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Introduction

In 1964, Hasbro, Inc introduced the “G.I. Joe,” the first action figure that would become the signature icon in every American boy’s toy box. Many versions of this franchise’s marketing wonder would subsequently appear through the years, but only two women ever made it on to Hasbro’s G.I. Joe scene. The first female to hit the radar was the nurse, who showed up in markets in 1967. However, it would not be until another 30 years later, with the fame of the critically acclaimed film G.I. Jane, that a female soldier would be added to the ranks of military action figures.

The visible absence of females in Hasbro’s line does not stray very far from the reality of women in the US military over the last fifty years. Though women make up about a quarter of the military today, they are still often viewed differently from their brothers in combat. Based on old statutes established in the 1970s, current laws treat women differently from men, banning women from serving on the front lines of close combat because of fears of higher female casualties and lower estimated abilities. The expectations of women in the military should be the same in order to best serve the needs of efficiency in the military. However, some argue that the prevailing method of different measurements of adequate fitness and military capacity of candidates participating in rigorous physical training that are based on gender undermine the US military’s ability to have the strongest forces possible.

In a new age of warfare of the Iraq War and the War on Terror, where traditional techniques are no longer the standard, women have tiptoed the fine line between what is legal on the warfront and what is blatantly against the law. Women away from the front lines are being put in new dangers comparable to those on the ground. Female prisoners of war (POWs) have become a major concern because of the dangers, such as sexual harassment, that they could encounter men that do not in their place do not experience. These fears have fueled additional concerns that Americans are more sensitive to the safety of women, leading to exaggerated, and arguably superfluous, life-saving missions such as the Jessica Lynch rescue.

What you, the members of the United States Senate, must do is assess the current situation of women in the military and decide what the best policy is with regard to women seeking combat, and what the implications of your policy will be on the security of US and its defense efforts across the globe.

Explanation of the Problem

History of the Problem

Women Enter the Armed Forces

Women first received the opportunity to join the ranks of the US military in 1942 when a separate women’s service called the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) was established to give women an opportunity to help serve with men during the Second World War. The famous war propaganda at the time advertised Rosie the Riveter hand in hand with Uncle Sam as it asked more people – men and women – to contribute to the war effort both at home and abroad. Nearly 150,000 women were involved in World War II as WAC women took over more extensive roles that went beyond the traditionally female nursing role.

In 1948, President Harry Truman signed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act that allowed women to professionally serve as long as they made up less than two percent of the current military force. It was not until 1973, as conscription for the Vietnam War ended and the volunteer army came into place, that women were offered more professional military roles and the cap had been lifted to accommodate the changes in the structure of the recruits in the army. The military made way for women as numbers jumped
from 1.4 percent female in 1970 to 8.3 percent of the military forces by 1980. However, despite the jumps in female test pilots and top military university graduates, numbers only rose to 10.8 percent of the army and to around ten percent overall by the beginning of the 1990s.

Public Fears

The role of women in the military has expanded in the last few decades, but many are worried that the changes are not for the better. Worries of low morale, increased sexual harassment, and the endangerment of female lives are common in the general public and have been issues brought forth by opponents of increased female military participation. Early in the post-draft years, the Department of Defense wanted to put women out of harm’s way and established an internal rule that women would not be allowed to engage in “close combat” (later called “direct combat”), a position described as engagement with an enemy “while being exposed to direct enemy fire, a high probability of direct physical contact with the enemy’s personnel, and a substantial risk of capture.” This rule has been the determiner of women-approved roles specifically within the Army and still prevents full employment of women in all roles within the military.

This demarcation was followed with the “risk rule” in 1994, which established that women who were in noncombatant units and branches would still be turned away from a role if it posed a risk of harm to the female personnel. This rule prohibited women from even coming into contact with ground combat troops. This particular rule has made recent war conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan quite complicated because of the increased participation of women in non-traditionally dangerous roles that have only become dangerous in the face of new battle conditions in modern-day warfare.

Recent Developments

More Female Combatants

The Gulf War influenced the decision by President Clinton and Congress to add to the numbers of roles that women could take on, making about 80 percent of all military jobs open to women. This meant that in the early 1990s, 250,000 jobs previously open to only men were available for women to fill. Additionally, since Desert Storm, women have been able to command combat aircrafts and vessels. This change has also come along with a jump in the number of women serving in the military to 27% of the personnel assistance, active and reserve. Of those who are active-duty personnel, 15% are women. To fuel the volunteer armed forces, women have been filling roles in the military that have alleviated the need for a draft, especially in a time when troops are stationed worldwide, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, the beginning of the 1990s saw a drop in the number of men entering the armed services, which some say is due to the direct result of the increased female population. If this is true, and if this trend continues, female participation, while originally intended to increase the size of the military, could force enrollment numbers in the opposite direction.

Desert Storm became the first war to have female prisoners of war (POW), leading to criticism of the expanded female military roles. In Desert Storm, two female POWs were captured and 15 women were killed in action (KIA) or missing in action (MIA). In 2003, the two female POWs revealed that they had been sexually harassed while under the hands of Iraqi soldiers. This type of torture and treatment of women presented a startling problem. Though some argue that Americans are beginning to get used to the idea of female casualties, these casualties still spur news reports and special attention that men often do not receive. One example of such special treatment is the Jessica Lynch rescue mission.

Jessica Lynch

2003 was the year of Private Jessica Lynch, the 19-year-old who was called “the woman who changed the face of this war.” Lynch had been transported to Iraq only about four days after the first day of the Iraq War, or what was known as “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” She joined the 507th Ordinance Maintenance Company in February 2003 and encountered trouble on March 23rd. After making a wrong turn in Nasiriyah, Lynch and her colleagues were captured by Saddam Fedayeen, a fierce resistance force. With nine other members of the Company dead or missing in action, Lynch managed to escape. She ended up in an Iraqi hospital where a local lawyer saw her and informed US Marines who were stationed north of the city. In a dramatic scene broadcasted all over national television, the US Navy Special Operations Forces (Navy SEALS) stormed the small hospital and pulled Private Lynch out in a stretcher. This young woman was welcomed with sympathy and adulation at her ordeal and became a symbol of courage in the war.
Recent controversies about the roles of women also come with the changes in modern warfare and the broader span of potential targets of war violence. Prior to World War II, the presence of civilian casualties was small and generally unheard of. Wars were fought at the battlefields and only those in direct combat faced the consequences. However, in the post-World War II era, warfare has started to include suicide bombers, ground mines, and insurgent guerilla raids. This has spurred debate in Congress about the roles of women and where they stand in the realm of modern warfare. Women were originally placed in non-combat units for the purpose of avoiding the bloodshed of the front lines. However, now those behind the lines are just as vulnerable as those on the other side. The “360-degree” warfare has meant that no positions are safe, as truck drivers have become just as vulnerable to bombs and attack as men in close combat. This poses a problem for Congresspersons because the rules of warfare have changed, and as a result blood-free options have become more difficult to pinpoint and harder to come by.

In an amendment, a defense spending bill in 2005 reiterated the “risk rule” of 1994 in hope of ending the recently-authorized practice of “mixed-sex” forward support units that were being used, with questionable legality, for maintenance operations in the wars fought by US troops overseas. This type of support unit was created during the Iraq War as somewhat of a terminological loophole. For example, instead of being “assigned” to the 3rd Infantry, women were “attached in direct support of” the particular group and provided effectively the same services. Much of this came with the dire need to fill the many open infantry spots, especially when it seemed logical to place women who were already trained and prepared for the combat lines. With the 2005 legislation, the Department of Defense and Congress have objected to this practice and thus they have continued to perpetuate – whether it is intentional or not – the long-held stereotypes of women not being able to handle the pressure and dangers of training and war.

Harassment Allegations

Another risk that women encounter in the military is found in non-combat situations. Though allegations had been made in the past, female counterparts have recently made new sexual harassment accusations against US military leadership and male soldiers. In 2004, Stone Phillips of NBC Dateline interviewed two women ignored by the military trial system when their fellow soldiers raped them. Sergeant Audra Woods had been attacked when stationed in Kuwait. She had been struck with a large rock, and then raped while being gagged with her own clothing. Another woman, Army Captain Heather Arlinghaus, had been raped at knifepoint while pregnant by someone who had faked an accent but had clearly been a soldier wearing military-issued clothing. Both women were married and experienced soldiers when these rapes occurred and neither received the response they should have received given the circumstances. For both women,
very little was done by the military after they received medical attention, and the perpetrators were never found.

Sergeant Woods and Captain Arlinghaus are not alone. They are two of almost a hundred allegations that were reported between 2002 to 2004. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld promised in 2004, “Sexual assault will not be tolerated in the Department of Defense.” However, this promise has not been carried out thoroughly by the military courts. Sergeant Woods and Captain Arlinghaus are prime examples of this veil of ignorance, as their cases were drawn out and progressed little in the time after they reported the rapes. The military, instead of responding with alertness, dragged on and avoided the issue, even suggesting that Sergeant Woods had concocted the story as an excuse to leave the Army.

This situation is dangerous not only for the women who serve, but also for the integrity of the armed services and its members, both male and female. Should women continue to serve in the military, men in the military could continue to fall under the temptation of the dastardly acts these men in the past committed. The risk is both to the men and women because the possible distraction of women may negatively affect men’s concentration – and inevitably the ability to run the most efficient units.

### Congressional Action

**Women’s Armed Services Integration Act of 1948**

Under President Truman, women were first officially introduced into the military at a cap of two percent of the forces. Women were allowed to serve in the Army, Navy, Marines, and the Air Force. This piece of legislation was a landmark change in the role women would permanently have for the rest of the century and into the 21st century.


Under the Clinton Administration, this Authorization bill removed certain exemptions barring women from service and therefore opened up over 250,000 jobs that were formerly held exclusively by men. This was one of the biggest official expansions of women’s roles in the military and came at a time when women had already established themselves after the Gulf War.

### 1994 Pentagon Policy

As a response to the Defense Authorization Act of the previous year, the Defense Department put forward changes in regulations for military women that opened up formerly closed positions, such as service as fighter pilots and on warships. However, the military also established what later became known as the “risk rule” which gauged the danger of particular positions that women could or could not hold. Though many positions had been opened under the realization that the US military could not bar all dangerous jobs from women, direct ground combat remained off-limits. After 1994, women were still prohibited from joining any units that came into close contact with the front line. This policy prevented women from holding almost 40 percent of the jobs available to men at the time and still keeps women from serving in a large chunk of positions today.


The House Armed Services Committee voted on this defense-spending bill during the 109th session of Congress that included a section that disallowed women from participating in support units to direct ground combat. Republican Representative Duncan Hunter (CA-52), author of this bill, added this amendment in May 2005, when it had been passed in committee. After the addition of this amendment, many women’s activist groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) protested the integrity of this action. NOW President Kim Gandy voiced her anger and called this “just another poorly veiled attempt to keep servicewomen from advancing to higher positions in the military.” Democratic Representatives such as Loretta Sanchez (CA-47) and Cynthia McKinney (GA-4) see this legislation as a step back in the progress that the military has made in the last half-century to expand the role of women in the military. They argue that this legislation threatens not only female recruitment but also efforts for both genders because of the discriminatory implications of the bill.

### Focus of Debate

**Conservative View**

Many social conservatives do not want to see their mothers, sisters, and daughters fighting and sporting
semi-automatic weapons in foreign, dangerous lands. The need to protect women has fueled protests against the new, allegedly “illegal” actions the military committed to compensate for the lack of male troops to do the proper front line jobs. By placing women in unofficially assigned roles near close combat, the Army jeopardizes the security so adamantly protected by the 1995 Pentagon “risk rule.” The renewed ban on front line contact in the 2005 defense spending bill had come from a Republican representative and member of the House Armed Services committee.

Conservatives are less ready to accept the expanding roles of women in the military. Some conservatives have argued that the physical abilities of women have been determined to be less beneficial to the efficacy of the military abroad. The extension of roles would mean more exposure to dangerous situations and death.

Liberal View

Many social liberals see the issue as a battle for women’s equality. Some would argue that since women are put through rigorous trials the way men are, that they are just as suited for combat as men. The more extreme liberals would seek to go as far as to open all positions in the military to women (and some argue that complete equality would mean instituting a draft that includes women).

Others complain that women are in danger while at war in ways that are not traditionally war problems: sexual harassment, pregnancies, etc. The resistance of armed service officials to investigate further on rape or harassment charges has enraged many people, especially female Democrats. Anger at President Bush has also come as a result of the prohibition of abortions overseas in military hospitals.

Presidential View

President Bush adamantly supports the troops, both men and women, who are fighting for the sake of protecting the United States and its homeland security. On January 11, 2005, President Bush announced that he supported a policy of “no women in combat,” declaring his views on the current military situation of women edging toward serving on the front line. Also, one key issue that has been a point of contention between President Bush and the liberals is the issue of abortions in the military. Women who need to have abortions are often not able to do so because of its current illegality in the military. President Bush adamantly opposes abortion and seeks to maintain pro-life legislation and regulations.

Interest Group Perspectives

Center for Military Readiness

The Center for Military Readiness (CMR) is an organization of civilians, active-duty, and retired military personnel that advocates, among other issues, for equal opportunity in the nation’s armed forces. The CMR has criticized the Bush Administration and Congress for being “inattentive and negligent” on the matter of women in land combat. The CMR contends that women soldiers are illegally being collocated with all-male combat units and being placed in de facto combat roles in Iraq and elsewhere. They call high-level departures from stated policy “confusing and demoralizing to the troops” and demand that Congress clarify its position on women in the military, and that the military comply with its mandated regulations. However, this conservative think tank also believes that women are encountering dangers and that the US is “asking far more of our female soldiers than ever before in history.”

National Organization for Women (NOW)

The National Organization for Women adamantly protests the legislative attempts of Congress to block women from serving in their choice of the branches and roles of the military. NOW President Kim Gandy voiced her approval of the Citadel’s efforts to gather more information about abuses in the military, which included a school survey of female cadets, many of whom had claimed being sexually assaulted. NOW strongly advocates increasing pressures on Congresspersons for legislation to be passed to protect women who face the dangers of abuse while on duty.

Heritage Foundation

Most Heritage Foundation scholars who have spoken on this issue have come out against women serving in combat roles. In one lecture, Heritage representative Phyllis Schlafly spoke of the negative impact of female
combatants on US culture and defense, stating that “only a tiny minority of American women choose a military career at all, and of those only a tiny minority are agitating to get combat jobs … This little group of ambitious women should not be allowed to impose their peculiar views of gender neutrality on our nation. The whole idea of men sending women, including mothers, out to fight the enemy is uncivilized, degrading, barbaric and embarrassing. It is contrary to our culture, to our respect for men and women, and to our belief in the importance of the family and motherhood. And furthermore, no one respects a man who would let a woman do his fighting for him.”

The Heritage Foundation has also linked females in combat roles to creating a “gentler,” “less fit” military, and considers the issue a “radical feminist assault” on the nation. Jack Spencer argues that the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) has put too much emphasis on exercises such as sensitivity trainings and has lowered the rigor and standard of the physical trainings. The different expectations in the performance of males and females creates a less prepared military for battle that focuses too much on the way men and women treat each other and not enough on the purpose of military training, which is to train. He calls the DACOWITS “a hotbed of feminism driven by the flawed theory that, were it not for artificial barriers to women, they would be interchangeable with men in all military tasks.”

**American Civil Liberties Union**

The ACLU is recognized for its liberal interpretation of civil liberties and protests the interests of bodies that have policies that are discriminatory to any deserving group. ACLU President Nadine Strossen noted in a speech she made at Women’s Equality Day in 2005 that the ACLU’s position is that they are “against any gender-based line.” This group feels that full equality entails sharing equally in not only the rights, but also the responsibilities, of citizenship, up to and including defending the nation in combat. The ACLU points out that one in every seven soldiers in Iraq is female, and in that environment, the lines between combat and support are heavily blurred. They reiterate that women “have inescapably become involved in combat,” since every service member in Iraq and many other new battlefields is at risk of attack at any time. The ACLU urges Congress to remove the discriminatory attitudes toward women from military policy and go so far as to moderately advocate the draft for female personnel.

### Possible Solutions

**Status Quo**

Some argue that the current status of women in the military should not change at all and that the current laws do quite well at serving their purposes of maintaining the volunteer armed forces. The fact that 80% of all military roles are open to women should be enough to satisfy the needs of women’s equality, according to advocates of maintaining the status quo.

**Allow Women to Serve in All Spheres of the Military**

Others argue that women should be allowed to serve in 100% of all combat and personnel roles because that is not too far away from the reality of the current war situation abroad. Women have come to encounter dangers that were unheard of 40 years ago. Therefore, it would seem only fair to allow women to serve wherever they want, since all positions are dangerous. Current restrictions could potentially prevent women who are skilled and trained from serving a role that could be vital to the functioning and efficiency of the armed forces in any of its branches. The expansions in the early 1990s had already opened up many jobs; it would seem only logical to go one step farther.

**Enforce Laws to Protect Women**

Not a mutually exclusive issue from the others, many Congressmen are beginning to address the terrible ordeals that women are encountering while stationed with male colleagues. Rape and sexual harassment charges endanger the lives of women and pose serious psychological consequences that damage the women’s abilities to serve to the best of their abilities. The lack of a good database and the lack of a truly efficient process to deal with these circumstances have prohibited swift movement in the past. It is imperative for the sake of women and for the sake of homeland security to make sure that the thousands of women serving are getting the protection and services they need.
**Cap the Number of Women in the Military**

This solution to the current problem is sometimes viewed as sexist and discriminating to female soldiers. However, an argument can be made about the potential dangers of having military services that are too female-friendly. Some people believe that even women who go through the most rigorous training could never match up to the equivalent male’s ability to run or jump as fast or high. Some argue that this can be explained by biology and the increased muscle mass that most men naturally have and that most women cannot naturally achieve without the help of artificial hormones.

This situation with women is further exacerbated by the fact that there will always exist a certain number of men who do refuse to serve because of the presence of women. However, it should also be noted that this argument for capping the number of women in the military reflects sexism on the part of the men refusing to serve with women, and many believe that women should not be blamed or punished for sexism.

Another controversial argument can be made that the presence of women can be harmful because their presence in the military can become distracting to men in their teams and squadrons, thus shifting the focus of some of the men and potentially damaging their performance in the field. Again, this argument can be perceived as sexist, and many women believe that they should not be punished for the sexism or chauvinism of their male counterparts.

**Questions a Bill Should Address**

Senators, when writing a bill, you must consider a huge range of different issues. First, we must look at the presence of women in the military and answer the old stereotypes: How do you make the military safe for women when women are so heavily outnumbered by men? Is there truth in the stereotypes about women in combat? Should women have special treatment that men do not have? Does having co-ed military squads decrease morale for men? Is it morally wrong to think that a woman’s life is worth more than a man’s? How can this pose risks in homeland security?

Then, you must analyze the implications of modern day warfare. What else has changed since World War II in the way that wars are fought? Should women still be barred from close combat when they are in just as much danger in other positions as they are on the front lines? Would lifting bans mean that women would be subject to the draft? What are the reasons for the bans when women have shown themselves to be just as capable as men? Did the 109th Congress have the right idea when passing the ground combat amendment?

Lastly, you must assess the final legislative debate. What can Congress do to stop harassment in the military? Will legislation be effective in addressing crimes against women that occur in the heat of a battle? Are quotas the answer to keep only the fittest in? How do you legislate on women’s untested abilities?

**Conclusion**

Every day both men and women are serving across the nation and across the world to defend the United States and its allies. Though still only a small fraction of the military consists of women, they do make a significant difference in staffing the armed forces and pulling their weight in the heat of battle. However, as old measures of protection of women have begun to wear down in the age of newfound warfare, it is up to you as Senators to look at the fairness of the current legislation and decide what is best for the G.I. Janes of all branches of the military. We need to protect our women from discrimination and harassment so that they can protect the citizens of the United States here and abroad.

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Glossary

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) – a lobbying group advocating the protection of civil rights and liberties

Citadel – a public military research group that conducts studies such as the one on sexual harassment on military training campuses

Close combat – an Army term used to mean “engaging an enemy with individual or crew-served weapons while being exposed to direct enemy fire, a high probability of direct physical contact with the enemy’s personnel, and a substantial risk of capture”
Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) – the war initiated by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and fought from 1990-1991 between a coalition of UN multilateral forces and Iraq

KIA (killed-in-action) – This refers to the status of individuals who died in the line of duty

Iraq War – Also dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Iraq War began March 2003 as a mission to unseat Saddam Hussein from power and to liberate the Iraqis from the oppression of the Ba’ath party

MIA (missing-in-action) – This term refers to the status of individuals who had been lost in combat or on missions and that there is no information on the whereabouts of

MOS (military specialty test) – The Army Enlisted Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Classification System designates ranking of soldiers based on their occupational and special skill levels so that they can be adequately used for battle

POW (prisoner of war) – a prisoner of war is a capture from enemy lines. Holders of POWs are required to follow laws established by the Geneva Conventions that reflect the modern laws of war and humanitarian law

Risk rule – a rule established by the Department of Defense in 1994 suggesting that women who were even exposed to the “risk” of direct combat could be turned away from specific roles within the military