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War's glass ceiling

Pentagon moves closer to allowing women to fight



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Army Specialist Theresa Lynn Flannery runs for cover as the base comes under attack outside Kufa, Iraq, near Najaf, in this 2004 photo. Along with a Bronze Star with a “V” for valor recommendation, Flannery, from Kentucky, also received a Purple Heart for an injury she received while under fire during a battle at Najaf.

OVER 130 women have died in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and yet they were not in combat. This paradox - women fight in wars but are not assigned to fighting in wars due to the Pentagon's exclusionary policy - is at the center of a long-simmering debate that has avoided much of the Lady Gaga-ness surrounding repeal of the military's ban on homosexuals. But if 2011 was the year of ending the “don't ask, don't tell” prohibition, 2012 begins with hints about a significant policy transformation regarding women in combat.

Ladies, get your guns. And grenades. And possibly your gut-slitting knives. Military bureaucracy can be slow, and conservative, and even unwieldy, but it can't defend the paradox too much longer.

To understand how women can fight, but still not be in combat, is all about definition. For decades, the Pentagon has been opening up roles for women to serve on

combat aircraft, ships, and, as of 2010, even submarines. But, the prohibition against “direct ground combat,” known as DGC, has never changed.

Pentagon policy uses phrases like “collocation” and “primary mission” to help explain the present panoply of rules governing women. It can be confusing to most civilians. More women are being brought closer to the combat line, without violating the DGC rule. The Marine Corps has created, for example, Female Engagement Teams to be assigned with, but not to, combat Marine Expeditionary Units because of a growing recognition that in many countries, male Marines ought not to engage civilian women. So, women are there with the very forces that are waging combat; they are in combat, but not “in combat.” Get it?

Neither, often, does the military. Defense Department definitions prohibit women who are placed “well forward on the battlefield”; Army policy omits that phrase and instead adds that women will not be assigned to any forces that are “repelling the enemy.”

Even forgiving the paternalism in all these rules, none of these definitions makes much sense when applied to modern warfare. As the Service Women’s Action Network, an organization committed to repealing the ban, notes: “Iraq and Afghanistan exemplify asymmetric battlegrounds, where the potential for engagement in direct ground combat is ever present.”

As the Pentagon faces the harsh realities of budget cuts and war, it is reviewing the utilization of all the skills of all its troops. Earlier in 2011, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission recommended ending the ban, noting that the rule creates a structural barrier that prohibits women from tactical field experience, which is the traditional route to becoming a flag or general officer. Only 24 of the Army’s 403 general officers (6 percent) are female, for example, though women represent roughly 15 percent of the force.

In response, Congress demanded that the service secretaries review all policies regarding female members. That report was due on April 15, 2011. The Pentagon asked for an extension through October. It missed that deadline, too.

The delay is not unusual, but reflects the magnitude of the potential change ahead. Publicly, senior military and civilian leaders are expressing frustration with a policy that adheres to notions of physical aptitude or troop cohesion that were used to exclude African-Americans and gays in the past.

New Army Chief of Staff General Ray Odierno has said that initial Pentagon attempts to clarify the policy do not represent the “things that our women are doing in combat.” According to sources, first drafts held firm to the exclusionary policy, but that was before Odierno had been elevated to his role.

Last week, departing Army Vice Chief of Staff General Peter Chiarelli focused on the anachronism of the combat exclusion in an interview with the Washington Post. Chiarelli clearly wanted his final public statements in uniform to be remembered. Simply put: in a “nonlinear battlefield there are no safe jobs.”

Army leadership is important here because the Army is the largest combat force. The internal debate at the Pentagon is about finding a unified approach without alienating too many of the troops. And it is being done in the midst of growing concerns about sexual assaults against female soldiers.

Unlike with the ban on the homosexuals, the female combat exclusion is not a statutory prohibition; Defense Secretary Leon Panetta can change policy on his own. The Marines are said to be reluctant to change the policy, just as they were with “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

The Pentagon is in its own internal war as it struggles to make its policy reflect the reality of warfare. The integration of African-Americans into the military is not too grand of an analogy for the challenges that the Pentagon will have to overcome. After that transformation, the military survived and became a model vehicle for blacks to break their proverbial glass ceiling.

The lives of over 130 women suggest that theirs is broken already.

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