Republicans Debate: Should Women Be Drafted?

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Toward the end of the eighth Republican presidential debate, the moderators introduced a new subject which has been absent from stump speeches and ignored in the seven previous debates. ABC's Martha Raddatz, who covered the war in Iraq, asked the candidates whether young women should be required to sign up for Selective Service if the military draft is reinstated, just as young men are required to do.

Senator Marco Rubio, whose teenage daughters were seated in the first row, was called on first. "I have no problem whatsoever with people of either gender serving in combat," Rubio began. "I do believe that Selective Service should be opened up for both men and women in case a draft is ever instituted."

Rubio has been ridiculed for the way he seems to deliver memorized, canned talking points, but his answer suggests he was unprepared for this question. He said he had no problem with women in combat "so long as the minimum requirements necessary to do the job are not compromised."

The debate was held the night before the Super Bowl, where some of the nation's best athletes compete before a world audience. Since there's no rule preventing "people of either gender" from playing football in the NFL, why has no woman ever appeared in the Super Bowl? Even if an exceptional woman could meet "the minimum requirements necessary to do the job" of playing football, that's not good enough for the physical demands of the NFL – or for military combat.

Rubio's reference to "minimum requirements" was echoed by the next candidate to speak, former governor Jeb Bush. "If women can meet the minimum requirements for combat service, they ought to have the right to do it. For sure."

Rubio and Bush have been the loudest voices calling for rebuilding the U.S. military into a force capable of defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Why should we shoot ourselves in the foot by assigning women to combat merely because a few exceptional women "can meet the minimum requirements"?

Even when they “meet the minimum requirements” for military service, women are injured at twice the rate of men, just as female athletes in high school and college sports suffer much higher rates of injury. The higher injury rate for women is one reason why a Marine Corps study found that all-male teams outperformed mixed gender units on a wide range of tasks.

Yes, women can fight hard against enemy attackers, but it takes real men, backed up by unit cohesion, to say “Let’s go get him” and initiate the fight against armed enemies. There is no evidence that women are the equals of men in actual combat.

When I was asleep in bed with my late husband and we heard a noise downstairs that sounded like someone was breaking into the house, I assure you my husband didn’t say “Honey, why don’t you go downstairs and check out that noise?” My husband did the manly thing and went downstairs himself.

Yes, women can pass many tests for strength needed for combat, but there are no tests to find out who will say “Let’s go kill a vicious enemy soldier bent on killing you any way he can.” We have plenty of evidence that men can and will walk into that kind of peril to save their buddies.

The naive premise that women can perform in combat to the same standards as men was refuted by retiring Marine General John F. Kelly, the outgoing commander of U.S. Southern Command. In his final briefing General Kelly warned of the coming “pressure to lower standards, because that’s the only way it’ll work in the way that the agenda-driven people want it to work.”

When it turns out that few if any women are actually serving in combat units, General Kelly predicted, “the question will be asked why aren’t they staying, why aren’t they advancing as infantry people? The answer is, if we don’t change the standards, it will be very, very difficult to have any real numbers.”

The third Republican candidate to endorse women in combat was Governor Chris Christie who, like Rubio, is the father of two teenage daughters. “There’s no reason why young women should be discriminated against from registering for the Selective Service. That’s what we should aspire to for all of the women in our country.”

Senator Ted Cruz was not allowed to speak on this topic in the debate, but he unloaded the following day. “It was striking that three different people on that stage came out in support of drafting women into combat in the military,” Cruz said. “I have to admit, as I was sitting there listening to that conversation, my reaction was: Are you guys nuts?”

“We have had enough with political correctness, especially in the military,” Cruz said to loud applause. “The idea that we would draft our daughters, to forcibly bring them into the military and put them in close combat, I think is wrong, it is immoral, and if I am president, we ain’t doing it.”

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