JULIETTE KAYYEM

# Urging women to Be All That You Can't Be

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**President Bush, right, meets with the all-male joint chiefs and combatant commanders in 2007; there are still no women combatant commanders.**

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S commencement address to the graduating class at Barnard College on Monday had no throwaway lines. It was for and about women; choosing a women's college for a highly touted presidential graduation speech was a signal that Democrats will use every opportunity to make gender, and gender rights, a political issue this fall.

And after invoking the usual platitudes, Obama included an eye-opening line: "Until a girl can imagine herself, can picture herself as a computer programmer, or a combatant commander, she won't become one." The president fully understands that the rules excluding women from combat pretty much rule out the possibility that she can ever aspire to be a combatant commander. This was Obama's way of signaling that he will change those rules if he's reelected.

Until now, Obama has been relatively quiet on issues of women and combat. This latest evolution is just as welcome as his change of heart on gay marriage. It is not only the right policy to end combat-exclusion rules, but there are also political points to be gained by urging women to Be All That You Can't Be.

First, a short detour for the civilian readers. A combatant command is a unit that the Defense Department sets up to align the missions of the different services in times of both war and peace. A command includes at least two military services, and they are generally organized on a geographic basis, such as Central Command for the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. Each command is run by a combatant commander, who must be a four-star general or admiral. These are serious jobs; the chain of command runs directly from the commanders, to the secretary of defense, to the president.

There are only two women who are now four-star generals: Army General Ann Dunwoody and Air Force General Janet Wolfenbarger, and neither is a combatant commander. Dunwoody is a logistics genius, and Wolfenbarger runs research, development, and testing programs for the Air Force. They are specialists, but not in combat. Most generals achieve elevated rank through combat jobs.

Changes announced earlier this year are intended to allow for women to be formally authorized for some combat activities that they are already performing. The changes are slow, but coming. Just this week, female soldiers began to move into previous all-male units; nine brigades started testing the inclusion of women before the policy goes Army-wide.

This is all known to Obama. And it is also known to Congress, which is permitted by the Constitution to authorize rules and regulations for the armed forces. It is this authority that allowed Congress to repeal the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in late 2010.

So, let the war begin. For Democrats, advocating for women's equal rights in the military is less complicated than contending with the reproductive and health issues that have drawn most of the gender focus this election season. Since most Americans have no

interaction with the military, which constitutes less than 1 percent of the population, the issue is largely theoretical and therefore much safer for politicians. Few Americans actually know a woman who wants to be in combat; by saying that such women should be allowed to follow their dreams, Obama isn't alienating anyone except those who still claim that women aren't up to the job. The exclusion of women is hard to defend without resorting to stereotypes about physical abilities or unit cohesion.

And that's exactly where the administration wants the debate to head; let the Republicans question women's abilities at their peril. Many female members of the House and Senate already embrace the goal of gender equality in the armed services. By this summer, there could be a legislative movement to formalize the Pentagon's efforts to expand women's roles, and maybe force the military to pick up the pace. By reminding women that there are still systemic barriers to their advancement, the Democrats can keep gender part of the national dialogue — and dare Republicans to stop them.

There are no throwaway lines, only the expectation that this is going to be a campaign for the votes of women like those smiling Barnard graduates. Most likely, none of them hopes to be a combatant commander. But it's good policy and politics to remind them that they couldn't anyway.

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