

# Dynamic Observation of the American Women and the Military, War and Peace

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## Abstract

Waves of American women's movements for reaching changes in their economic, social, and political lives started two centuries ago and were full of turbulences. The role of women in the military has a long history as well. Although the great majority of the U.S. military personnel have always been male, the military has needed and continues to need women's support and participation in many capacities. Starting from the Revolutionary War, the American women actively got involved in all the wars, but historically women's saliency in all XVIII-XX wars, would be substituted by their quiescence in the post-war periods, as a result of men's stereotypical attitude towards women's role which relegated them to the household chores. Alternatively, women's participation and contribution to the wars changed their self-images, and led them to expect equal treatment after the war as well. Men's patriarchal bias towards women's role was so strong, that it took several centuries, several wars to reach progress in the military and peace.

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## Introduction

Before 1776 American women did not participate enough in conflicts over land, religion, taxes, local politics, or local transactions. However, they could hardly distance themselves from the events of the 1760s and 1770s, as they watched the escalating violence coming from Britain in the prerevolutionary decade. American women's activity started with patriot women, learning lessons of partisanship, which manifested in their support of the colonial boycott of tea and other items taxed by the Townshend Act of 1767.

## Age of the American Revolution

Male leaders understood that they needed women's cooperation in the revolution. Women joined the army in 1776. Life in the military camps was hard, and army commanders, while recognizing that female laborers did essential work, regarded them as restriction, rather than as advantage. Most women joined the army from necessity, lacking any other means of support during their husband's absence. The war repealed some distinctions between masculine and feminine characteristics. Women who would previously have undergone criticism, if they rejected their "natural" feminine shyness, now found themselves complemented for doing that. The line between male and female behavior, once so vivid, became less underlined. Of course, it by no means disappeared, but accommodation to wartime conditions brought a new understanding of the fact, that traditional sex roles did not provide adequate models for conduct under all happenings and situations. Despite this new discovery, men were unable to recognize changes in women's self-images. A well-known communication between Abigail and John Adams clarifies men's reaction. In March of 1776 Abigail Adams asked her husband John Adams, the second President to ensure that the new nation's legal code included protection for wives against the tyrannical tendencies of their spouses. In

response John stated, "I cannot but laugh" at "your extraordinary Code of Laws. Our Masculine systems... are little more than Theory... In practice you know we are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters" (Gelles, 1992).

The perception that they had been equally affected by the war led some women to expect equal threatened after the war as well.

The New Jersey widow Rachel Wells protested to the Continental Congress in 1786 about the law issued concerning the fine, that divested her of interest payments on the money, she had invested in state bonds during the war.

Mary willing Byrd's social status was much higher than that of Rachel Wells, but she introduced a similar argument in 1781, that Virginia had treated her, unfairly the parent of eight children, a virtuous citizen, never violating the laws, a friend to her country. "I have paid my taxes; my property is taken from me and I have no redress", she observed. In 1776, after addressing John Adams to "Remember the Ladies", Abigail issued a warning to her husband. "If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies, we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or Representation" (Zagarri, 1998).

On the one hand she did not mean her husband to take the threat seriously. Although, she made crucial presumption about women's inferior legal status by putting a standard argument to new use.

## Civil War

It's noteworthy to observe American women's role in the Civil War, where as Civil War nurses they presided over massive hospitals and worked to feed and clothe soldiers. Although they had to overcome harsh patriarchal barriers to be permitted to carry out that mission. In spite of warning from a veteran of the War of 1812 that army regulations excluded women from

encampments, the congregation of the Brick Congregational Church in Galesburg, Illinois voted to send their most qualified member, Mary Ann Bickerdyke, a middle-aged widow, a botanic physician. Ordered to leave by the hospital director, who resented her interference, she quietly continued her work, and when reported to the commanding officer General Benjamin Prentiss, she convinced the general to let her stay. The harsh context of the war required an unusual person. A plain, hardworking woman, mother Bickerdyke single-mindedly devoted herself to what she called "The Lord's work".

The efforts of women like Mother Bickerdyke in other communities quickly took on national dimensions. The Women's Central Association of Relief (WCAR), subsequently had 7,000 groups throughout North. Its volunteers raised funds, collected a variety of items – food, clothes medicine, bandages, and more than 250, 000 quilts, bedcovers and sent them to army camps and hospitals, volunteers also provided meals, housing and transportation to soldiers. Association groups provided \$15 million worth of goods to the Union troops (Faragher, Buhle, p. 299).

## **World War II**

When in WW2 there was an unprecedented need for soldiers, the non-combat ranks were changed and the need of women became more intense, women used to work in non-combat lines such as linguistics, weather forecasters, telephone operators, etc.

During World War II white women and women of color symbolized by Rosie the Riveter, were needed for the war effort working in shipyards and munitions factories while men were drafted for active services (Denman and Inniss, 1999). However, a group of 200 representative women, met in Washington at the White House on June 14, 1944 to express indignation that although women stood side by side with men in peace and war, until then very few women had shared policy-making bodies in the councils of national and

international policy-making bodies. These American women claimed a role in Postwar Foreign Policy Making.

In every Post-War period, American women were deprived the chances of social, political involvement. This is why women met at the White House to claim a role in Postwar Foreign Policy Making in 1944. Here eloquent appeals to women to prepare themselves to provide the greatest possible service to society in national and international councils were uttered by women leaders. The tasks of war, of peace, of nation – planning must be shared by men and women alike. According them, no part of the citizenry holds a greater state in the democratic way of life, for the reconstruction of an ordered world, than the women of the nation; women have been called upon to share the burdens of war, to stand side by side with men, to complement men in the fighting services. So, women must share in the building of a post-war fit for all citizens-men - and women- to live and work freely side by side (Norton & Ruth Alexander).

Men's stereotypical attitude towards women's role in the society and particularly in the military has been so deep-rooted even in the democratic country, like the United States, that it took centuries, several wars, to reach changes. Women gradually got progress after limited actions to women's equal participation in the military.

## **Women in Military from the End of XX Century**

In the United States most people grow up with the great sense of pride, its wealth, its power, and its superior position in the world. Americans learn the Pledge of Allegiance, a sense of patriotism, and that their way of life is worth fighting and perhaps dying for. Most families have at least one member who has served in the military. The United States is number one in the world in terms of military technology, military bases, training of foreign forces, and military aid to foreign countries (Children's Defense Fund, 2000).

It also spends the most. The U.S. military budget is six times larger than that of Russia, the second biggest spender. The largest proportion of the U.S. federal budget \$876 billion, 46 percent supports current and past military operations, including the upkeep of over 400 bases at home and over 2000 of those abroad, development of weapons systems, pensions for retired military personnel, veterans' benefits (War Resisters League, 2002). The military shapes Americans' notions of patriotism, heroism, honors, duty, and citizenship.

### **The Need for Women in the Military**

Despite the fact, that the vast majority of US military personnel have always been male, the military has needed and continues to need women's support and participation in many capacities (D'Amico and Weinstein, 1999; Enloe, 1983; Isakson, 1988).

It needs mothers who have patriotic duty and to encourage their sons, and recently their daughters, to enlist. It needs women nurses to heal the wounded and traumatized. It needs wives and girlfriends back home.

Currently the military needs women to work in electronics and many other industries producing weapons components, machine parts, tools, uniforms, household supplies, and foodstuffs for military contracts. It needs women working in nightclubs, bars, and message parlors near foreign bases and ports providing R and R, rest and relaxation for military personnel. At the same time the military needs women on active duty, significantly trained for combat as well as performing traditional roles in administration, communications, intelligence, or medicine.

American women in the military to the extent that they are today is a comparatively new phenomenon. In 1972 women were only 1.2 percent of military personnel. The following year, after considerable debate, Congress ended the draft for men, though young men are still required to register for the draft when they turn 18. Many left the services as

soon as could, causing a manpower shortfall that has been made up by recruiting women, especially women of color. In 2001 women compiled 15 percent of all military personnel (in the army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard). Almost half the women in the army's enlisted ranks were Black (46 percent), compared to 31 percent in the navy and 28 percent in the Air Force.

African American women, Asian American women, Native American women, and Latinas made up 63 percent of enlisted women in the army, 52 percent in the Navy, and 40 percent in the Air Force. By contrast, 64 percent of women officers in the army are White, and 76 percent of women officers in the Air Force are White (Women's Research and Education Institute, 2002).

### **Restrictions to Women's Equal Participation in the Military**

Bolstering women's equality within the military is based on a belief in women's right to equal access to education, jobs, promotion, and authority in all aspects of society, and to the benefits of first-class citizenship. Women's rights organizations, such as the National Organization for Women, have advocated women to have equal opportunity with men in military, as have women military personnel, military women's organizations like the Minerva Center (Pasadena, Md.) and the Pallas Athens Network (New Market, Va.), and key members of Congress like former representative Pat Schroeder, who was on the Armed Services Committee for many years. In 2001, in the military, as in the civilian job market, most enlist women were doing "women's work", including support and administration (34 percent), health care (15 percent), service and supply (10 percent). Among officers the same amount: 41 percent worked in health care, 12 percent as administration, 10 percent in supply and logistics (Women's Research and Education Institute, 2002).

After years of persistence, women who served in Vietnam were honored with a memorial in Washington D.C. This appreciation, as well as women's changing position in society, have impacted on social attitudes. In 1991, in the Persian Gulf War, for example, military women were highlighted in the headline news stories throughout the country. Saying good-bye to their families before going overseas, they were depicted as professional soldiers as well as mothers.

Women's equal participation in the military is restrained in certain ways, however, involving restrictions on combat roles; limited access to some military academies; the impact of a general culture of racism, sexism and sexual harassment.

### **Women in Combat Roles**

Women served in the US military during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. They were as a rule appointed as auxiliary, according to political scientist Mary Katzenstein (1993), despite the fact that they performed a wider range of tasks than is usually recognized – as transport pilots (Cole, 1992), mechanics, drivers, underground reconnaissance, nurses (Camp, 1997), and administrators. The flow of women into the military since the mid-1970s and the question of training women for combat have revealed a number of stereotypical attitudes toward women on the part of military commanders, Pentagon planners, and members of Congress, depending on grade according which they believe – that combat is male.

From the late 1980s to 90s, a great deal of news reports, magazine articles and letters to editor covered this topic.

War-making is primarily a high-tech, push-button affair, as exposed in the bombing missions of 1991 Gulf War and the bombing of Kosovo in 1999, of Afghanistan in 2001, and of Iraq in 2003. Combat roles are dangerous and demanding. Many consider that

women are not physically strong enough, are too emotional, and lack discipline or stamina. They will affect men's morale negatively, and will disorganize fighting units, as men will be sidetracked if a woman arrangement is hurt or captured. The country is not ready for women coming home in body bags.

Women in the military reveal good job performance. Military planners face predicament: they need women to make up the shortfall in personnel; simultaneously they have sexist or patronizing attitude towards women. Political scientist Francine D. Amico and Laurie Weinstein (1999) remarked, that the "military must camouflage its reliance on woman power in order to maintain its self-image as a quintessentially masculine institution" (p.6). It does this by marginalizing women through sexual harassment, professional disparagement, and divisions between combatant and noncombatant. What implies combat in modern workforce is not a simple notion, as it might seem; however, definitions of the "front" and "the rear" alter with developments in military technology. Communications and supply, defined as noncombat areas, where women work, are both likely targets of attack.

Media coverage of women's participation in the Persian Gulf War demonstrated that many performed combat roles like men, and this caused changes in laws and regulations that had previously excluded women of combat assignments (Muir, 1993; Peach, 1997; Sadler, 1997; Skaine, 1998).

In 1993 the rule excluding women from dangerous jobs was changed despite preserving some exceptions. Women can work on combat ships and jet planes, but not in submarines or in direct offensive combat on the ground. Restricting women from combat roles meanwhile has been creating barriers in their career promotion, as senior positions often demand combat experience. By 1997 women occupied only 815 of the 47,544 combat-related jobs that were offered to women in 1993 and 1994.

In 2001, there were 114 active-duty female fighter and bomber pilots, 366 women pilots for other

aircraft, and 653 women helicopter pilots. As of October 2002, no women had been involved in “the military aspect of the war on terrorism”, as the Special Forces units that had carried out almost all the action were all male (D’Agostino, 2002). This situation had changed by March 2003 and women fought in the war against Iraq, with women among those service members killed or taken prisoner.

## Conclusion

The dynamics of the American women’s activity in the military reveal very interesting observation. During the revolutionary war, women manifested great support of the colonial boycott, as well as activity joined the armed forces. Male leaders understood that they needed women’s cooperation; However, the army commanders, while recognizing that female laborers did essential work, regarded them as restriction rather than as advantage.

The recognition that they had been equally affected by the war, led some women to expect equal treatment after the war as well, however, after the war, they were treated unfairly, disregarding the class they belonged to. Psychologically women sensed that they had been devalued by the men. It’s noteworthy, that this got the form of repetitive cycle in Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War II. After every war the woman would be relegated to family chores and nurturing of children again.

Women got combat roles only after 1991 with great difficulty, as combat roles are dangerous and demanding. No women had been involved in military aspect of war on terrorism. This situation had changed by March 2003 and women fought in the war against Iraq.

International crisis on terrorism has given new momentum to women’s understanding of links between U.S. domestic and foreign policy. It generated new force for established organizations like Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom

(Philadelphia), Women’s Action for New Directions (WAND, Mass.), Women in Black (New York and other cities), and Women Against Military Madness (Minneapolis).

The above-mentioned brings us to the conclusion, that American women after so many discrepancies in peace and war, express their conviction that women should constantly be taking action in order to implement the significant statements of women leaders to see that women have a share in national and international planning.

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