

Women in Combat? Secretary Mattis Steps Into a Minefield

Aside from the “is he in or is he out” speculations, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis has largely avoided the major controversies that have plagued his fellow Trump cabinet members. But if the reaction to his recent remarks at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) are any indication, his luck may have begun to run out.

During a September visit to the military school, Mattis offered his thoughts on women serving in combat infantry jobs, later interpreted by the Associated Press as a “[dim view](#)” of their prospects. The comments were further panned by those advocating the integration of women into combat, who characterized Mattis as “[poisoning the well](#)” and “[sabotaging](#)” efforts to integrate women. Other reactions, some from [veterans](#), were even less flattering.

Are these reactions justified? Better yet, what exactly did Mattis say? A male VMI cadet, who went to bat for his female classmates, asked the secretary about his thoughts on women in combat. The following quotations are part of a longer [reply](#), but these appear to be the most contentious points:

It's a very, very tough issue. Because it goes from some people's perspective of what kind of society do we want... it goes to the almost primitive needs of a society to look out for its most vulnerable.

How did the infantry get its name? Infant soldier. Young soldier. Very young soldier. They're cocky, they're rambunctious. They're necessarily macho. And it's the most primitive, I would say even evil, environment—you can't even explain it.

This is an area we are going to have to resolve as a

nation...the military has got to have officers who look at this with a great deal of objectivity, and at the same time remember our natural inclination to have this open to all. But we cannot do something that militarily doesn't make sense...

His message seems to be: *be careful what you wish for. There are far-reaching consequences to allowing anyone and everyone to serve in combat. The military's effectiveness and well-being come first.* Though he never expresses opposition, it is clear that Mattis is skeptical of women in combat. He echoes a concern that proponents and the public [do not fully appreciate](#) the unrelentingly brutal and lethal realities of combat and, far too willingly, dismiss the lessons of those who express objections borne of bitter [experience](#) that comes only in a shooting war.

While women have been serving unofficially in combat for decades and do so with bravery, courage, and honor, this misses the point, critics say. Men and women *are* different, and if women cannot physically carry their injured comrades off the field, for example, then [they are a detriment to the unit](#), no matter how willing they might be to sacrifice their own lives in battle.

Furthermore, allowing women to serve in combat positions carries social costs and implications the American people may be unwilling to bear. We can already see a bit of this whenever the idea of requiring women to register for Selective Service rears its head. By law, all women would have to share the responsibility of defending the nation when called upon to do so, something the equal rights-endorsing public seems [greatly uncomfortable](#) with.

Mattis's comments strike a nerve because they run counter to prevailing public narratives, which downplay the differences between men and women and promote the belief that all should

have the opportunity to pursue whatever career they desire. The nature of the military as an institution and its mission requires it to conduct business in a fashion vastly different from that of civilian society. It is made even more difficult by America's military preeminence, intensifying social pressure for the military to "get with the program," and the fashioning of combat as just another workplace—as opposed to the uniquely lethal environment that it is. The idea that the military will ultimately be [judged on the number of women](#) in combat roles and units—that is, fulfilling "quotas"—only fuels the perception that advocates are motivated by something other than a desire to effectively defend the nation.

Only months before being appointed secretary of defense, Mattis, alongside Kori Schake, co-authored a [book](#) in which he expressed sentiments consistent with his recent remarks:

...an uninformed public is permitting political leaders to impose an accretion of social conventions that are diminishing the combat power of our military, disregarding our warfighting practitioners' advice. These demands impose a burden the public and political leaders refuse to acknowledge and will only be evident in the aftermath of military failure... every change to established practice should be judged on whether it increases battlefield lethality.

Mattis and Schake drew these conclusions in part from an essay authored by Tod Lindberg, published in the same book. Lindberg found a glaring [disconnect](#) between the self-described "very liberal" and not only the military but the broader society. Apart from the "very liberal," a majority of the public, regardless of political or social outlook, agreed the military is a unique institution with a special mission and therefore reserves right to conduct itself in a fashion vastly different from the society it serves.

The concern, of course, is that the "very liberal" represent a

vocal minority that nonetheless dominate critical institutions in society, such as academia, media, and policymaking. Therefore, they possess a greater ability to influence culture and policy because their views occupy a larger percentage of the discourse.

Though the military strives to remain above the fray, the pervasiveness and toxicity of culture war is making it difficult to do so. The military is increasingly at risk of becoming another institution afflicted with partisanship because it has been often viewed as a [vehicle for social change](#). Arguments concerning “battlefield lethality” may ultimately fall on deaf ears, for example, because as far as the culture warriors are concerned, there is far more at stake.

Akin to the [debate](#) surrounding homosexuals in the military in the 1990s, those most in favor or against the proposition did not see it solely as an issue of military effectiveness, but a decision that “would have profound consequences for society at large.” Those in favor of women in combat believe such a policy would be the ultimate symbol of women’s rights, embodied in the acceptance that they are just as capable of fighting and dying for their country as men.

[Gallup found](#) this past summer that the public still trusts the military over all other institutions. That means Americans should trust the military to make the right decisions on issues like women in combat. They should discourage practices that would place undue pressure on the military to deliver specific policy outcomes not out of a belief that a better fighting force will result but that it will aid in creating what they deem to be a “better” society.

The reason? The men and women in uniform will ultimately bear the brunt of the consequences, good or bad, of any policy change. Civilians may issue the orders, but the military is responsible for their implementation and success or failure.

Very few know for certain what it takes to perform in combat. The brutal, “evil” realities of war are such that we ought to be extremely discretionary about whom we entrust with the responsibility of directly engaging with the enemy and enduring the tremendous discomfort, pain, and suffering that comes with the profession. The public ought to be far less glib about seeing anyone, much less women, in combat. Society may view it as an issue of equal rights, but warfighters do not.

In the end, the military serves the public. Should the day ever arrive where the two find themselves at an impasse, the protectors must bend. But to prevent the sacred relationship from fraying, there must be trust. The military must trust that the public seeks to not undermine their norms and traditions, nor cast upon them additional pressures that could have a detrimental effect. In exchange, the military must commit to transparency and candidly engage in dialogue with the American people to foster greater understanding and unity between two worlds that, for good reason, must remain disparate. Without public support, the military is an illegitimate institution. A dysfunctional civil-military relationship is something the country can ill afford.

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