

Here's Why Women in Combat Units is a Bad Idea

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Three problems plague the debate over whether all combat units should finally be opened to women. (Actually, there are four problems: The fourth and most important being the likelihood that there will be no real debate, something that I hope this article will help to mitigate). Most career soldiers and officers I know believe the integration of women into Special Forces teams, and into SEAL, Ranger and Marine infantry platoons, is already a forgone conclusion. From their perspective, politicians in uniform (namely, top brass) don't have the intestinal fortitude to brook the vocal minority in Congress – and the country, really – who think mainstreaming women into ground combat units is a good idea.

As for the other three problems, the first is that every sentient adult knows what happens when you mix healthy young men and women together in small groups for extended periods of time. Just look at any workplace. Couples form. At some point, how couples interact – sexually, emotionally, happily and/or unhappily – makes life uncomfortable for those around them. Factor in intense, intimate conditions and you can forget about adults being able to stay professional 24/7. Object lesson for anyone who disagrees: General Petraeus.

Problem number two: Those who favor lifting the combat exclusion ban engage in a clever sleight of hand whenever they equate women serving in combat with women serving in combat

units. Given women's performance over the past decade in Afghanistan and Iraq, who but a misogynist would doubt their capacity for courage, aggressiveness or grace under fire at this point? But battles are like exclamation points. They punctuate long stretches when there are no firefights. Spend time around soldiers when they are coming down from adrenaline highs, or are depressed or upset; they are prone to all sorts of temptations. Alternatively, under Groundhog Day-like conditions, troops invariably grow bored and frustrated. How quickly we forget Charles Graner and Lynndie England, and the dynamic between them that helped fuel the sadism at Abu Ghraib.

Problem number three involves a different elision. Proponents of lifting the ban love to invoke desegregation and the demise of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Their intent in doing so is to suggest that all three are of a piece: Blacks now serve in combat units, as do (at least in theory) openly homosexual soldiers, and there have been no untoward effects. It is therefore past time to let women be all that they can be as well. Except that attraction between the sexes is nothing like the denigration of another race or the disinterest (or disgust) heterosexual men feel when it comes to the idea of one man pursuing another.

Indeed, racism and bigotry lie at the opposite end of the spectrum from attraction. Lumping all three together is a canard.

There is no clearer way to put it than this: Heterosexual men *like* women. They also compete for their attention. This is best captured by the Darwinist aphorism: male-male competition and female choice. Or, try: no female has to leave a bar alone if she doesn't want to, whereas at 'last call' lots of men do.

Cast back through history or just look cross-culturally: Men's abiding interest in women (and women's interest in having men *be* interested) creates limitless potential for friction. Is this really what we want to inflict on combat units?

More than a decade ago, I described the critical ethos on teams, and in squads or platoons, as '[one for all and all for one.](#)' Introduce something over which members are bound to compete, that the winner won't share, and you inject a dangerous dynamic. Worse, introduce the possibility of exclusivity between two individuals and you will have automatically killed cohesion.

Interestingly – tellingly – proponents of lifting the combat exclusion ban routinely dismiss the significance of cohesion. Take the recent story about the Marine Corps' new experimental mixed gender combat unit that appeared on the front page of the Wall Street Journal. In it, [correspondent Michael Phillips writes](#): “The debate over women in combat – similar to arguments about gays in the military – used to focus on so-called unit cohesion...”

That value-laden qualifier, “*so-called*,” made me sit bolt upright. Its use signals just how successful military sociologists and others have been at dismissing the idea that social cohesion might (still) matter. Their preferred cohesion is something they call ‘task cohesion,’ which refers to soldiers' ability to do a job regardless of whatever inter-personal differences might exist among them. This, according to these academics, is the only kind of cohesion military units

need. Forget shared interests, past-times or proclivities. Remaining effective over the long-haul in combat no longer requires that individuals have anything more than the mission in common.

Except – dig beneath the political correctness that those in uniform know they better parrot, and it quickly becomes apparent that academics have split an impossible hair. For instance, U.S. Army Special Forces Command has been waging a quiet dissuasion campaign against Special Forces soldiers joining motorcycle ‘clubs.’ And though some wonder why any special operator would feel the need to join a bunch of wannabe outlaws when SF teams already constitute the ‘baddest’ gangs around, operators enamored with biker subculture are clearly seeking something SF does not provide. For many that something is camaraderie.

No question, stateside camaraderie is not what it is OCONUS (outside the continental U.S.). Family life looms large, wives have careers etc. There are a host of reasons why cohesion frays whenever teams return from deployments (to include how strained families are thanks to the sheer number of deployments). However, this fraying has consequences. Individuals go on benders and get into trouble; combat veterans commit suicide; PTSD festers. Old timers’ assessment is that team members no longer have each other’s backs *except* in combat. Ironically, their observation fits exactly what focusing only on ‘task cohesion’ prescribes.

Talk to team leaders and they will describe how much effort it takes to get team members and their families to *want* to socialize once everyone is home. But they will also describe how rewarding it is once they do – all of which should be an indicator that social cohesion still does matter. It matters to those who join Special Forces in order to belong to something other than just a job. It also matters to those responsible for leading them, who recognize what a difference it makes downrange when a team ‘hangs together.’

Consequently, one question that should be posed to those who fixate on ‘task cohesion’ as the only glue the military needs is: Don’t social scientists owe it to those who already serve in special operations (and infantry) units to pay attention to what they say (and do), rather than rely on what members of mixed gender *non-combat* units self-report regarding ‘task cohesion’?

Of course, the idea that there can be any social ‘science’ answer to whether the U.S. military should integrate women into ground combat forces is silly. Proponents might like to think that objective metrics can be devised. But metrics that measure what? Whether a unit can gel? Whether it will stay solid? Whether it will be able to recover from disaster effectively?

Granted, there are some critical performance criteria – such as the ability to meet physical standards – that can be gauged in advance. But it is essential to remember that just because an individual meets these does not mean he or she will fit well into any group. Nonetheless, physical standards now amount to *the* Rubicon in the combat exclusion debate.

Opponents of lifting the ban believe that so long as standards remain high – and do not get gender-normed – few women will either want to serve in the combat arms or be able to make it through selection. Thus, certain Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) – they hope – will remain protected. For their part, proponents question the relevancy of the physical standards that special operations units and the Marine Corps infantry do still use. Their position is that if you

look at any unit, tasks are rarely undertaken by individuals alone. Instead, members shift and share burdens, and help each other out. Invariably the group finds creative ways to get the job done regardless of individuals' weaknesses.

Ergo the Marine Corps' new experimental unit, the Ground Combat Element Integrated Task Force (the subject of Phillips' article). What the Marine Corps tests will find as they train up both male and female volunteers for combat should be interesting, to say the least. Forget just the gender dimension. Each service *should* ensure that today's standards reflect real world requirements, and not some arbitrary, holdover notions of what combat pre-9/11 entailed. After all, it could be that numerous physical standards will need to be raised, not lowered – something that is all too imaginable given the sheer weight of today's combat loads. If so, it will be interesting to then see what tack proponents take, since thus far they have shown zero interest in acknowledging why we even have combat units. Their impetus all along has been equity instead.

Equity is a quintessentially progressive and thus classically American goal. It is also a goal that increasingly attracts uniformed fathers who want to see their uniformed daughters excel. This reflects a remarkable societal shift. Proponency by men who have served in the combat arms is powerful and persuasive. It can also be extraordinarily moving. However, no decision about the future makeup of ground combat units should be influenced by what opening such units will do for anyone's offspring, or sibling or spouse. Instead, the *only* thing that should matter is whether the presence of women will contribute positively to the combat effectiveness of combat units.

No question, women are a boon for certain types of missions, especially certain special operations missions. No one I know disagrees with that, and in fact most special operators are anxious for more qualified women to be able to work with them. But there is a world of difference between women participating on certain missions and women serving alongside men as permanent members of ground combat units.

This difference has everything to do with why combat units exist – they exist to be sent into harm's way. Maybe they won't take casualties. But the military can never count on that. The prospect of attrition requires that the military treat individuals not as individuals, but as interchangeable pieces of a complex system. Not only does every combat soldier need to be capable of accomplishing the same essential tasks as every other combat soldier (according to rank, MOS etc.), but every potential replacement has to be able to easily fit into an already-stressed group. This introduces the equivalent of a Goldilocks challenge: Groups must be flexible enough to *quickly* absorb new members, while new members need to be sufficiently similar to both old members and surviving members that they readily fit.

Unfortunately, proponents of lifting the combat exclusion ban don't seem to get this. So, while it might make academic sense to assume squads, platoons and teams will simply be able to work out their own division of labor (read: task cohesion) under duress, what invariably happens when new members of the opposite sex arrive on the scene? In any setting, group chemistry changes – in predictably unpredictable ways.

Unfortunately, the services aren't likely to use their sexual assault data to make the case that injecting women into hard-charging, all-male units isn't a sound idea. But surely other statistics

exist. For instance, how much time do command staffs already spend on boy-girl troubles? Anecdotally, fraternization and related issues eat up way too much time. Is this really what Washington should now saddle combat units and commanders with as they fight ISIS or whomever else in the future?

Or what about combat soldiers' spouses, who already have more than enough worries? Why don't their concerns count? This is a question that leads to a cascade of others for anyone who truly cares about equity. Whose equity *should* most matter? And who should get to determine this?

The irony is that combat units are 'it' when it comes to protecting all the other equities we Americans value. That is inconvenient truth number one. We have no other front-line/behind-the-lines first responders. Why would we want to do anything that jeopardizes their cohesiveness and integrity?

Inconvenient truth number two is that men and women have been each other's most consistent distraction since the beginning of time. To pretend that we don't know what will happen when men and women are thrown together for prolonged periods in emotionally intense situations defies common sense. Being overly academic and insufficiently adult about adult behavior isn't just irresponsible but imperiling, and belies the deadly seriousness with which we should want combat units to perform.

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