

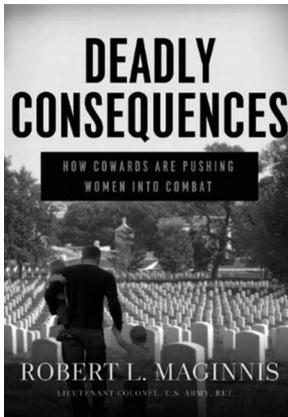
Women in Battle

Deadly Consequences: How Cowards are Pushing Women into Combat

By Robert L. Maginnis

Will integrating women into combat units have "deadly consequences" for US national security? Three experts—Anna Simons, Anthony King, and John McKay—provide their evaluations.

A Review by Anna Simons



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Deadly Consequences is a blistering polemic that provides plenty of facts, figures, and citations to those who oppose the idea of women being integrated into direct ground combat units. Maginnis does not mince words:

The incremental process by which the United States military decided to put women into direct-fire, close ground combat assignments has been deceitful. It is the work of political leaders who naively treat ground combat as an equal-opportunity issue and of military commanders who know better but are afraid to speak the truth about its adverse effects on readiness (p. 4).

Nor is it just the current Joint Chiefs of Staff Maginnis considers to be cowards. Essentially, any man who would let a woman serve in his place deserves scorn. As for why the Joint Chiefs and other senior military leaders merit particular opprobrium: in Maginnis's view, they have succumbed to politically correct pressure. He identifies six myths any responsible senior leader has to know are untrue:

- 1) The new battlefield is woman-friendly.
- 2) Women are clamoring for combat duty.
- 3) Women are already effective at the front.
- 4) Good leadership defeats eros.
- 5) Women are perfectly capable of handling the rigors of combat.
- 6) Other countries put women in combat.

Maginnis fillets each of these myths, liberally borrowing from and updating others' work. He then moves on to eight major risks the military will face should women be given direct ground combat roles:

- 1) Compromised standards.
- 2) Failure to match capabilities with job assignments.
- 3) [Women's] Physical suffering.

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- 4) Destruction of the warrior spirit.
- 5) Increase in sexual assaults.
- 6) Forcing women into combat.
- 7) Reduction of retention rates and decline of quality.
- 8) Subjecting women to the draft.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the risks vs myths, Maginnis occasionally shoots his own logic in the foot. For instance, early on in the book he mentions young people's "hookup" culture and their penchant for alcohol and drug-fueled behavior. Midway through, he cites various studies that point to pregnancy rates among soon-to-be-deployed and deployed women. Not only does he stress that many pregnancies are unplanned, but women are clearly indulging in sex on board ships and in combat zones without using birth control. Yet, eight pages further he writes, "Men's inclination to take risks in every aspect of life makes them better combat candidates" – as if women's willingness to engage in unprotected sex is not risky behavior.

I mention this because while I agree with a number of Maginnis's points, it is hard not to wince whenever he misfires or over-exaggerates. For instance, he lambasts radical feminists for wanting to "eviscerate the military" as a patriarchal institution, yet offers too little evidence for the anti-military and anti-war campaign he intimates exists. This is too bad. Because if he could offer a chapter (rather than scattered sentences' worth) of proof that proponents are more anti-military than anti-male, he might actually win over more people – to include anyone who worries about national security or cares about the military as an institution.

Equally unfortunate may be Maginnis's focus on the nature of combat rather than the nature of combat units. Maginnis invokes General Odierno to suggest that the counterinsurgency fights of the past decade may not presage the future, and while both men may well be right that the military had better (re)gird itself to be able to engage in a grimmer, more sustained, high intensity form of conventional combat, this could lead some readers to wonder what young men at outposts like Restrepo endured. Consequently, too, Maginnis misses making the point that wherever the US puts boots on the ground in the future, it is still likely to need to field small units capable of operating on their own in austere conditions. No question, physical standards will matter in such units. But so will group dynamics.

Because meeting physical standards represents a sort of Rubicon for entering the "boy's club" of combat units, standards receive a great deal of attention. However, both sides in the debate may err in pinning too much on them. Opponents believe so long as standards remain high – and do not get gender-normed – few women will either want to serve in the combat arms or be able to make it through selection. Thus, certain Military Occupational Specialties (MOSSs) – they hope – will remain protected. However, the track recently taken by those who want all billets opened to women is to question the premise behind each standard. Proponents increasingly point out tasks are rarely undertaken by individuals alone; instead, every combatant belongs to a team, a platoon, or a squad. This means members in all units shift and share burdens and

can surely find creative ways to get the job done regardless of individual strengths.

But, not only do combat units exist to be sent into harm's way – they, after all, represent the thin line in the sand between all of us and harm – they should never be presumed to be immune to casualties. Let a unit suffer casualties, and any burden-sharing that might have worked among individuals during a field exercise, or during practice, is bound to fall apart. This is inconvenient reality number 1. Inconvenient reality number 2 is that attrition requires members of combat units be considered interchangeable, even in the 21st century; thus, every member of a unit has to be capable of accomplishing the same essential tasks. At the same time, replacements have to be able to fit easily into the group. This introduces a Goldilocks challenge: the group has to be tight, but not so tight it cannot absorb new members and still function.

While Maginnis acknowledges the significance of cohesion, he does not dig very deep. He never explains the havoc that romantic, and not just sexual, attachments can wreak. Someone else will have to investigate and explain what makes a combat unit effective (or not). Maginnis prefers to concentrate on the physical and psychological rigors of combat instead. One way he does so is to describe battles in Najaf (circa 2004) and in Vietnam (which is somewhat curious given his earlier dismissal of counterinsurgency). Yet, no matter how graphically he tries to render both scenes (along with a shorter description of fighting in the Chosin reservoir), readers who are not already used to (or enamored with) reading about combat sequences are likely to remain unmoved.

Here is where, without necessarily meaning to, Maginnis exposes the real communications gap: how can he and other opponents make their arguments stick? How can combat veterans convince skeptics the presence of women really will be disruptive, and it will take away from – rather than add anything to – combat effectiveness? One might especially wonder how opponents of lifting the ban can make the case in light of the fact, as Maginnis points out, Hollywood and media depictions have helped convince many Americans that women are just as capable as men: just look at how well they have held their own in firefights.

Of course, no movie has yet been made depicting the ways in which a woman's presence might actually wreck a unit or doom a mission, let alone what might happen should a female fail to uphold her end in a prolonged battle. Imagine, though, the subliminal impact such imagery could have, particularly if the plot was compelling and the acting realistic. Crime scene reenactments influence juries, which is why they are increasingly popular. Or, just consider *Kony 2012*.

Arguably, with the "right" kind of footage it might well be possible to shift public opinion dramatically away from wanting to see women introduced into direct ground combat units. Indeed, at this point in time, one or two well crafted YouTube videos could well have a more profound effect than any book will, no matter how vividly written.

Could *Deadly Consequences* itself be turned into a movie or a documentary? Certainly Maginnis's book is a very easy read for anyone who already leans in his direction. However, in the next round (whether print or film), it would surely help the overall argument if all the sub-arguments were carefully presented and the tone were less inflammatory. In

Maginnis's defense, his aim has clearly been to (re)sound the alarm and rally the base. Not only is time running out, but it is hard not to agree with him given the gravity of the military's mission to protect us all, that Congress has a duty – nay, an obligation – to treat this issue with far more gravity and ecumenicism than it has thus far. In fact, that may be the most significant point this book makes.

A Review by Anthony King

The official silence following Leon Panetta's rescission of the restrictions on women serving in the combat arms has been surprising, but it should not be taken as evidence of approval within the armed forces. On the contrary, informally, widespread dismay has been reported among many male combat veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Robert Maginnis's engaging book, polemically subtitled "how cowards are pushing women into combat," might be read as a corrective to this silence. Incensed by Panetta's decision and the pusillanimity of General Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maginnis rejects the decision as jeopardizing national security.

Maginnis is not completely against women's service in the armed forces. He honors Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, the first woman to win a Silver Star, and numerous other female combat veterans (67): "Some women in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated valor under fire in protecting their units and themselves" (68). Yet, Maginnis does not take their combat performance as evidence that, in the future, a small number of exceptional women might also be able to serve in combat. On the contrary, he concludes his encomium with a decisive qualification: "We should celebrate their courage but not abandon logic by pretending that they are case studies of women successfully joining in sustained, conventional combat" (68).

This is the foundation of Maginnis's entire argument. While women may have served successfully in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, these campaigns were low-intensity operations. "With some notable exceptions, counterinsurgency is best compared to high-intensity police work, not high-intensity conventional combat"(40). Since the United States is currently trying to reorient itself to conventional maneuver warfare, the prospect of a return to high-intensity war invalidates all the evidence about women in combat from Iraq and Afghanistan to justify a reprise of the central and long-standing objections to female service. Yet, some of the evidence he discusses is valid and interesting.

Predictably, Maginnis focuses on physical capacity. He cites a British military study which showed an increased rate of injury among women of 7.5 times when "training to the same standards" as men; "women could produce a much greater long-term medical bill for the Pentagon than men" (132). Problems of female hygiene and pregnancy are discussed at length.

Naturally, Maginnis highlights the issue of sex. For instance, under "Myth No.4: Good leadership defeats eros," he notes that sexual

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fraternization was endemic at Kandahar Airfield; “nothing [the] chain of command did could stop these nightly liaisons” (69). “As if consensual affairs weren’t bad enough, our armed forces also face an epidemic of sexual assaults” (71). Finally, Maginnis notes that women are at greater risk of sexual violence than men if taken prisoner; Private Jessica Lynch “now acknowledges that she was raped and sodomized by her captors” (146).

Maginnis’s arguments can be challenged and, in many cases, rebutted; some women are physically capable of combat, sex has not always been endemic to, or universally undermined, the cohesion of combat units, and men can also be sexual victims. Indeed, Maginnis admits some women are capable of passing even the most rigorous selection process uninjured: “I watched some Olympic-caliber women athletes run through the [SEAL] obstacle course better than certainly many of the SEAL candidates do” (112).

Yet, Maginnis’s argument collapses on a more fundamental point. Even if the next US conflict is a conventional interstate war, Maginnis is unjustified in dismissing the experience of combat troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Operationally, counterinsurgency campaigns are less intense; they cannot be lost in a day. Yet, at the platoon and company level, on days when the enemy has been engaged, the fighting in places like Ramadi, Fallujah, Sangin, or the Korengal Valley seems to have been no less difficult and dangerous as anything the infantry of the Second World War or the Korean Conflict faced. At this level, the fighting provides the best evidence currently available on whether women can perform in combat; with important caveats, some of which Maginnis describes, the evidence suggests a small number of women can. Maginnis’s argument is based on an unjustified conflation of the levels of war.

Yet, his work remains useful, not least because it provides an insight into an increasingly strident and radical segment of United States society; the Republican and religious right. Thus, his valedictory acknowledgement is instructive: “Above all, I acknowledge my heavenly Father, without whom this book could never have been written” (198). Writing as a Christian, Maginnis is disgusted by a society, corrupted by liberalism and radical feminism, could have so disastrously ignored the sanctity of the female role as mother and wife and profaned the institution of the family: “It is no surprise that a culture that so degrades and devalues women is untroubled by sending them into combat. Americans once held women in high esteem, but, today, chivalry is practically dead. Respect for women went the way of marriage thanks to radical feminists who want to destroy that institution” (41). In this, Maginnis perhaps reveals his true objection to female integration. He also shows that perhaps the greatest obstacle to female accession may lie not in their physiologies but in contemporary American culture, which is increasingly polarized into secular and liberal versus conservative and religious factions.

A Review by John C. McKay

Robert Maginnis's book singularly examines the consequences of placing women in front-line infantry units. The author is a West Point graduate, a retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel with germane Pentagon experience, and a Senior Fellow for National Security at the Family Research Council. *Deadly Consequences* effectively synthesizes much of a debate informed by emotive conjecture, parochialism, and ideologically tainted discourse. An injudicious choice of title and sensational dust-jacket blurbs suggest, quite unfairly, that Maginnis advocates a limited perspective. Regretably, they demean the author, misrepresent what he convincingly argues, and are sure to alienate the broad readership the book deserves. His thesis merits considered study. In Maginnis's view, proponents of female integration into front-line ground combat units falsely conflate the sociocultural tropes of "gender neutrality" and the "lifting of gender barriers" with the indispensability of combat effectiveness. The two phenomena are distinct and distinctly incompatible. He excoriates what he sees as pusillanimous, disengaged, and disingenuous behavior on the issue by senior civilian and uniformed leadership within the United States government. He singles out high level military leaders for censure for their facile pronouncements on the complex and poorly understood topic of placing females in front-line infantry units.

Deadly Consequences is an informative, nonacademic, lucid treatment of an important subject. There is commendable range in this book. An impressive amount of research went into it: Congressional testimony; interviews; pertinent United States and foreign government documents and studies; archival findings; and, contemporary and historical examples—a more nuanced examination of the Soviet Union's (WW II) and Israeli (past and current) use of females in ground combat formations would have strengthened the book's argument. Proponents of placing women into front-line infantry units either conveniently ignore or, in the shrillness of the moment, lose sight of a good deal of that background material. Maginnis cites authoritative medical research and findings giving evidence of the increased physical and psychological tolls (and concomitant short- and long-term medical expenses) associated with women compared to men in combat environments. He also examines the pernicious effects of sexual rivalries and the negative impact on unit cohesiveness.

One of the official US government documents Maginnis cites is the March 2011 final report of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission, *From Representation to Inclusion: Diversity Leadership for the 21st Century*. Emblematic of much of the government's official justification for integrating females into front-line infantry units, the report is a flawed document: the Commission's purpose was not to consider the enhancement of combat effectiveness but rather to advocate guardianship under "demonstrated diversity leadership," a fuzzy concept with no relevance to battlefield lethality. Further, the Commission's findings are primarily based on the analysis of three nonauthoritative reports, omitting even passing reference to the 1992 Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed

Forces (also cited). The report significantly underrates the differences in strength and physical capacities between men and women. The issue of pregnancy is completely ignored. Any absence of evidence contradicting or challenging the Commission's findings failed to prompt additional studies. Tellingly, the paucity of ground combat experience, notably of sustained—three or more days—close-in, ground combat experience, distinguishes the Commission's membership. That critical expertise and experience was (and is) readily available and appears to have been ignored in selecting the Commission's membership. Maginnis quotes several individuals who have given long and serious consideration to the issue well above the current level of debate. Further, the Commission premised its findings on the templates of Iraq and Afghanistan, disregarding high-intensity conflict. In addition, potential foes such as the People's Republic of China and North Korea are not mentioned.

Maginnis traces incremental changes in institutional ethos brought about with the increasing integration of women into the military. The fact the all-volunteer force could not sustain itself without female volunteers, and their critical contributions, cannot be denied. But Maginnis also cites figures of a higher suicide rate among female veterans compared to male veterans.

In today's culture, it is difficult to see how the issue will receive the impartial, objective airing it deserves. Nevertheless, Maginnis makes sound recommendations for addressing it. Foremost among these is Congressional hearings. According to Maginnis, there have been no full hearings in the House of Representatives on women in combat since 1979; and, none in the Senate since 1991. *Deadly Consequences* begs for more critical analysis.

