



# **Executive Memorandum**

No. 739

April 17, 2001

## **TIME TO REVIEW THE DEFENSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON WOMEN IN THE SERVICES**

*JACK SPENCER*

As the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) celebrates its golden anniversary this week, much attention will be focused on how the roles of women in the military have changed. In 1951, the committee's purpose was to advise the Secretary of Defense "on the full range of matters relating to women in the Services." But the committee, comprised of civilian men and women who are appointed by the Secretary for three-year terms, has strayed far from this mandate.

The DACOWITS today is largely advancing a feminist agenda for the U.S. armed services that many critics argue has a detrimental effect on combat readiness. The President should use the occasion of the committee's 50th anniversary to commend the many contributions women have made to the U.S. military forces throughout the nation's history, but he should also ask the Secretary of Defense to conduct a thorough review of DACOWITS' activities, as part of his overall review of U.S. armed forces, before appointing any new members.

**Why the Committee Deserves a Closer Look.** It is important that issues unique to women in the services be addressed by the new Administration. Today, 15 percent of the active duty force and 20 percent of new recruits are female. Uniformed women are fully integrated into all of the services, with the exception of a few close-combat units on land, submarines at sea, and special operations forces aircraft. Most military experts agree that introducing women to those units would affect

combat effectiveness. Nevertheless, the DACOWITS is focusing its efforts on challenging this policy.

The DACOWITS is generally urging the Pentagon to change the armed forces in ways that reflect its feminist ideology. For example, top priority at committee meetings is routinely assigned to "equal opportunity" issues and other career-oriented

considerations such as gender-integrated basic training. This goal is based on the flawed theory that were it not for today's artificial barriers to women, men and women would be interchangeable in all military occupations.

Numerous experts and panels, however, have recommended that basic training should remain gender separate. The Federal Advisory Committee on Gender-Integrated Training and Related Issues (the Kassebaum-Baker Committee) in particular reported in late 1997 that "the present organizational structure in integrated basic training is resulting in less discipline, less unit cohesion, and more distraction from the training programs."

The ongoing controversy over whether to station women on submarines at sea illustrates how often

---

Produced by the  
Kathryn and Shelby  
Cullom Davis Institute  
for International Studies

Published by  
The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE  
Washington, D.C.  
20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400  
<http://www.heritage.org>



This paper, in its entirety, can be found at: [www.heritage.org/library/execmemo/em739.html](http://www.heritage.org/library/execmemo/em739.html)

---

the DACOWITS ignores such expert advice. Last year, the committee recommended unanimously that women be assigned to submarines. It made this recommendation despite objections from such officials as former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jay Johnson; such reports as Science Applications International Corporation's 1995 "Submarine Assignment Policy Assessment"; and available information on huge redesign costs, social complications, habitability hardships, medical risks, and operational hazards that could compromise submarine missions.

Even Sheila M. McNiell, a DACOWITS vice chair from 1996–1998, found this recommendation surprising. In a June 12, 2000, letter to *The Washington Times*, she wrote that she was "disappointed" in the recommendation and felt "the issues of privacy, career progression, unit cohesiveness and, ultimately, cost should have far outweighed the effort toward gender equality." Congress was prompted to pass an amendment to the 2001 Defense Authorization bill to ensure that any effort to promote gender integration on submarines is subject to substantial congressional oversight.

The DACOWITS also discourages or disregards responsible dissent among its members and staff. According to March 17, 1998, congressional testimony by Elaine Donnelly, President of the Center for Military Readiness and a member of DACOWITS from 1984–1986, committee members—predominantly civilian women—"rarely hear dissenting views" and "limit their hearings and recommendations to matters of equal opportunity and women's career opportunities" without regard to their effects on military readiness. Of the military women that make or arrange the presentations at committee meetings, female officers favoring the committee's agenda are many, and enlisted women who strongly oppose involuntary combat assignments are a distinct minority. The views of servicemen who serve with the women are not represented at all. As Donnelly points out, the committee structure does not allow an objective evaluation even of the consequences of committee recommendations.

The media exacerbate the problem. As Stephanie Gutmann describes in *The Kinder, Gentler Military*, the services often capitulate to the demands of the DACOWITS "to avoid a battle that the press would probably spin as entrenched men versus nobly struggling women."

**What Washington Should Do.** The 50th anniversary of the DACOWITS offers the Bush Administration and Congress an opportunity to set a new course for understanding the role of women in the U.S. armed forces. The President should:

- **Express the concerns of those who find the DACOWITS' political agenda troubling** and direct the Secretary of Defense to subject the committee to a comprehensive review as part of his current overall defense review.
- **Ask Congress to suspend funding for DACOWITS** until the defense review is complete and it can be shown that there is still a need for such a committee, given the broad expansion of women's roles in the services since the Korean War.
- **Instruct the Secretary not to appoint new members to the DACOWITS** until the review is complete to preserve his options based on the findings.

**Conclusion.** Discrimination has no place in the U.S. armed services. The contributions of women in uniform have been an integral part of the overall success of America's armed forces since the founding. However, the DACOWITS' agenda has become too politicized, and many of the committee's members are pursuing a feminist agenda that diverts attention and resources away from the urgent problems facing today's services. The distractions and controversies that the DACOWITS has caused will make it increasingly difficult to achieve the nation's most important defense goals. President Bush must not follow in his predecessor's footsteps by sacrificing combat readiness for political correctness.

—Jack Spencer is Policy Analyst for Defense and National Security in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.