

**JULIETTE KAYYEM**

# “Proximity” debate has it backward

**S**IMULTANEOUSLY, TWO very different stories are unfolding about women in the military, speaking to the best and worst about our force’s capacity to reform and repulse. As the Pentagon allows more women to train for roles that had been previously closed under the antiquated combat exclusion rules, the unfolding rape scandal at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas shows that some men still view assault as sport. The mixed narratives, some argue, suggest what can happen when the sexes merge, when the stresses of war mix with physical proximity. Even General Edward Rice, the head of Air Force personnel, hinted that separation in basic training might be the best solution.

This notion — that sexual abuse is somehow tied to the the emergence of women in closer proximity to combat — is a complete ruse. Women in combat are not a cause of sexual assault, but they could be the cure.

The Lackland incident is shocking in its scope and in the relative lack of public attention it received. An internal Air Force investigation proves that 31 women have recently been victimized at the training centers there, mostly by male instructors. No new inclusion efforts have gone into effect at Lackland.

Sex-abuse scandals, such as the 1991 Tailhook incident, have plagued the military since well before women took on, if not by law but in practice, more combat roles in Afghanistan and Iraq. Data released last week shows nearly 20,000 “violent sexual offenses” within the ranks last year alone, and thousands more unacknowledged. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has required new and basic “zero tolerance” policies that ensure that allegations of sexual crimes are reviewed by seasoned officers, and not the victim’s (and often the perpetrator’s) immediate commander.

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There is no dearth of ways to address the military’s sexual assault problem, including changes to rules that prohibit uniformed personnel from seeking civil remedies against the military as a way to hold a third party (the Pentagon) responsible. Less radical would be the establishment of civilian oversight of training and reporting on sexual harassment. Another proposal would require the Pentagon to maintain a central registry of offenders’ names.

What is not a solution is the notion that segregation of the sexes in training or combat will stem assaults. It’s unrealistic, panders to stereotypes, and discriminates against women. Worst of all, it may contribute to the violence. The problem of sexual assaults is the product of a system that has thrived on the premise that women are not of equal status, a premise reflected in the combat exclusion rules themselves.

Those rules make no sense in modern-day warfare. On the battlefield, such rules are not enforced, and women often fight alongside men. It’s quite possible that such integration has contributed to an increase in sexual assaults in the past few years, but the challenges and stresses facing the military in a period of sustained war can’t be discounted; suicides and substance abuse are also on the rise. This all then leads some women to wonder whether joining the military is a good career move, making the kinds of numbers necessary for true integration impossible.

Instead of proposing a new form of exclusionary rules, the Pentagon should realize that these two narratives — women as warrior and women as victim — inevitably come together. While sexual assault occurs in all professions, it will surely be less prevalent in a system where women have equal footing, a strong numerical presence, and well-earned leadership roles. Women in combat will then be normal and the question of proximity will be moot.

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Every service is opening its doors just a little bit more this summer and fall. This is progress. But 250,000 military jobs are still closed to women, and so long as they are, men and women will view each other suspiciously, over a divide that should not hold.

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