AMERICAN WOMEN HAVE GONE TO WAR IN VARIOUS ROLES THROUGHOUT U.S. HISTORY. ONLY SINCE 1948, HOWEVER, HAVE WOMEN BEEN SLOWLY INTEGRATED INTO THE ARMED SERVICES. TODAY, A DEBATE CENTERS ON WHETHER WOMEN SHOULD BE IN DIRECT GROUND COMBAT.

From the American Revolution to the Spanish-American War, women served as nurses, laundry workers, cooks, couriers, spies, and saboteurs. A few actually fought in hand-to-hand combat, usually disguised as male soldiers. But nearly all women who participated in the nation’s early wars served as civilians who were “with” but not “in” the military.

In the early 1900s, Congress established Army and Navy nurse corps. Although these were permanent organizations, they were only “attached” to the armed services, not a part of them.

During World War I, the Navy and Marine Corps recruited women to serve as uniformed clerks, radio operators, translators, and in other jobs with a military rank. The Army and Navy also made use of their female nurse corps, but still did not recognize them as part of the military.

Due to serious shortages of personnel in many non-combat jobs during World War II, Congress created the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) whose members held full military status, but in an organization separate from the Army. Congress also authorized separate women’s reserve units for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

More than 350,000 women volunteered to serve with the regular armed services in World War II. They held such jobs as nurses, clerks, truck drivers, mechanics, electricians, and auxiliary pilots. Their main job was to “Free a Man to Fight,” which was the slogan of many World War II recruitment posters.

America’s World War II allies used women in combat roles. Britain drafted women and trained some to operate anti-aircraft guns. They were not, however, allowed to “pull the trigger.” In the Soviet Union, women took a direct part in fighting as snipers, machine-gunners, tank crew members, combat pilots, and anti-aircraft gunners who did pull the trigger.

**Integration of Women**

After the war, Congress debated whether to make women a permanent part of the regular military. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, who had led the allied forces in Europe, favored this. “The women of America,” he said, “must share the responsibility for the security of this country in a future emergency as the women of England did in World War II.”

President Harry Truman signed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act in June 1948. This authorized the enlistment of women and commissioning of female officers in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and newly formed Air Force. The separate Women’s Army Corps and female reserves of the other armed services continued for a while, but eventually were phased out.

The integration of women finally put them fully “in” the regular armed forces — but with restrictions. Women could make up no more than 2 percent of the total military force. The number of female officers and the rank they could achieve were capped. Woman officers could hold no command authority over men. Nor could women be assigned to military aircraft and most Navy ships. Finally, women were prohibited from serving in combat.

During the Korean War, only female nurses and other medical personnel went to Korea itself. The rest of the women in the military served outside Korea, such as in Japan and the U.S.

As the draft became more unpopular during the Vietnam War, the armed forces stepped up their recruitment of women, who were excluded from conscription. The 2 percent cap was lifted, and female volunteers filled more military jobs than ever before, easing the need to draft more men.

In 1973, after the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam, Congress ended the draft and replaced it with an all-volunteer military. Immediately, the armed services saw the need to recruit more women to fill the jobs no longer being filled by drafted men. This proved to be a big turning point for women in the military.

In the early years of the all-volunteer military, the armed forces no longer kept females in segregated roles.
units, but females were far from equal to their male peers. Most of the restrictions of the 1948 Women’s Armed Services Integration Act still applied.

Women quickly proved they could do many military jobs previously held only by men. Outside the military, a growing women’s movement in American society demanded more equal opportunity for women in the armed services.

During the 1970s, barriers to women within the military began to fall. Women were assigned to non-combat Navy ships and military aircraft. The armed services opened their advanced officer training schools to women. In 1976, West Point and the other service academies began admitting women. Women officers started to command units, but females were far from equal within the military. These beliefs included that female soldiers should be protected from battlefield dangers and capture by the enemy. Also, that as life-givers, women should not be trained to kill; combat was a man’s job. Another long-held belief was that women generally lacked the physical strength and stamina for combat.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq put into question all the female combat exclusions. Instead of “frontlines” or attacks by large enemy armies, these wars had ambushes, roadside bombs, rocket grenade attacks, snipers, guerilla raids, and suicide bombers.

Under the exclusion rules, women took such “non-combat” jobs as truck drivers, truck convoy guards, military police, base guards, medics, communications specialists, and intelligence officers. But female soldiers often found themselves in the middle of direct ground combat because the battlefield had changed so drastically.

The policy defined “direct ground combat” as “engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with hostile force’s personnel.” In effect, this barred women from “tip of the spear” military units, which includes the Army and Marine infantry, paratroopers, armor (tanks), most artillery, and special forces such as Navy SEALs and Army Rangers. In addition, the new policy stated that women could not be assigned to support jobs or units located close to direct combat units.

The 1994 Ground Combat Exclusion Policy reflected long-held American beliefs about women in the military. These beliefs included that female soldiers should be protected from battlefield dangers and capture by the enemy. Also, that as life-givers, women should not be trained to kill; combat was a man’s job. Another...
women, were victims of sexual assault in 2012. Another DOD report released in 2013 revealed that 20 percent of all women in the military experienced unwanted sexual contact. Victims said they often did not report a sexual assault, fearing retaliation by their attacker or believing their commanding officer would do nothing.

In 2013, Congress passed legislation that attempted to address the sexual assault problem. Among other things, the law requires commanders to send all complaints of sexual assault to military criminal investigators and makes it a crime to retaliate against anyone reporting such a complaint.

A controversial measure to take the decision to prosecute sexual assault cases away from commanders and hand it over to military prosecutors failed to pass Congress. Opponents argued that removing such a decision from the military chain of command would weaken the authority of commanders over their troops.

**Women in Ground Combat**

On January 24, 2013, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, acting on the unanimous recommendation of the chiefs of the armed services, announced the end of the Ground Combat Exclusion Policy. “Female service members,” Panetta said, “have faced the reality of combat, proven their willingness to fight, and, yes, to die to defend their fellow Americans.”

The new policy gave the military until January 2016 to integrate women into the direct ground combat jobs and “tip of the spear” units. It will still be possible to exclude women from certain jobs, but this will require the approval of the secretary of defense.

The decision to integrate women into direct ground combat jobs and units drew much criticism. Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, remarked that Congress should pass new legislation and “assign highest priority to military necessity” and not to “ideology that denies difference between men and women.”

The Case For

1. Women have already been in direct ground combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have proven their ability to kill the enemy in such jobs as truck convoy machine gunners, base guards, and military police.
2. Women who physically qualify should not be denied ground combat service. In 2013, the first three women completed the Marine infantry training course. This included a 12-mile hike, carrying 85 pounds of gear. Besides, in a ground combat zone there are skills other than strength that females tend to be better at than males such as handling civilians.
3. Promotion in the military has always been facilitated by having combat experience. Officers in the Army, Marines, and Special Forces today are overwhelmingly males largely due to the long exclusion of women from ground combat assignments. Even female West Point graduates have been slow to reach the top ranks of the Army due to this exclusion.

4. One cause of the sexual assault problem in the military is that some servicemen view service-women as inferior sex objects rather than warriors. When women achieve real equality by being integrated into ground combat units, they will gain more respect from their male peers and sexual assaults will decline.

5. Barring women from ground combat violates their constitutional right of “equal protection of the law.” Both men and women have a citizenship duty to defend their country.

6. Some countries such as Canada and Israel have opened more combat jobs to women than the U.S. Israel drafts women who make up half the lieutenants in its military forces. A law in 2000 granted equal opportunities in the military to women who qualify for the job.

The Case Against

1. While female soldiers have defended themselves and others in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a big difference between defensive and offensive combat. Offensive ground combat involves “tip of the spear” units like the Marine infantry that seeks and attacks the enemy under fire, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat. Our enemies do not intentionally weaken their forces under combat. Our enemies do not intentionally weaken their forces under fire, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat. Our enemies do not intentionally weaken their forces under fire, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat. Our enemies do not intentionally weaken their forces under fire, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat. Our enemies do not intentionally weaken their forces under fire, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat.

2. Studies, comparing men and women in the military, show that most women possess less muscle strength, less lifting ability, lighter bones, slower marching speed, and are more prone to injuries. Few women will be able to complete the rigorous training courses for “tip of the spear” combat
units. Politicians and feminists will then pressure the military to lower the training standards for women, which will weaken our ground combat forces. Another problem is female soldiers who are pregnant when their units are called up for deployment will leave gaps in the ranks.

3. Within the military today, the main push for women in combat comes from female officers who want combat experience to get faster promotions to advance their careers. Among enlisted women in the military, surveys show that few of them want to become combat fighters like men.

4. The military should have expected sexual conflicts when mixing women into units dominated by men. The competition for the attention of women among males is only natural. But it is also a distraction from the military mission and causes a breakdown of unit trust. Moving women into direct ground combat units will make the sexual assault problem worse.

5. Integrating women into ground combat roles will result in the courts finding the registration and drafting of only men to be an unconstitutional violation of “equal protection of the law.” If women are drafted in the future, some will involuntarily be assigned to direct ground combat units.

6. No other country today has found it necessary to put women into direct ground combat units like the U.S. Marine infantry and Navy SEALs. Even Israel limits women in combat to mainly border defense.

**DISCUSSION & WRITING**

1. Do you think women should be in the military at all? Why or why not?

2. What do you think should be done to stop the soaring rise of sexual assault cases in the armed forces? Explain.

3. Under the current Department of Defense policy announced in 2013, direct ground combat jobs are open to women, although certain positions may still be closed to them by the secretary of defense. In the following list of jobs, which do you think should be open and which closed to women today? Explain your choice in each case.
   a. Tank Crew Member
   b. Paratrooper
   c. Infantry Rifleman
   d. Explosive Ordinance Disposal Technician

**Further Reading**


**ACTIVITY**

**Should Women Be in Direct Ground Combat?**

Divide students into three groups to debate the question above.

1. Group 1 will take the affirmative and prepare arguments and evidence from the article to support women in direct ground combat.

2. Group 2 will take the negative and prepare arguments and evidence from the article to oppose women in ground combat.

3. Members on each side will have a chance to question the assertions made by their opponents after their presentation.

4. Group 3 will be the judges of the debate. They should review the 1994 Ground Combat Exclusion Policy and be prepared to ask both sides questions after their presentations.

5. After the debate, the judges will discuss the choices below and decide on one by majority vote. The judges must then explain the reasons for their decision.
   a. Women should be in direct ground combat.
   b. Women should not be in direct ground combat.
   c. Women should be in direct ground combat but should be excluded from certain kinds of jobs named by the judges.
In the 20th century (e.g., which populations supported the Kuomintang and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international policies. (1) Understands U. S. foreign policy from the Truman administration to the Johnson administration (e.g., . . . Kennedy’s response to the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis; how the Korean War affected the premises of U. S. foreign policy; . . . (4) Understands factors that contributed to the development of the Cold War . . . .

Women in the Military

Common Core Standard RH11–12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas. Common Core Standard SL11–12.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning . . . .

Common Core Standard RH11–12.3: Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

California History-Social Science Standard WH11–12.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Women in the Military

National High School U.S. History Standard 30: Understands developments in foreign policy and domestic politics between the Nixon and Clinton presidencies. (3) Understands the impact of the Reagan presidency on relations with other countries (e.g., . . . Reagan’s view of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and how that shaped defense policy); . . . (5) Understands the influence of U. S. foreign policy on international events from Nixon to Clinton . . . .

California History-Social Science Standard 10.9: Students analyze the international developments in the post-World War II world. (1) Compare the economic and military power shifts caused by the war, including the Yalta Pact, the development of nuclear weapons, Soviet control over Eastern European nations . . . (2) Analyze the causes of the Cold War, with the free world on one side and Soviet client states on the other . . . (3) Understand the importance of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, which established the pattern for America’s postwar policy of supplying economic and military aid to prevent the spread of Communism and the resulting economic and political competition in arenas such as Southeast Asia (i.e., the Korean War, Vietnam War), Cuba, and Africa. (7) Analyze the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union . . . .

Women in the Military

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Women in the Military

National High School U.S. History Standard 29: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties. (2) Understands conflicting perspectives on different issues addressed by the women’s rights movement . . . .

National High School U.S. History Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States. (5) Understands major contemporary social issues and the groups involved . . . .

National High School Civics Standard 21: Understands the formation and implementation of public policy. (4) Understands why agreement may be difficult or impossible on issues . . . because of conflicts about values, principles, and interests.

California History-Social Science Standard 11.10: Students Analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights. (7) Analyze . . . differing perspectives on the roles of women.

California History-Social Science Standard 11.11: Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.

California History-Social Science Standard 12.2: Students evaluate and take and defend positions on the scope and limits of rights and obligations as democratic citizens, the relationships among them, and how they are secured.
Women in the Military