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# Women in Combat: Policy Catches Up With Reality

By TANYA L. DOMI

AT his confirmation hearing on Jan. 31, Chuck Hagel, President Obama's nominee for defense secretary, stated unequivocally, "I will work with the service chiefs as we officially open combat positions to women, a decision I strongly support."

The word "officially" was illuminating: a subtle acknowledgment, whether intended or not, that women have already been fighting, and dying, in combat roles.

As an Army veteran — I left in 1990, with an honorable discharge — I was struck by the close, if indirect, association between the role of women in the military and that of gays.

More than 20 years ago, when President-elect Bill Clinton first announced that he would lift the ban on gay men and lesbians serving in the armed forces, I wrote an essay for the Op-Ed page of this newspaper, urging that women be permitted to serve in ground-force combat duty in the Army and the Marines, with "tough but fair physical and mental standards" that men and women alike would have to reach.

"The military does not have the luxury of discounting the nearly 11 percent of its forces who are women," I wrote. "They have risen to each challenge, with a sterling record in Grenada, Panama and the Persian Gulf."

As we know, the role of neither gays nor women would not be settled for another two decades.

In 1993, Mr. Clinton agreed to an uneasy "don't ask, don't tell" compromise on gays in the military, a policy that led to hypocrisy, dishonesty and preposterous outcomes, not to mention gross examples of blackmail and abuse. That same year, the Pentagon allowed women to serve as combat pilots. But the following year it formally restricted women from artillery, armor, infantry and other such ground-combat roles.

When President Obama signed legislation repealing "don't ask, don't tell" a little more than a year ago, allowing gays to openly serve, I knew that the moment would pave the way for removing the remaining barrier to equality in the services. The timing is a belated

recognition of women's valor: since World War II, when civilian women served as test pilots, trying out aircraft that could be flown in combat only by male aviators, many have died in risky yet unofficial missions. More than 800 women have been wounded in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and more than 150 have been killed.

The decision last month by Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta to allow women in ground-combat roles may have surprised the public. But since the draft ended in 1973, the Pentagon has been steadily expanding the role of women — who now make up 14 percent of our armed forces — across all of the services. Women were progressively integrated into the regular forces as the Pentagon dismantled the gender-segregated units that had existed at least since World War II.

But because of outmoded Pentagon bureaucratic regulations, the military failed to reform its personnel assignment policies, even as more and more women came into the line of fire, with the emergence of “asymmetrical warfare.” Consequently, military women have been denied formal recognition for their combat experience, even though they have served as medics and intelligence officers, participated in convoys, accompanied infantry troops and searched civilians. These are just a few examples of the varied roles that have exposed women soldiers to hostile forces and armed combat, despite the official policies that insisted that women be assigned exclusively to noncombat jobs.

Making matters worse, a structural military “brass ceiling” has frozen women's leadership potential, because female officers with real but unacknowledged combat experience were effectively denied career advancement and training.

In 2011, the Pentagon's Military Leadership Diversity Commission recommended eliminating combat exclusion policies for women in order to remove structural barriers and open traditionally closed doors, especially in assignments. As with the issue of gays in the military, which was studied for decades, the Diversity Commission's recommendations followed numerous reports over the years finding that women were qualified to serve in an ever-expanding number of roles. In 2007 the RAND Corporation studied the issue; other reports have been conducted by the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces and the Defense Advisory Commission on Women in the Services, which was established in 1951. All reports found that women were making important contributions to the military readiness of the United States. The only barrier to their service has been an equal opportunity to compete.

The lifting of the ban, which will not be fully phased in until 2016, was made with the unanimous support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and its chairman, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey.

Because women are central to the continued effectiveness of America's military force and have proved themselves to be vital to combat and unit effectiveness, lifting the combat ban is a belated but essential step. And as I argued in my Op-Ed article in 1992, the military's high standards for mental acuity and physical fitness should not be diminished to integrate women into combat units.

With this momentous shift, America once again reaffirms its core values of equality and respect — values predicated upon a person's capabilities and demonstrated competence, not an immutable characteristic like gender. This is good for our military, and our country too.

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