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Writing Process

For this project, I chose an opinion article about whether or not women should be allowed in combat positions. The author believes women should not be in the infantry, while I believe women should be given the chance if they so desire to be in a combat role. The main idea in the original article was that women are not capable of succeeding in the infantry. I countered this idea throughout my response essay by agreeing that not every woman is cut out for a combat job, but the women out there who would thrive in the infantry should be given that opportunity.

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Megan Rice

On January 24, 2013, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, along with the support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced the lifting of the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule and ordered women to be integrated into all infantry positions in the military. Each branch of the military had until January 2016 to integrate women into combat roles; if they disagreed with the decision, they could request an exemption (*Memorandum for Secretaries of the Military Departments*). There was a wide range of opinions on the decision. One woman, Kathleen Parker, wrote an article a few days after the announcement on January 26, expressing her disapproval of the integration of women into the infantry. She cited women's inferior physical abilities as a reason they should not be on the front lines. Parker also pointed to the psychological differences in males and females, saying female soldiers could not handle the trauma of battle. Along those same lines, she adds that women face greater tortures upon capture; thus, society should not allow young girls to be in situations where they could face such atrocities. Although each point made in the article is true, Parker focuses on the average woman and fails to realize that the argument of women in combat is centered on the above-average woman.

The first argument Parker cites is that women are physically inferior to men. She states, "Females have only half the upper-body strength as males" (Parker). When looking at the bell curves for male and female upper-body strength, lower-body strength, and body core strength, the mean for females is always below the mean for males. On average, males will always physically outperform females (Szayna et al. 52-53). So, Parker's statement is true, but it is not exactly applicable to the debate on women in combat as it is not the average male and the average female who are seeking infantry positions. It is those who go the extra

mile, work a little bit harder, and prove that they can handle the challenges that come with fighting on the front lines who will in the end serve in these combat roles. As Szayna et al. put it, “Physical differences are expected between men and women on average ... [but] there are women who will achieve exceptionally high scores” (50). In August of 2015, Capt. Kristen Giest and 1st Lt. Shaye Haver became the first two females to graduate from the U.S. Army’s Ranger School (Smith-Spark). These two soldiers answered the question of whether females can reach those above-average levels. Just because most women could not physically qualify for the infantry does not mean that the ones who would qualify should be disregarded as well.

Though there are physical requirements for a combat job, there are no emotional requirements that need to be met to qualify for an infantry position. However, Parker believes that women do not have the hormones that will allow them the emotions needed for the front lines: “Eighteen-year-old males have the advantage of being gassed up on testosterone, the hormone that fuels ... aggression,” she states to support her claim that eighteen-year-old females are just little girls, if one were to ignore their legal adult status (Parker). By arguing that eighteen-year-old males and females are not on the same emotional maturity level, Parker attempts to paint the picture of the adolescent female and the adult male. As Robin Truth Goodman, a feminist scholar, states, “Women’s presence in the home makes them into preservers and transmitters of consciousness and social relations that are set apart – and so, different – from the colonizing culture,” trying to further prove that women are not emotionally wired for the horrors of war, while hinting that men somehow are fit to handle such atrocities (67). Parker argues that females are not neurologically wired for war, leaving the reader to assume that males are psychologically equipped to handle the gruesome sights of the front lines. If one takes a deeper look into the issue, it has less to do with the differences in men’s and women’s psyche and more to do with the differences in what male and female soldiers experience within the military. Mattocks et al. did a study on the mental health of female soldiers and found that the only issue that a majority of females reported having to cope with that male soldiers typically do not have to cope with was sexual violence/harassment from fellow soldiers or superiors (539-544). Factoring in that many female soldiers face a whole separate category of trauma that male soldiers typically do not encounter may allow for a better understanding of why many women who return home from their deployments are more emotionally damaged than their male counterparts. It is

also important to note that women who have experienced sexual trauma are not to blame for being more emotional. Thus, cases where women have experienced such trauma cannot be used as evidence for why women are too emotional for direct combat roles because it would be inappropriate to blame the victim. The opponents of women in the infantry continuously turn the emotions of a woman against her and never look at the potential harm that that causes not only women but also men who are essentially being told to suck it up.

Labeling women as the emotional gender assumes that men somehow either do not have emotions or that they do not need to express their emotions. As Victoria L. Brescoll, a professor in the Department of Organizational Behavior at the Yale School of Management, put it, "The common belief that women are the more emotional sex may be due to the fact that people are simply observing women displaying more emotions than men" (417). What she is saying is that women and men have the same amount of emotions; it has just become a social norm that women are the ones who can show those emotions while men are to keep them hidden. This idea aids the belief that women's surplus of emotions when compared to men's lack of emotion makes them incapable of effectively fighting on the front lines. The argument that women are not emotionally and mentally cut out for combat jobs fails to recognize that wartime trauma affects male soldiers too (Doan and Portillo 237). Continuing to uphold the idea that men are less emotional than women is not only false but detrimental to the recovery of male soldiers after they return home from their deployments. While some critics may turn to studies done on the mental health of veterans, they are not extremely accurate because on average, men are less likely than women to acknowledge and talk about their feelings and mental health because of this gender stereotype that men are emotionless (Bilsker 532). Along with this trend of failing to address the mental health of male soldiers, often times people do not talk about the problem of sexual trauma experienced by females in the military.

Another one of Parker's arguments is that women face greater tortures upon being captured. She clearly does not realize the traumas that women may already face within the military. When women are captured and tortured, the probability of them being raped and molested along with being physically and verbally abused is much higher than their male counterparts. "Gender-based violence, specifically violence against women, is highly prominent, particularly in the context of war, and may be inflicted upon both civilian and military women alike," says Mattocks et al. (538). Many argue that females should stay off the

front lines because they have a lesser chance of being captured and thus a lesser chance of being horrifically tortured. However, what the public may not know is that women face a much greater threat of being assaulted/harassed by one of their fellow soldiers or superiors than they do of being captured by an enemy. In all of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of US military personnel who had been taken prisoner or gone missing in action was in the single digits (Friedman). A study from 2015 of over 500 female veterans found that “approximately 39% reported sexual assault, 74% reported sexual harassment, and 54% reported physical victimization during military service. Nearly 28% of participants reported having had all three traumatic experiences during military service” (Gibson 226-228). Although self-reporting leaves out the people who were too afraid to disclose that they had experienced sexual trauma of some kind, it still provides a good indicator of how large of a problem gender-based violence is for female soldiers. While this could be seen as another reason women should not be in combat roles, it would be unethical to bar women from certain positions because of the actions of other male soldiers. One could argue that sexual trauma within the military is not as cruel and evil as the sexual trauma faced upon capture, but all sexual trauma is evil; it does not matter which is worse. This demonstrates that more attention needs to be focused on eradicating gender-based violence in the military.

After taking a closer look, it is obvious that the average female is not cut out for military combat, but neither is the average male; it takes an extraordinary person to fulfill the duty of an infantry soldier. Parker uses weak claims that women have inferior physical abilities and a weak emotional state as well as the idea that women face greater traumas upon capture than they do in their own battalions. As it is now apparent, many of the arguments against women being allowed to apply for combat positions are based on large assumptions of the whole female gender. While the integration of women into the infantry is a very important step in gender equality, it could be argued that other steps towards gender equality should be taken before a large change like this one. But for now, strong and brave women will continue to pave the path for future generations of female soldiers. As far as the future of the military goes, only time will tell if the proponents or opponents of integration of women into all military positions were correct.

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