

Exploring the Notion of Women in Combat ©

By Connie J. Schlosberg

Imagine being a United States soldier driving with your comrades through the war-zone desert of Iraq, when you stumble upon a young girl, no more than six or seven years old, standing innocently in the middle of the dirt road. The rules of engagement tell you that you need to keep going even if it means to literally run over this helpless looking girl, but would you? This dilemma was the theme for an episode from a television series called *Cold Case*. This episode – called “The War at Home” is about a female soldier who is not the same person when she returns from the Iraq war. She fought in Iraq for 93 days with two friends when their vehicle came under attack. At the end of the show, we discover that she used her “maternal instincts” and didn’t obey orders to keep driving when she saw a young Iraqi girl standing in the middle of the road. This young girl was utilized to attack them and caused her to lose an arm, one soldier to lose a leg, and another soldier lost his life. War may not be pretty, but that doesn’t make it masculine. In this paper I seek to reason that if women can serve in the United States military, if a woman volunteers to defend this nation’s rights, then this nation should defend her right to volunteer for any military assignment. I will also connect this debate with Aristotle’s philosophy of virtue ethics, pertaining to the building of character, and Simone de Beauvoir’s classical feminism, that espouses women and men should be considered as persons first and gender second, using her treatise *The Second Sex* as my basis for justification. I will conclude that by eliminating our focus for this issue as being related to gender, we can appreciate that the military and society

should accept all military persons with equal respect and consideration for combat action.

Established by then-Defense Secretary Les Aspin on 13 January 1994, the “Aspin Rules” exempt female soldiers from assignments in smaller direct ground combat (DGC) units that engage in deliberate offensive action against the enemy and from units that assemble with them. However, the Department of Defense has already started to bypass the exemption of female soldiers from these types of assignments. Pentagon officials’ answer to sidestep these rules: attach Forward Support Companies (FSCs) and their inevitable contingent of female soldiers to bigger support brigades – a separation the Army contends does not violate this policy. The Army has deliberated the idea of implementing mixed-sex FSCs into actual combat brigades.

Female combat pilots and military police (patrolling the streets of Baghdad, for instance) are a recognized part of Congress’s softening of the restriction on the roles females can play in combat operations, even though there remains a regulation that exempts women from direct ground combat units that engage in combative action against the enemy. However, the Department of Defense officials agree it would violate the Pentagon’s policy against women-included units and would require notification to Congress.

What might change this policy is inevitable military personnel numbers. Army representatives told Pentagon officials in a special report that if it was forced to keep the vital FSCs all-male, it would simply not have enough soldiers. Recent reports concerning female soldiers in FSCs, although focused on the women in combat issue,

suggest that there may be “insufficient male soldiers in the inventory to fill forward support companies and that the pool of available male recruits may be too small to sustain the force.” FSCs are supposed to provide maintenance and logistic support to UA combat battalions which, according to some is a violation of the Army’s 1994 policy, which not only banned women from units that engage in direct ground combat such as infantry and armor, but also excluded women “from assignments below brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground.” To date, the Secretary of Defense has not approved of any change in the “Aspin rules.” [Order Code RL32476, CRS Report for Congress, U.S. Army’s Modular Redesign: Issues for Congress, May 20, 2005]

Traditionally, women have been excluded from combat units because of accustomed views of women’s roles in our society. Women are excluded from combat positions not because they are unable to perform the jobs, but because of the view that, unlike men, women should be protected from harm and that women should not kill. A testimony given before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Merrill A. McPeak, Air Force Chief of Staff, indicated that although he believes that women are capable of flying combat aircraft, he would still choose a male pilot over a more qualified female. He stated even though “logic tells us” otherwise, “I have a very traditional attitude about wives and mothers and daughters being ordered to kill people.” Discussions with Ms. Inge Potman, a retired Air Force Sergeant, posed another argument suggesting that if women were sent into combat, many of them mothers, would be unable to face the physical and emotional demands of violent close combat and a higher risk of capture that exists today. Ms. Potman has medals and accolades for her M16 sharp shooting

skills, but believes shooting a decoy target is different from a human being. She feels, in the United States, we are not culturally socialized as women to kill other human beings as opposed to other countries such as Israel (The Israeli military allows women in combat.) Other opposing views include:

- Women are physically weaker than men, and therefore, standards would have to be lowered and unit effectiveness jeopardized. A combat soldier is required to carry a heavy backpack plus weapon. If these standards are lowered so more women qualify, our military forces will be reduced and soldiers put in to dangerous situations. Plus, in direct ground combat, women do not have an “equal opportunity” to survive or to help fellow soldiers survive. A 5'2”, 110 pound female would not be able to carry an injured soldier to safety.
- There is potential danger for the male soldiers to have female comrades in arms. Since men are instinctive to protect women, the male soldiers will be more centered on protecting their female comrades and become distracted from their mission.
- Female Prisoners of War (POWs) could be raped with threats or violence against these women POWs could be used as a ploy to persuade male POWs to divulge secrets to the enemy.

Grant it, we perceive women as being emotional maternal beings, and men as stoical and hard-nosed, but that's not to say that women can't be brave and men can't be sensitive. Nancy Sherman stated in her book, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind*, “Soldiers, however tough and stoic, are also social creatures...It is an expression, too, of vulnerability – that bonding to others makes one vulnerable to loss.” The nature of modern war from WWII forward have vividly

illustrated that our nation can ill afford to unilaterally (and naively) restrict women from combat roles. Not only does America require their talents, but our enemies and potential adversaries have demonstrated time and again that they will not respect quaint Victorian-era sensibilities that we might have regarding women as non-combatants. Thus, if women are considered targets by our enemies, we should give ourselves every advantage to fight and win—including leveraging the enormous capabilities that American women possess. Let's address the opposing views concerns.

- Women are physically weaker than men, and therefore, standards would have to be lowered and unit effectiveness jeopardized. I interviewed via email Colonel (General Select) Larry Grundhauser, from the Directorate for Intelligence, Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. His response to this issue says it best: “I don't believe in lowering objective standards if such standards have a basis in empirical fact. For example, a woman who is in the infantry who must not only carry her gear, weapon and perhaps a crew-served weapon like a mortar or heavy machine gun, will require much more physical strength and endurance. It would be illogical to waive or lower those standards. That said, to say that every woman must run a mile in the same time as a man seems arbitrary to me.”
- There is potential danger for the male soldiers to have female comrades in arms. Combat experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have disproved that assertion. It's my understanding that our heroic soldiers have shown balanced commitment/concern for their comrades, whether they are male or female. Mr. Rusty Hatfield, a retired Army Communications Specialist, explains that it wouldn't make a difference if the

comrade was male or female. What if the male soldier has a kinship with another male soldier? He is just as likely to put himself in danger for a friend as for a female.

- o Female Prisoners of War (POWs) could be raped with threats or violence against these women POWs. The nature of the enemy we've faced in the 20th century and today are such that similar horrific scenarios for POWs exist for males irrespective of whether female POWs are involved. Faked or genuine torture of male POWs to compel statements of other male POWs has been used in the past and I don't think it can be quantified in comparison to the level of concern a male POW would have over a female POW's plight in a similar situation.

Virtue ethics is one of three major approaches in normative ethics (concerned with classifying actions as right or wrong) and is identified as the one that emphasizes the virtues or moral character. Virtue ethics focuses on what makes a good person rather than what makes a good action. It tries to define the goal or duties, which emphasizes the consequences of actions. It consists of using reason within our society. For the virtue ethicist, this is achieved by the person who lives the proper human life by practicing the virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance). A virtue is a habit or quality that allows the bearer to succeed at his purpose. Aristotle argued that each of the moral virtues has a Golden Mean – essentially a middle ground - between two corresponding vices.

Of course, with one's physiology as Aristotle's philosophy suggested, we would expect men and women to have different moral virtues and psychological traits. If moral virtues as well as psychological traits are connected with one's capacities, then all

individuals should be encouraged to cultivate the same set of psychological traits and moral virtues. Applying this theory to women in combat, we could say that women might have a tougher time with finding the Golden Mean between two vices. For example, the virtue of courage is a mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. This is certainly a virtue needed in a war zone. Given the realistic fact that women are generally more nurturing humans, under this philosophical approach, could a woman be stoic enough to differentiate between the two?

Classical feminists perceive men and women as equal persons first, with gender differences as being cultural. Aside from our biological differences, our culture has conditioned us to believe there are differences of what men and women are capable of accomplishing. Classical feminism supports another type of gender, namely androgynous. Simone de Beauvoir's dissertation *The Second Sex* paved the philosophy for equal education and opportunities. Beauvoir thought if boys and girls were raised as simply humans rather than males and females, sexism wouldn't exist. She observed that men are viewed as typical human beings whereas women are viewed by men as "the Other" – defined as someone who is different from you thus hard to understand. Beauvoir felt that if women allowed to shed their traditional roles, they would become authentic human beings.

If women were raised the same as men and no gender differences existed. We would not be debating whether women should participate in combat. They would already be doing it. Beauvoir's - as well as Ms. Potman's - theory is correct. As Americans, we are not culturally socialized to think that women are capable of stoicism.

However, if sexism could possibly be removed from society and the androgynous gender becomes a reality, than we will most definitely see women warriors. The fastest way for women to be regarded as moral is for them to be raised with the same moral thinking as men – in other words - for women to display the psychological traits usually associated with men. If women are oppressed from such actions as voluntarily serving in all factions of the military, they won't have the material means necessary to develop their potential.

I find it interesting that the women I spoke to are predominately against women in combat versus the men who believed potentially women could participate in combat. I'm not certain if the men gave me cookie-cutter responses simply because they thought that's what (as a woman) I wanted to hear. However, I believe women can be as effective and brave as their male counterparts. This statement in itself serves to underscore the critical metric: "qualified." Too often, the argument devolves into discussions that assert the average size/strength/endurance physical traits of women, and resolves that they cannot, therefore, perform as well as their male counterparts. Theory has been dislodged by experience in America's military, including the combat arms. Women are serving alongside their male counterparts with valor and distinction under the most strenuous and harrowing circumstances. There are challenges. Some weapons systems still require physical strength to employ that may prove difficult for women, in general. There are women who possess that physical strength. Moreover, with the advent of precision engagement strategies that utilize speed, stealth, highly networked command and control weapon systems, women are able to serve on the front lines against our enemies just like men. Finally, in many instances women have

demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to endure stress and horrific circumstances that exceed that of the male colleagues.

In conclusion, the choice to serve in the military is the principal decision that should be voluntary. Once that decision has been rendered by the member—male or female—then whatever military assignment is required for that member is the decision of the military service. There are certainly jobs within the military that require volunteer status, such as airborne, special operations, etc., but in general the assumption for anyone wearing a uniform should be that they could face combat at any time and must be prepared mentally and physically for such.