P.S. to the NEWS
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HEARINGS ON WOMEN IN COMBAT

In the midst of the Iranian crisis, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel held four days of hearings on the proposal to repeal the existing laws which exempt servicewomen from military combat. The witnesses for this proposal didn't talk much about combat itself, but they spoke glowingly about "career assignment" of servicewomen to military aircraft and ships.

When it came to the question of assignment to the combat infantry, most of the witnesses gagged a bit. But if the rule is changed for the Air Force and Navy, it is only logical to change it for the Army, too.

Testifying against the repeal of the laws which exempt women from combat assignment were General William Westmoreland, who saw plenty of combat as U.S. commander in the Vietnam War, and Admiral Jeremiah Denton, who spent more than seven years in a POW camp after being shot down in Vietnam. After listening to them tell what combat is really like, it is easy to see why the laws exempting women were enacted in the first place, and why common sense requires that they be retained.

The witnesses against the repeal of the current laws described some of the problems that already exist with a growing number of women in the armed services. During 1978, in the Army alone, 7,832 of some 50,000 female soldiers (15%) became pregnant. Of this number, 2,068 women left the service, 2,626 had abortions, and 3,138 female soldiers had their babies and stayed in the service. Since large numbers of the births are illegitimate, several witnesses expressed dismay at this new policy of funding and rewarding immorality.

Whichever route the pregnant soldier chooses, it takes its toll on combat-readiness, which is what the peacetime services are all about. Combat-readiness is eroded because of time lost due to pregnancies, by the voluntary resignations due to pregnancies, and by the child-care problem which results when the female soldier keeps her baby and brings it back to the post.

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The first reason that pregnancies have become such a major problem is that the number of women in the armed services has tripled since 1972, from less than 2% of the total force to about 6%. Under projected figures, the number of servicewomen will double again by 1983. In 1972, 90% of the women in the armed forces were in traditional women's jobs; today this percentage has shrunk to 60%.

The second reason that pregnancies have become such a big problem is that the services no longer discharge female soldiers who become pregnant. They must issue them GI maternity uniforms, pamper their condition with lighter jobs and time off for which male soldiers must pick up the slack, and then let the soldier-mothers bring their babies back to the post nurseries.

Pregnancy is only one reason why women in combat units reduce, not increase, their combat-effectiveness. Rape is another, which in our armed forces is now said to be twice what it is in our cities. A third reason is that (according to the Air Force Surgeon General) females have only 60% of the physical strength of males.

Brig. Gen. Elizabeth Hoisington, former director of the WACs, told the subcommittee that "in my whole lifetime, I have never known ten women whom I thought could endure three months under actual combat conditions in an Army unit. ... Studies cannot duplicate the realism of a battle in a Vietnam jungle, in the cold Korean hills, the trauma from killing or witnessing death and terrible wounds."

Colonel Phelps Jones, USA (Ret.), representing the Veterans of Foreign Wars, testified that "the presence of thousands of women in our armed forces, and the prospect of many more thousands in the future, is a "quiet revolution" with profound implications for our national security. ... As structured today, should our armed forces be called upon to fight, American women will be killed, wounded, and captured in numbers that have no precedent in the history of the modern world."

Several witnesses pointed out that every nation which has experimented with women in combat, including Israel and Russia, has abandoned the notion. It simply doesn't work. As the old saying goes, those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes.

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