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Women in Combat—A Time for Truth

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Friday, May 14, 2004

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Why are we not hearing more about the issue of women in combat? The current war in Iraq raises this issue most urgently, because women have been deployed in front-line units from the very beginning of this effort. The famous case of Pfc. Jessica Lynch should have been sufficient to awaken Americans to the fact that women are now serving alongside men throughout the combat theatre.

The inclusion of women in active combat roles completes the project pushed so aggressively by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s and then institutionalized by the Clinton administration in the 1990s. Women now serve in a multiplicity of combat roles, and the armed services claim a goal of “interchangeability” between men and women in most units.

According to Newsweek, women now compose about 15 percent of the Army, 13 percent of the Navy, 19 percent of the Air Force, and 6 percent of the Marines. The proportion of jobs open to women ranges from 91 percent in the Army to 99 percent in the Air Force. Even though women are not yet allowed in infantry, artillery, or armor units, women serve in other front-line combat positions, including service as fighter pilots. Women may not serve in the elite Special Forces units or on the Navy's submarines, but they can be found throughout most of the other combat-ready units in uniform.

The inclusion of women in the armed forces—and in especially in combat units—was demanded by feminists as a step toward full equality for women. Reversing millennia of human wisdom, feminists claimed that exclusion of women from combat service amounted to a form of unconstitutional discrimination. The decision to incorporate women in fighting units came in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when the military was itself at a low point of morale, and when the Pentagon's leadership was especially susceptible to political correctness. With much fanfare, women were put in uniform and in the public eye.

Of course, the military did not publicly acknowledge that in order to incorporate women in fighting units, the services had to lower physical requirements and redefine terms of service. These “redefined” terms of service would come to public attention from time to time, such as when the presence of pregnant soldiers became a complication on the battlefield.

To the Arab mind, the most grotesque dimension of the Abu Ghraib scandal is symbolized in the presence of Pfc. Lynndie R. England, the female prison guard shown with a “thumbs up” gesture and a wide grin pointing to the genitals of a naked Iraqi prisoner. In another picture, Private England, age 21, is shown holding a leash attached to the neck of a chained and collared Iraqi detainee. These photographic images are fast becoming iconic in the Arab world.

These photographs represent far more than pictures of prisoner abuse. To Muslims, this represents utter disrespect for

all men, and the total degradation of women. Nothing could be more insulting to Arab moral sensibilities than this—and Muslim outrage over sexual humiliation at the hands of uniformed women will endure long after American troops are no longer in Iraq.

Arabs prize modesty, and Muslim men are not even to show their full nakedness in the presence of other men—much less women. Furthermore, to force a Muslim man to strip naked before a foreign woman is to humiliate him beyond Arab imagination. The Americans went even further than this, forcing the naked Iraqi detainees to perform real and simulated sex acts with the American women watching—and leering.

In an interview with KCNC-TV, the CBS affiliate in Denver, Colorado, Pfc. England explained the tactics she and her colleagues used on the prisoners. “We just humiliated them, got them naked, made them run up and down, you know, get them exhausted.” She clearly understood what this meant to the Iraqi men: “I’m a female, and in the Muslim culture it’s very embarrassing or humiliating to be naked in front of another female, especially if it’s an American.”

Columnist Suzanne Fields of *The Washington Times* also understands the moral equation. “Being guarded, punished, and humiliated by American women in Abu Ghraib prison challenges the very essence of what it means to be a Muslim man stuck on the lowest rung of the world power hierarchy,” she commented.

An unnamed U.S. Army official told *TIME* magazine that sexual humiliation can be an acceptable tool used to “break down” an enemy by exposing his psychological vulnerability. “When women have power and control over you, that sets the whole male psyche out of its equilibrium,” he said. “He’s not dominant anymore. It’s not for the squeamish. But the typical Arab male will do anything to avoid it. . . . The overall process is one of humiliating these people.”

Americans are rightly humiliated by the entire spectacle. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s surprise visit to the Abu Ghraib prison yesterday may begin a process of re-establishing order and credibility in the detention center program, but far more remains to be done.

Don’t expect much attention to be directed to the women in combat issue. The Pentagon has trouble enough dealing with the armed struggle, the struggle for world opinion, and the task of rebuilding Iraq. The military brass is not likely to take on the feminists as well. The culture of political correctness treats women in combat as a non-issue, but it will not remain that way forever.

Christian moral teaching holds that military service is for men—not women. The Bible presents a comprehensive pattern of differentiation between men and women. Men are to protect women, even as women bear a special responsibility as nurturers—as wives and mothers. Scriptural texts indicate that war is for men, and “wives,” “little ones,” and cattle are to remain in the land while men go to war [Joshua 1:14]. Christians have understood this pattern for centuries, even if some appear confused in the present. Evangelical historian Harold O. J. Brown observed this consistent teaching within the Christian tradition: “Within both Judaism and Christianity, indeed almost universally in all human culture, the military profession has been reserved for males.”

The presence of women in combat forces degrades humanity, putting women in the line of fire while sending all the wrong messages about family, gender, and moral honor. The Abu Ghraib scandal demonstrates that women do not raise the moral level of men in warfare. To the contrary, it looks as if the men lower the moral status of the women.

Historian Walter McDougall commented that, “one of the central goals of the feminist movement is to establish a fully sexually integrated military, trained, fit, and ready to engage in combat. . . . The United States today is the only serious military power in history to contemplate thorough sexual integration of its armed forces. And thanks to an adamant feminist lobby, a conspiracy of silence in the officer corps, and the anodyne state of debate over the issue, the brave new world of female infantry, bomber pilots, submariners, and drill sergeants may lie just around the corner.” Then again, maybe that world is already here.

A 2001 article in *Newsweek* offered a glimpse into the world of women in military service and its impact on the family. In the article, U.S. Army M/Sgt. Kelly Tyler told of her 10-year-old son. “You know how kids are always changing what they want to be when they grow up?,” she asked. “The other night [her son] told me he wanted to be a war protester so that I wouldn’t ever have to leave him.” That comment is sadder than sad. The inclusion of women in combat military units is a challenge to the moral character of the American people. This little boy’s protest says it all.

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