

UPDATE

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“TAILHOOK” AFTERMATH: DON’T FEMINIZE THE FLEET

(Updating *Backgrounder* No. 836, “Women in Combat: Why Rush to Judgment?” June 14, 1991.)

As the Navy, Congress, and the American people consider the now notorious “Tailhook” sexual misconduct case, perspective is required. Twenty-six women have charged that they were sexually assaulted by a number of officers at last September’s annual convention of the Tailhook Association, the professional organization of naval and marine aviators. If the charges turn out to be true, then those guilty should be punished to the fullest extent of the law. Sexual misconduct represents a grave breach of professionalism and has no place in the military. However, the uproar surrounding this incident threatens to harm the effectiveness of the Navy as a fighting force. Promotions of fleet commanders have been held up, and some in Congress, such as Representative Patricia Schroeder, the Colorado Democrat, are saying that the only way to prevent sexual misconduct in the military is to put women in combat. The result is plummeting morale and disarray in one of the finest fighting forces the world has ever seen.

This is going too far. Concern about eradicating sexual misconduct in the military should not be allowed to destroy the very reason for the military’s existence: to protect the security of all Americans. The culprits, if they are guilty, should be punished, but the Navy as a whole should not be condemned. Nor should the Navy be forced to embark on some social experiment—by putting women in combat positions, for example—which not only will do nothing to stop sexual misconduct, but will also weaken the team cohesiveness and fighting ability that is the key to winning battles and wars.

Tailhook and its Aftermath. The Tailhook saga began last September in Las Vegas at the convention of the Tailhook Association, named for the device that stops landing aircraft on the decks of carriers. Lt. Paula Coughlin says that she was forced to run a gauntlet down a hotel hallway filled with Navy officers who grabbed her breasts and tried to remove her clothing. After the Navy investigated this incident, it was discovered that possibly seventy officers engaged in such assaults on at least 26 women (fourteen of them fellow officers) at the Las Vegas convention. The damage from this incident has been compounded by the presence and alleged complicity of senior officers, by failures throughout the chain of command to respond adequately to complaints, and by revelations that reports of misconduct from earlier conferences were ignored. Navy Secretary H. Lawrence Garrett III resigned on June 26, invoking the Navy’s tradition of bearing full responsibility for the actions of his men. Although Garrett has not been accused of participating in or condoning the events at the Tailhook symposium, which he attended, his handling of the subsequent investigation has been widely criticized.

Tailhook and Congress. The initial congressional response to the Tailhook affair is damaging the morale and combat effectiveness of the Navy. From June 4 to July 2, Congress delayed the promotions of roughly 4,500 Navy and Marine officers above the rank of Navy Lt. Commander and Marine Corps Major in order to determine whether any of them was involved in the Tailhook incident. Many changes of command were postponed, including those for the forces responsible for the waters off Yugoslavia, and the naval base at

Guantanamo Bay, where thousands of Haitian refugees are currently being housed and processed. The House Appropriations Committee, chaired by Pennsylvania Democrat John P. Murtha, on June 29 voted to double its original cut of 5,000 positions from Navy headquarters. Murtha said that this action was “directly connected to the obstruction and arrogance of the Navy.”

Representative Schroeder meanwhile has tried to use the outcry over Tailhook to bolster her case for placing women in combat positions. For example, in a June 28 interview on *Cable News Network* concerning the Tailhook incident, Schroeder criticized the Navy’s handling of the issue, implying that the real problem was the unequal treatment of women. She said: “If you’re the best for the job and you want the job, you get it...,” meaning, of course, a combat job.

The idea of Schroeder and other liberal lawmakers seems to be that the military is the proper place for social engineering, no different from any other workplace, and perfectly suitable to applying the feminist principles of absolute equality between the sexes. Representative Barbara Boxer, the California Democrat, said in a June 28 television interview concerning the Tailhook controversy: “The thing about the military is, it has always been a place for opportunity, first for people of color—they broke the color barrier—and then for women. We have more work to do here and in other areas, but we’ve got to make sure we move forward.” Moving forward for Boxer, of course, is putting women into combat. In her view, the military is more important as a vehicle for curing social ills than as a fighting machine.

Unfortunately, military leaders are showing signs of caving into the kind of pressure generated by Schroeder and Boxer.

Example: When asked whether the problem of misconduct would be solved by placing more women on ships, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Frank Kelso, replied on June 28 that he was waiting for the report of the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, which is due in November. He failed to speak out against placing women in combat. In fact, in several appearances before this Commission, not a single senior Navy officer has argued strongly against allowing women into combat.

Example: Rear Admiral Leonard N. Oden, the commander of the Naval Training Center in Orlando, Florida, describes an experimental co-educational “boot camp” for recruits as incredibly successful. Mixed gender recruit platoons are outperforming their all-male counterparts in training. But peacetime training is far removed from combat. The fact that the sexes have separate sanitary and housing facilities, totally impossible to accomplish in combat units or aboard combat ships in war, is not made clear.

Military Leaders Must Hold the Line. In this emotionally charged atmosphere, the Navy’s leaders must follow three courses of action. They must: 1) expeditiously but fairly investigate and punish those who are found guilty in the Tailhook case; 2) continue vigorously their support for the “zero tolerance” policy toward sexual misconduct that was developed in 1989; and 3) forcefully explain to Congress and the American public why women should not be allowed in combat.

Women do not belong in combat for several reasons. There is a risk that physical standards for combat training will be compromised if women are allowed into combat positions where those standards are critically important, such as in the infantry and in special operations units. There is also the disruption of the military’s mission that will result from the pregnancy of female troops in combat positions.

But most damaging would be the devastating impact on the morale, team cohesion, and fighting spirit of the armed forces. Combat is a team activity which brings infantrymen and sailors more closely together than any other form of work. Some women may indeed be as physically and mentally capable as men to perform some combat duties, but what matters more in combat is not individual ability, but teamwork. The presence of women in combat units, especially those in the infantry, would disrupt the teamwork that makes a difference between victory and defeat on the battlefield. Special relationships inevitably would develop, introducing new risks as men acted differently in combat toward females than they do toward males.

If Schroeder and other feminists want to solve the sexual misconduct problem in the military, the last thing they should do is advocate putting women into combat. Female soldiers will be taken prisoner and sexually abused by enemy forces. This is precisely what happened to Maj. Rhonda Cornum when she was taken captive by the Iraqis during the Persian Gulf War. She was, she later acknowledged, “violated manually—vaginally and rectally.” It makes little sense to expose women to new and even more horrific threats in the name of protecting them from their own American colleagues.

The Navy as an institution should not be made a scapegoat as the Congress tries to find a solution to the sexual misconduct problem in the services. This not only would be unfair to the thousands of male Navy officers and personnel who do not abuse women, it would damage the fighting capability of the Navy, which would be a disservice to the nation and the American people whom it is entrusted to protect.

The Navy is a fine institution. It has successfully responded to problems of racial prejudice and drug abuse which continue to plague the civilian world. Its policy of “zero tolerance” for drugs, enforced by random testing and dismissal for offenders, virtually eliminated the problem when it was implemented in 1981. There is every reason to believe that the problem of sexual misconduct will be dealt with in the same manner. Outside pressure to find the culprits of sexual misconduct is fine, but damaging the integrity of the Navy as an institution should not be the cost.

America Does Not Need A Kinder, Gentler Military. Despite their justified outrage at the Tailhook incident, Americans must realize that the military needs fighters, not laboratory subjects for experiments in social engineering. The purpose of the military is to fight and win wars, not to serve as a jobs program or as a vehicle for social change. If the federal government is to ask men to risk their lives in combat, it must not create an environment that will increase that risk. This is what putting women into combat positions would do. Far from solving the problem of sexual misconduct, women in combat would merely feminize the warrior culture of the armed services, and thereby weaken its ability to do its job.

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