



# Fighting and Winning Like Women\*

Dr. Robert M. Hill

**I**N MAY 2012, National Public Radio’s Renee Montagne spent time in Afghanistan covering a range of critical issues facing the country as it looks to a future without significant NATO and U.S. force presence. On 10 May, the topic was women’s rights and concerns that if the Taliban were brought into the political process or able to reestablish any degree of control, gains in women’s rights would be, most assuredly, jeopardized.<sup>1</sup>

That same day, I read about the 2012 DePuy writing contest on the topic of women’s role in the Army over the next 20 years. In light of the National Public Radio story, it struck me as ironic that the U.S. Army was wrestling with the very same question. This soul-searching suggests a number of things:

- *Best case*—we’re not as advanced on issues of equality as we’d like or need to be.
- *Worst case*—We continue to hold onto outdated and sexist views of women; i.e., we’ve fundamentally not changed much at all since their full integration in the early 1970s.
- *Risk*—Asking such a question is just lip service and a stall tactic.
- *Opportunity*: Admitting that we truly *do* know the answer is the first step toward genuine change. But like the joke—“Hey boss, when do you need that report,” and the reply comes back, “Yesterday!”—we cannot wait 20 years to make needed changes.

## Three Vignettes

*I was a cadet at West Point when the first class with women entered in 1976 and ambivalent about their admittance into the Corps of Cadets. I remember asking my father, an alumnus and career infantry officer who saw combat in Greece, Korea, and Vietnam, how he felt. He surprised me with his response: future wars would demand more brain than brawn and women were damned smart. It would be foolish to limit the military’s intellectual capital because of outdated stereotypes and prejudices.*

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IMAGE: Engraving of Joan of Arc in battle in *Le Brun de Charmettes*, Paris, Ed. Artus Bertrand, 1817.

*A year after my graduation, as the cadets in the first class that included women were considered for leadership opportunities, I heard that a female company-mate had been recommended for a position on the brigade staff, making her one of the corps' highest-ranking cadets. Knowing her, I felt the academy had made a wise choice. Instead of accepting it, she declined. The story I heard was that she worried she would never know whether her selection was due to her achievements and potential or solely based on her gender.*

*I recently encouraged my 24-year-old daughter to consider joining the military. She has struggled with college academics, and I felt that enlisting would provide an alternative glide path to success. When I mentioned this to a friend, he said I should watch the film *The Invisible War*, about rape in the U.S. military, and reconsider my position.*

As the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Only in this case, as it relates to the role of women in the military, achieving the status quo is decidedly bad: for women, men, the Army, the Department of Defense, the nation and the world.

## War on Women

Let's face it: being a woman is tough. Many assume much of women's plight occurs in countries such as Iran, India, China, and Afghanistan, where they are murdered, mutilated, poisoned, or constantly harassed. The idea that they are maligned and mistreated in the U.S. is all-too-readily dismissed or ignored. It should not be.

In the United States, women are facing assaults on a number of fronts, from reproductive rights to equal pay for equal work, issues that many thought had been resolved but, in fact, have been simmering at a sub-boil for some time.<sup>2</sup> Whether there truly is a "war on women" or it is simply partisan politics is debatable; yet it is clearly symptomatic of the fact that gender issues remain unresolved and polemical.

The number of sexual assaults that the DOD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) estimates occur each year evidences this fact. In 2010, SAPRO concluded that of the approximately 19,000 sexual assaults that occurred only 3,100 of them were reported.<sup>3</sup> While some assaults were against men, the vast majority were against women. As a consequence, in 2011, Secretary of Defense

Leon Panetta implemented significant policy changes designed to enhance reporting of assaults or harassment, shift blame away from the victims, and hold perpetrators accountable.<sup>4</sup> Yet, without fundamental changes to the way we (men and women) view women and their role in the military, we're not likely to see meaningful progress toward any end state—whether characterized by equality, equity, democracy, meritocracy, inclusiveness, decency, fairness, or any combination thereof—that matters.

When I mentioned this essay and its fundamental premise to a coworker, she said sarcastically, "Chivalry is still alive." She elaborated that outmoded conceptions of gender roles continue to affect our vision of women, and of men, and their proper role in society and with one to the other.

Our hesitancy to allow women into combat arms, among other considerations, might well stem from a fear of upending those historic and faith-based conceptions of gender. We are *weirded out* by the idea that we will have to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with defeminized women or feminized men or both. Given the momentum of the Don't Ask Don't Tell repeal and the imminent decree that women be allowed to serve in combat arms and attend Ranger School, we need to adjust our thinking—and fast—even though it will be a struggle for many.

Two snippets of dialogue from the movie *G.I. Jane* are instructive of this struggle.<sup>5</sup> They reveal how stereotypes are simultaneously dead-on and far wide of the mark. As a quick refresher, *G.I. Jane* starred Demi Moore as Lt. Jordan O'Neil, an idealistic young naval officer given the opportunity to attend S.E.A.L. training, where her primary instructor and antagonist is Master Chief John Urgayle, played by Viggo Mortensen.

**Lt. Jordan O'Neil:** You were given the Navy Cross right? May I ask what you got it for?

**Master Chief John Urgayle:** Since it bears on this conversation, I got it for pulling a 250-pound man out of a burning tank.

**Lt. Jordan O'Neil:** So stopping to save a man makes you a hero, but if a man stops to help a woman, he's gone soft?

**Master Chief John Urgayle:** Could you have pulled that man clear? Lieutenant, you couldn't even haul your own body weight out of the water today.

**Lt. Blondell:** Lieutenant, why are you doing this?

**Lt. Jordan O’Neil:** Do you ask the men the same question?

**Lt. Blondell:** As a matter of fact: yes, I do ask them.

**Lt. Jordan O’Neil:** And what do they say?

**Lt. Blondell:** “Cause I get to blow shit up.”

**Lt. Jordan O’Neil:** Well, there you go.

## Asking the Right Question

The answer to the question “What is the role of women in the United States Army for the next 20 years?” is simple: the role of women, the role of any minority, should be identical to the role of the majority. In other words, women should be able to do anything they are capable of doing.

If we are truly committed to enacting real change, a more important question to ask ourselves is “What is the role of leaders (the majority of them men) in the U.S. Army over the next 20 years if we’re going to achieve a fully inclusive, operationally effective force?” Until we answer this question without prejudice or bias, answering the same question about women will yield only cosmetic and marginal results.

Success in the Army, or any military service, should not be determined by race, gender, sexual orientation, or even sexual identity but by one’s competence, period. As I argued in “Soldiers All” (*Military Review*, November-December 2011), achieving full equity and equality means being blind to difference and, at the same time, open-eyed to the fact that real differences exist. Rather than use these differences to

drive wedges among the force, we must become more sophisticated in using these differences to achieve an operational advantage.

We have to be careful not to apply these differences stereotypically or in broad-brush fashion. These differences exist on an individual level more than they exist on a group or sub-population level. Therefore, it’s not that women, by their gender, are more this or that. It is that an individual woman has particular strengths and weaknesses, and the sooner that we learn to focus on and optimize this soldier’s strengths and shore up her weaknesses, the sooner we will become a smarter, more optimized force as a whole.

Our goal must be a *singular force* that achieves and exploits *unity through difference*. To achieve this singular force, we must decide the status quo and incremental change are no longer acceptable and must implement efforts that foster radically adjusted mindsets and behaviors at all levels. The actual doing is not the hard part; it is the decision to act that is hard. Moreover, although forcing it



**Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, vehicle commander, 617th Military Police Company, Richmond, Ky., stands at attention before receiving the Silver Star at an awards ceremony at Camp Liberty, Iraq, 16 June 2005. Hester is the first woman soldier since World War II to receive the Silver Star.** (Spc. Jeremy D. Crisp)

is an option, this decision must really be made on an individual level if it is to be enduring. Here are some thoughts on how to achieve a singular yet diverse force.

## Lead the Way

In most instances, the American military can rightfully be proud of its efforts to make itself more representative of the nation it swears to defend. It took longer than it should have to allow gay and lesbian soldiers to serve openly, but as Kenneth Karst concludes, “. . . it is hard to find any other institution in American society that has done better” at integrating minorities.<sup>6</sup>

Often, the military’s hand is forced, such as Truman’s executive order mandating the full integration of African Americans. Naysayers viewed these mandates as *social experiments* that would impair military readiness. However, research tended to prove otherwise. With each integration—whether it was religious, ethnic, racial, or sexual minority—we expanded our capacity to deal with an increasingly complex, globalized, and interconnected world.

Perhaps because the integration of minorities has always been directive in nature, it has fueled quiet and persistent dissent and a sort of passive-aggressive behavior that insidiously weakens the fabric of the force. The time has come for the Army to champion the inclusion of all minorities openly and proactively, and to say, quite simply, all are welcome.

Entrance into the force should depend on criteria that do not discriminate except to meet minimum essential cognitive and physical standards, proven competence, and a demonstrated willingness to adhere to Army values and standards, period. What this might mean, however, is that admittance of individuals who do not fit neatly into sexual, racial, or ethnic categories, such as those who are transgendered, will be allowed. The rationale will be clear: we will want to recruit any individual who enables us to become more sophisticated in our capacity and capability to solve the intractable challenges confronting us.

This same inclusive mindset should simultaneously enable us to value the soldiers who comprise our force today and reject outright any behavior that demonstrates disrespect toward any one of them. The staggering statistics of harassment, rape, and

other forms of violence largely directed against women is evidence that there is vast room for improvement. However, we can no longer afford to solve this and related problems through reactive, overly prescriptive, and top-down-driven solutions. Instead, we must quickly engender system-wide, bottom-up acceptance of difference, otherness, and diversity.

The momentum is there with the repeal of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell and the impending policy change to allow women into combat arms. We need to continue, even accelerate, this momentum. The more barriers we eliminate, the more each soldier feels valued for his or her unique contribution and the more quickly we can become an operationally adaptive, resourceful, resilient, and optimized force.

## Renormalize Standards

The main issues that continue to center the debate about the proper role of women in the Army and military are physical and biological differences and the degree to which they affect, or should affect, the integration of women into physically demanding roles. As Catherine Aspy, a Harvard graduate and former soldier, argues: “Combat is not primarily about brains, or patriotism, or dedication to duty. There is no question women soldiers have those in abundance. Combat is about war-fighting capacity and the morale of the unit. Here physical strength can be a life-and-death issue. And that is why the physical disparities between men and women cannot be ignored.”<sup>7</sup>

This matter is, without question, one of life or death, and Aspy is correct: one cannot ignore physical disparities. However, this fact should not shut down options, merely give gravity to the decisions that senior leaders make in dealing with it. One of the hallmarks of being an American is the opportunity to dream big and realize one’s dreams through pluck, tenacity, and hard work. The goal should be to maximize opportunities for all soldiers, to favor inclusion over exclusion, to widen opportunities for advancement, and help as many soldiers as possible achieve these opportunities, while minimizing obstacles and barriers.

This does not mean lowering standards. Rather, it means establishing the right standards for the task based on a range of factors that themselves are researched, measured, evaluated, reevaluated, second-guessed, and explained thoroughly and

clearly. The challenge will be to create these standards without pre-bias, colored by tacit or stereotypical thinking. The process by which the Department of Defense formulates standards must be explicit and transparent, as well as open to reasonable and defensible changes that account for new research or evidence. These standards must also account for the ways that technology is enabling physical difference to be offset and leveled.

In the end, we may not all agree with certain specific standards that are established, but there should be broad agreement on their formulation. A strong female soldier or weak male soldier should equally believe that the standards, while tough, are fair and attainable; and both should be given an equal chance and, more importantly, equal encouragement to attain them.

## Be Vigilant, Be Vocal

The “mindset reset” that I am advocating will not be easy. The naysayers will be many, and though they are losing ground, they are still potent and, in some instances, dangerous.

When asked by CNN how she felt about the wave of recent legislation infringing on women’s rights, such as the Virginia law requiring women to have an ultrasound first before an abortion, Eve Ensler, the author of *The Vagina Monologues*, said that she pitied those seeking to control women’s sexual and reproductive rights. “To some degree, the world has changed,” she said. “And they don’t know what to do in the new world.”<sup>8</sup> In short, their effort to limit women’s rights is a “last-gasp” retaliation against the inevitability of complete liberation and full equality; but it is in their last gasp that opponents of change can be most vociferous and vicious.

The Soldier’s Creed states that, “I will never leave a fallen comrade.” If we truly and fully accept Army values and creeds, then we will quickly find ourselves incapable of accepting or enabling those who deny, denigrate, or demoralize fellow soldiers. We will feel duty-bound (and gladly so) to speak against intolerance and hatred every time it is muttered or spewed. And we most certainly will shun, even incarcerate if necessary, those who fell a comrade in the first place through harassment or violence, and we will take the steps necessary to discharge them from service.

As Albert Einstein intoned, the world is dangerous not because of evil people but because of those who

do nothing about it. More often than not, evil people manifest their depravity by targeting and preying upon others, typically a minority or minorities. It fuels their egos and quest for power. About the only way, and the best way, to siphon off this fuel is to erase difference or otherness. Yes, it is utopian and damned difficult to achieve, but not impossible. It is certainly easier when the foe is clear, definable, something to which we can all point to and say, “Bad, wrong, stop, or I will make you stop.” It is far more difficult when the foe—whether it is prejudice, bigotry, bias, or subtle forms of harassment—is more tacit, hazy, and diffuse.

Years ago, a boss articulated a common precept of leadership that might be shorthanded as “trust on credit.” He called it his prime directive. It said, “I assume you are good, decent, and desire to do the right and noble thing and will extend trust under that assumption until you prove otherwise.” Like any precept of the Warrior Ethos, never leaving a fallen comrade should not be merely a forced obligation but a willful choice borne of the view that every fellow soldier is an equal comrade in the first place.

## *Commanders set the tone and nothing is more important.*

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## Inform (Educate) and Influence

Overcoming prejudice, bigotry, malign behavior, and violence directed against fellow soldiers is a form of counterinsurgency, something we have become adept at over the past decade. Our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other places, has taught us how powerful informing and influencing can be in achieving mission objectives. These tandem tasks are now foundational to leadership under the mission command construct, and they must be employed swiftly and conscientiously in the fight against intolerance.

Yet the change being advocated cannot be commanded, commandeered, or coerced. As stated earlier, educating, training, and influencing inclusive and welcoming perceptions and behaviors among the force must become less reactive, prescriptive,



The ban on women in combat was lifted 23 January 2013. Though 99 percent of the careers offered in the Air Force are open to women, the decision will open more than 230,000 jobs across all branches of the military. The year 2013 marks the 20th year that the Department of Defense allowed women to serve as combat pilots.

and top-down. Commanders set the tone and nothing is more important. They must be accountable for creating environments that are mission-focused but never at the expense of any individual or sub-group. The challenge will be the one expressed by two individuals interviewed for the *New York Times* article “Black? White? Asian? More Young Americans Choose All of the Above”: “I don’t want a color-blind society at all,” Ms. Wood said. “I just want both my races to be acknowledged.” Ms. López-Mullins countered, “I want mine not to matter.”

At the end of the day, the soldiers themselves must foster a fully inclusive force that treats everyone on his or her own merits, and we should

do everything possible to empower them to create new models, strategies, and tactics for achieving this end state.

## The Role of One, the Role of All

The role of women in the Army over the next 20 years is to fight and win. It is the same role as that for men, for African Americans, for Asian Americans, for gays, for lesbians, for Filipino Americans, for Norwegian Americans, for gay Cuban Americans, for lesbian Norwegian Filipino Americans and every shade, star, and stripe in between. That is why the asterisk appears in the title of the essay. Substitute any class or category

you wish—if they are American soldiers, their mission is to fight and win.

Rather than debate the reasons why any given class or category cannot or should not be included in the all-inclusive category of “fighters and winners,” we should dedicate our energies to fostering reasons they should. Army leaders have always encouraged soldiers to achieve their fullest potential and fulfill their aspirations, but sometimes within artificial constraints or boundaries dictated by antiquated and stereotypical thinking. There is no better time than right now, prompted by a

question such as this one, to reshape our thinking and radically adjust our mindset in a positive and proactive way.

In the distant future, we will be a blended nation, all of us some shade of brown; our distinctness and otherness will be erased. Or will it? At root is the very human fear of losing our individual identity. Unfortunately, history has tended to base this identity on the wrong criteria. It is not about how we look but how we act and exemplify Army values.

I don’t know about you, but I am not afraid to act like a woman. **MR**

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NOTES

1. Renee Montagne, “Critical Afghan Issue: Future of Women’s Rights,” NPR, <<http://www.npr.org/2012/05/10/152396820/womens-rights-critical-afghan-issue>> (10 May 2012).

2. Wayne Drash and Jessica Ravitz, “Vagina enters stage left—or is it right?” CNN, <<http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/28/living/vagina-politics/index.html>> (28 March 2012).

3. Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, FY 2010, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (March 2011), 97, found at <[http://www.sapr.mil/media/pdf/reports/DoD\\_Fiscal\\_Year\\_2010\\_Annual\\_Report\\_on\\_Sexual\\_Assault\\_in\\_the\\_Military.pdf](http://www.sapr.mil/media/pdf/reports/DoD_Fiscal_Year_2010_Annual_Report_on_Sexual_Assault_in_the_Military.pdf)>.

4. Lisa Daniel, “Panetta, Dempsey Announce Initiatives to Stop Sexual Assault,” American Forces Press Service, <<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=67954>> (16 April 2012).

5. Internet Movie Database (IMDb), <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119173/quotes>>.

6. As cited by Margot Canaday, “U.S. Military Integration of Religious, Ethnic, and Racial Minorities in the Twentieth Century,” found at <[http://www.palmcenter.org/publications/dadt/u\\_s\\_military\\_integration\\_of\\_religious\\_ethnic\\_and\\_racial\\_minorities\\_in\\_the\\_twentieth\\_century](http://www.palmcenter.org/publications/dadt/u_s_military_integration_of_religious_ethnic_and_racial_minorities_in_the_twentieth_century)> (1 May 2001).

7. Catherine L. Aspy (pseudonym), “Should Women Go Into Combat?” excerpted from *Reader’s Digest* (February 1999), found at <<http://www.bobjust.com/womenincombat/>>.

8. Wayne Drash and Jessica Ravitz.

9. Susan Saulny, “Black? White? Asian? More Young Americans Chose All of the Above,” *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/us/30mixed.html?pagewanted=all>> (29 January 2011).



*Joss Whedon speaks powerfully to the issue of equality, particularly gender equality. Click on image above to watch.* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYaczoJMRhs>