

Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth that Women Can't Fight

Megan Mackenzie
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“The presence of the female Marines [in Afghanistan] brought to the fore issues of human security. Female counterinsurgents are one of the few advantages we have over our adversaries”.¹ As Hudson and Leidl recognise, American women have existed in combat situations in most major wars of the past century. Despite this, it could be said that our history books have done little to document women’s presence and contributions, almost to the point where many would believe that prior to the 2013 decision to reverse the combat exclusion of women in the United States, women *simply were not involved in combat*. Within this context, reading Megan Mackenzie’s book *Beyond the Band of Brothers* (2015) is a welcome relief to know more about women in combat and learn more of the controversial nature of their engagement.

Women’s engagement in security, defence, and on-ground combat has typically been underrated and under-explored. Delving into one of the core bastions of male military dominance, this book unravels the national narrative of a heroic band of brothers—the male combat unit lying at the heart of US military identity. Historical accounts of soldiering, combat and war depict men as “the natural and rightful protectors of society and present war as the ultimate expression of masculinity”, leading to an enforced, if incomplete, exclusion of women from combat (p. 1).

This book was published in light of the 2013 decision to reverse the combat exclusion of women, and amid fears that women’s ‘new’ inclusion in combat would feminise, weaken or ‘spoil’ military culture. Mackenzie, an associate professor of the University of Sydney, presents a succinct, gripping account of the bigger picture—women’s roles in combat before the exclusion policy was repealed, as well as the reality of the military culture this policy was designed to protect. While the exclusion policy was “heralded by Congress

¹ Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 206.

and the Department of Defense (DoD) as crucial for national security”, Mackenzie digs deeper to understand how combat exclusion survived for so long and what role it played in shaping military identity (p. 2). Her argument is twofold: combat exclusion was part of “an evolving set of rules, guidelines, and ideas primarily used to reify the all-male combat unit as elite, essential, and exceptional”, and; that combat exclusion was not evidence-based, but rather was created and sustained through narrative, myth and emotional arguments for women’s exclusion (p. 3). Far from the abolition of the combat exclusion representing a new era in gender relations, she illustrates how female soldiers are and have always been central to rebranding and rewriting history.

Beginning with how combat exclusion has historically comprised fluid and evolving sets of rules and stories restricting women from combat, Chapter One sets the scene for academic analysis of military identity. Far from combat exclusion being an enforceable policy, Mackenzie uses examples from World War Two and the proceeding years of ‘returning to normal’, to demonstrate how myths around gender difference were part of a broader effort to re-establish gender roles following women’s unprecedented engagement in paid labour associated with the war. She further demonstrates examples from the Vietnam War—while women may have been excluded from official combat positions among the infantry, all personnel working or being treated within locations such as hospitals, commonly targeted by guerrilla warfare, were treated as being ‘in combat’. Mackenzie uses the examples of periods during and after war to successfully track combat exclusion as a set of fluid rules in opposition to formal policy able to be ‘repealed’, history-tracing combat exclusion to find it the result of myths and emotions rather than evidence-based policy.

Building on this argument, Chapter Two focuses on US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mackenzie demonstrates how wars eroded any remaining enforceable rules associated with combat exclusion, rendering the distinction between combat and support roles irrelevant. The realities of insurgency warfare in both Iraq and Afghanistan made divisions between front lines and rear units non-existent, as women formed consistent parts of hostile military operations across combat and support units. Mackenzie exposes how despite this, media and official government papers perpetuate the notion that women were not on the front lines. This has not only contributed to inaccurate historical records, which Mackenzie’s book plays a part in correcting, but also contributes to the myth of combat exclusion. In this chapter Mackenzie also presents her most compelling arguments for how repealing the combat exclusion ‘policy’ sought to redefine military identity following the growing association of US soldiers and human rights abuses and sexual violence.

Chapter Three explores the key emotional arguments presented to oppose women’s engagement in combat. Despite the tendency to present combat

exclusion as a product of rational decision-making, this chapter delves into how emotional exclusion of women based on 'gut feelings' present the decisions as 'natural', beyond critique, and therefore difficult to counter and affect. Under such beliefs, Mackenzie notes

the presumption that men, as a result of their physical qualities, are the natural protectors of society, inherently brave, innately aggressive, and willing to use violence ... [conversely] women's bodies ... are depicted as rendering them weaker, more likely to be concerned with protecting life, more nurturing, and prone to peaceful conduct (p. 77).

Physical standards and combat cohesion based on male bonding are presented by Mackenzie as the main 'research driven' standards for exclusion.

Mackenzie goes on to provide a condensed account of research on the standards for exclusion to date and its gaps in the fourth and fifth chapters. The idea that women cannot compete physically with men is the most oft-used argument for excluding women from combat. Mackenzie demonstrates how this assumption makes a considerable leap between physical gender differences and whether that inherently disqualifies women from combat, as if women's difference intrinsically renders them incapable of tasks or duties required. Through doing so, seven core questions are asked which are worth republishing, given the preponderance of emotional arguments used as a basis for discrimination: (1) Are women weaker than men? (2) Is physical difference insurmountable? (3) What are the physical standards for men and women in the military, and are there double standards for women? (4) Are there combat-specific physical requirements? (5) Do combat roles require enhanced, or different, physical capabilities than other roles within the military? (6) Do physical standards discriminate against women? (7) Is the physical argument only about standards? Through a comprehensive assessment of literature and empirical evidence, Mackenzie answers these questions, demonstrating how "growing evidence that women are able to meet military physical requirements remains overshadowed by ... hypothetical and incredibly emotional narratives" (p. 132). Mackenzie paints this absurdity well, summing up "[f]ears of sharks potentially attacking menstruating women, and narratives depicting weak women, unable to drag their comrades to safety on the battlefield" (p. 132).

Physical difference dealt with, Mackenzie then moves to the idea that women would undermine the types of bonding that make combat units able to operate effectively. She outlines the cohesion hypothesis, which "presumes a positive relationship between group cohesion and soldier performance, and a negative relationship between the inclusion of women and the rates of bonding and trust necessary for such cohesion" (p. 134). Rebutting this idea, Mackenzie argues compellingly that not only is *social and task* cohesion possible with both men and women within a unit, but that the outcomes of historically all-male cohesion cannot solely be classified as

inherently 'good'. There is considerable and mounting evidence that with male-bonded groups comes sexual violence and human rights abuses, of not just external parties, but internal troops. Mackenzie refers to examples of indiscriminate violence, looting, rape and destruction, which reveals that cohesion is not simply "a romantic bond between honourable troops; instead, it reveals that bonding can be built on misogyny, misconduct and the abuse of women" (p. 149).

Finally, Mackenzie brings the book together to discuss the wider influence wielded by military myths and stereotypes exemplified by the band of brothers. In this section Mackenzie makes methodological contributions to the analysis of vast quantities of online comments, an important contribution to research across disciplines wanting to quantify and analyse online content. Mackenzie finds that through an analysis of online comments on three articles before, during and after the repeal of the combat exclusion, debates predominantly surrounded women's physical fitness—their capability or their inadequacy. The topic is found to be divisive and evocative of strong emotions, perhaps explaining the over-reliance on emotional arguments for and against the combat exclusion, over the preponderance for evidence-based policy decisions.

Mackenzie self-identifies her book as neither a complete historical account nor a guide to the future of women's engagement in the military. However, her account of military identity skimmed over aspects such as sexual violence within ranks, which could have warranted further coverage. This is a subject covered particularly well by Hudson and Leidl's *The Hillary Doctrine*, and a debate which could have further enriched the exploration of military identity. Many feminist scholars have also discussed the idea of security, and just who is being secured from whom in international relations. A discussion of this kind would not have been out of place in Mackenzie's book and could have further enhanced the dialogue on military identity and what effects this identity had on the security of military women.

Overall, Mackenzie has made an important contribution to international relations and discussions on women, security and identity. One of the great values of this book lies in using the notion of a band of brothers to break down military identity, contributing to the literature particularly with reference to how narratives and stories co-create deeply embedded messages about "appropriate, ideal, acceptable, and legitimate behaviours, identities and practices" (p. 9). Coming from a government and feminist theory perspective, Mackenzie does this well. Perhaps as a scholar based outside of the United States, her analysis is a particularly clear and succinct appraisal of American military identity, which has implications for the assessment of Australia's own military and the myths sustaining any negative elements of military culture, like a similarly high rate of sexual assault and harassment within ranks. This is where this book can make important contributions to ongoing conversations in academic and policy

circles, particularly given the introduction of more women into positions of leadership within world militaries, and how and why this may change aspects of the military identity for the better. While the book contributes to debates on the motivation and justification for war, its methodological contributions are also noted as important and could inform future research in this area and beyond.

This book will interest academic researchers and students alike, however, its appeal is even broader to anyone engaged in the debating the future directions of the military and its engagement of women.

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