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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

A Gender-Equality Breakthrough

On Jan. 23, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta lifted the ban on women serving in combat: infantry, armor and artillery. Is that a good thing? Let's look at three issues: 1) strength and performance; 2) societal norms; and 3) the ramifications of capture.

Strength and Performance

It is true that modern warfare has taken on an antiseptic aura, with UAVs (drones) and air strikes from miles above the battlefield. But even though today's foot-soldiers are immeasurably better equipped than their earlier counterparts, grunt warfare is still grunt warfare. Dogfaces are still required to carry heavy loads of weaponry and equipment - and sometimes even wounded comrades.

Every credible study has discovered the obvious: Women do not have the same physical capacity as men. The military's physical testing shows almost no overlap between the performance of men and women. Marine Captain Katie Petronio reported, "The rate of my physical deterioration was noticeably faster than that of male Marines." Navy Captain Martha Whitehead testified that women are three times more likely to be "non-deployable."

Ground combat means aggressively attacking the enemy with a high probability of face-to-face contact. This requires an edge in strength, reach, speed and aggression. Male 18-year-olds have that edge over women, plus an abundance of aggression-producing testosterone. With the mission at stake - not to mention the survival of our warriors - why go into combat with anything less than your strongest? Is diversity really more important than survival?

Societal norms

Marine squad leader Ryan Smith described his experience in the assault on Baghdad. "Špeople seem to believe that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have merely involved driving out to a forward operating base Š a quick firefight Š and then returning to Š shower facilities and chow hall." Smith writes: "We rode into war crammed in the back of amphibious assault vehicles Š designed to hold roughly 15 Marines snugly Š we had

as many as 25 men stuffed into the back. Marines were forced to sit, in full gear, on each other's laps and in contorted positions for hours on end – we spent over 48 hours on the move without exiting the vehicles. We were forced to urinate in empty water bottles inches from our comrades. Many Marines developed dysentery from the complete lack of sanitary conditions. When an uncontrollable urge hit a Marine, he would be forced to stand, as best he could, hold an MRE bag up to his rear, and defecate inches from his seated comrade's face – When we did reach Baghdad, we were – covered in a mixture of filth and dried blood – they lined us up naked and washed us off with pressure washers.”

Smith concludes: “Has the government considered whether introducing women into the above-described situation would have made my unit more or less combat effective? Societal norms are a reality, and their maintenance is important to most members of a society. It is humiliating enough to relieve yourself in front of your male comrades; one can only imagine the humiliation of being forced to relieve yourself in front of the opposite sex – In the reverse, it would be painful to witness a member of the opposite sex in such an uncomfortable and awkward position. Combat effectiveness is based in large part on unit cohesion. The relationships among members of a unit can be irreparably harmed by forcing them to violate societal norms.”

In the field, sanitary conditions can be primitive; perhaps just a slit-trench, no privacy at all, and likely no toilet paper. Squatting over a slit-trench in front of others is a degrading experience. Is this appropriate for female troops at all - let alone in the presence of men? Who has thought this through?

Ramifications of capture

Two female American soldiers were captured in the early part of the war in Iraq. These women were not supposed to be in actual combat, but were captured because their convoy got lost. Both were injured and received poor medical attention. One reports having been raped and sodomized by her captors. The only female American captured (after her Blackhawk crashed) during the Gulf War a dozen years earlier also reported being raped. This is the treatment female captives can expect, even when their captors are a military with a command structure, rules and discipline.

Even for men, capture by irregulars such as the Taliban - a force not governed by any recognized rules of warfare - removes any hope of civilized treatment. American troops captured by guerillas in Iraq and Afghanistan have been tortured, mutilated, castrated and beheaded. Fortunately, no female American soldier has been captured by the Taliban. If that were to happen, what would be her fate? Certainly gang-rape and torture, probably mutilation and - in the unlikely event she would ever be recovered alive by American forces - lasting physical and psychological damage.

Conclusion

The law and common decency require that men and women be treated equally. But no thoughtful person would argue that this requires denying undeniable physical differences. Nor should it require subjecting women to humiliating conditions and to the risk of torture and rape.

When the normally level-headed Panetta made his announcement, President Obama proclaimed: “Today, every American can be proud that our military will grow even stronger with our mothers, wives, sisters and daughters playing a greater role in protecting this country we love.”

Really? Could he get it more backwards than this? Combat is not about gender equality or employment opportunities. Combat is about victory and survival.