Secretary of Defense Speech

Remarks on the Women-in-Service Review

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, Pentagon Press Briefing Room, December 3, 2015

Good afternoon. Thanks for being here. Appreciate it.

When I became Secretary of Defense, I made a commitment to building America’s force of the future – the all-volunteer military that will defend our nation for generations to come. Like our outstanding force of today, our force of the future must continue to benefit from the best people America has to offer. In the 21st century, that requires drawing strength from the broadest possible pool of talent. This includes women, because they make up over 50 percent of the American population. To succeed in our mission of national defense, we cannot afford to cut ourselves off from half the country’s talents and skills. We have to take full advantage of every individual who can meet our standards.

The Defense Department has increasingly done this in recent decades – in 1975, for example, opening up the military service academies to women, and in 1993, allowing women to fly fighter jets and serve on combat ships at sea. About the same time, though, DoD also issued the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule, which still prohibited women from being assigned to units whose primary mission was engaging in direct ground combat. That rule was in turn rescinded in January 2013, when then-Secretary Panetta directed that all positions be opened to qualified women by January 1st, 2016 – that is, less than one month from today – while also giving the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, three years to request any exceptions, which would have to be reviewed first by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and then approved by the Secretary of Defense.

As many of you know, I was Deputy Secretary of Defense at the time. That decision reflected among other things the fact that, by that time, the issue of women in combat per se was no longer a question. It was a reality, because women had seen combat throughout the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – serving, fighting, and in some cases making the ultimate sacrifice alongside their fellow comrades-in-arms.

We’ve made important strides over the last three years since then. We’ve seen women soldiers graduate from the Army’s Ranger School. We have women serving on submarines. And we’ve opened up over 111,000 positions to women across the services.

While that represents real progress, it also means that approximately 10 percent of positions in the military – that is, nearly 220,000 – currently remain closed to women…including infantry, armor, reconnaissance, and some special operations units.

Over the last three years, the senior civilian and military leaders across the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Special Operations Command have been studying the integration of women into these positions, and last month I received their recommendations – as well as the data, studies, and surveys on which they were based – regarding whether any of those remaining positions warrant a continued exemption from being opened to women.

I reviewed these inputs carefully, and today I’m announcing my decision not to make continued exceptions – that is, to proceed with opening all these remaining occupations and positions to women. There will be no exceptions.

This means that as long as they qualify and meet the standards, women will now be able to contribute to our mission in ways they could not before. They’ll be allowed to drive tanks, fire mortars, and lead infantry soldiers into combat. They’ll be able to serve as Army Rangers and Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Corps infantry, Air Force parajumpers, and everything else that previously was open only to men. And even more importantly, our military will be better able to harness the skills and perspectives that talented women have to offer.

‘No exceptions’ was the recommendation of the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Secretary of the Navy, as well as the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, the Chief of Naval Operations, and the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command. While the Marine Corps asked for a partial exception in some areas such as infantry, machine gunner, fire support, reconnaissance, and others, we are a joint force, and I have decided to make a decision which applies to the entire force.

Let me explain how I came to this decision.

First, I’ve been mindful of several key principles throughout this process.

One is that mission effectiveness is most important. Defending this country is our primary responsibility, and it cannot be compromised. That means everyone who serves in uniform – men and women alike – has to be able to meet the high standards for whatever job they’re in. To be sure, fairness is also important – because everyone who’s able and willing to serve their country, who can meet those standards, should have the full and equal opportunity to do so. But the important factor in making my decision was to have access to every American who could add strength to the joint force. Now more than ever, we cannot afford to have barriers limiting our access to talent.

The past three years of extensive studies and reviews leading up to this decision – all of which we’re going to post online, by the way – have led to genuine insights and real progress. Where we found that some standards previously were either outdated or didn’t reflect the tasks actually required in combat, important work has been done to ensure each position now has standards that are grounded in real-world operational requirements, both physical and otherwise – so we’re positioned to be better at finding not only the most qualified women, but also the most qualified men, for military specialties.

Another principle is that the careful implementation of integrating women into combat positions would be a key to success – implementation – and also that any decision to do so or not would have to be based on rigorous analysis of factual data. And that’s exactly how we’ve conducted this review. It’s been evidence-based and iterative.

I’m confident the Defense Department can implement this successfully, because throughout our history, we’ve consistently proven ourselves to be a learning organization. Just look at the last decade and a half. We’ve seen this in war, when we adapted to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions in the wake of 9/11 and in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We’ve seen it technically, as new capabilities like unmanned systems and cyber capabilities have entered our inventory. And we’ve also seen it institutionally, when we repealed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” In every case, our people have mastered change excellently – and they’ve been able to do so because their leaders have taken care to implement change thoughtfully, always putting the mission and our people first.

We will do the same today. As we integrate women into the remaining combat positions, we must keep in mind the welfare and total readiness of our entire force. And as we focus on the individual contributions that each servicemember makes, we also have to remember that in military operations, teams matter. That’s why it’s important that the services chose to study both individual performance and team performance. And they not only made comparisons to other elite units, like NASA long-duration flight crews and police SWAT teams – they also worked with our international partners to examine how they have integrated women into ground combat roles.

Again, how we implement this is key. As Chairman Dunford has noted, “simply declaring all career fields open is not successful integration.” We must not only continue to implement change thoughtfully, but also track and monitor our progress to ensure we’re doing it right – leveraging the skills and strengths of our entire population. And all of us have a role to play.

As we proceed with full integration of women into combat roles in a deliberate and methodical manner, I am directing that seven guidelines be used to steer this implementation.

First, implementation must be pursued with the clear objective of improved force effectiveness. Leaders must emphasize that objective to all servicemembers, men and women alike.

Second, leaders must assign tasks and jobs throughout the force based on ability, not gender. Advancement must be based on objective and validated standards. A good example of this is SOCOM’s selection processes, which combine objective and subjective criteria in, I quote, a “whole person” concept that includes rigorous physical standards and also “strong moral character, leadership skills, mental agility, problem-solving skills, selflessness, maturity, and humility.”

The third guideline is that for a variety of reasons, equal opportunity likely will not mean equal participation by men and women in all specialties. There must be no quotas or perception thereof. So we will work as a joint force to expertly manage the impacts of what the studies that have been done suggest may be smaller numbers of women in these fields that were previously closed.

Fourth, the studies conducted by the services and SOCOM indicate that there are physical and other differences, on average, between men and women. While this cannot be applied to every man or woman, it is real and must be taken into account in implementation. Thus far, we’ve only seen small numbers of women qualify to meet our high physical standards in some of our most physically demanding combat occupational specialties…and going forward, we shouldn’t be surprised if these small numbers are also reflected in areas like recruitment, voluntary assignment, retention, and advancement in some of these specific specialties.

Fifth, we will have to address the fact that some surveys suggest that some servicemembers, both men and women, have a perception that integration would be pursued at the cost of combat effectiveness. Survey data also suggests that women servicemembers emphatically do not want integration to be based on any considerations other than the ability to perform, and combat effectiveness. In both cases, leaders have to be clear that mission effectiveness comes first…and I’m confident that given the strength of our leaders throughout the ranks, over time these concerns will no longer be an issue.

Sixth, as I noted, both survey data and the judgment of the services’ leadership strongly indicate that, particularly in the specialties that will be opened, the performance of small teams is important, even as individual performance is important.

The seventh guideline has to do with international realities. While we know the United States is a nation committed to using our entire population to the fullest – as are some of our closest friends and allies – we also know that not all nations share this perspective.

Our military has long dealt with this reality, notably over the last 15 years in Iraq and also Afghanistan, and we’ll need to be prepared to do so going forward, as it bears on the specialties that will be opened by this decision.

With all these factors in mind, Chairman Dunford recommended that if we were to integrate women into combat positions, then implementation should be done in a combined manner, by all the services working together. And I agree, and that will be my direction.

Accordingly, I am directing all the military services to proceed to open all military occupational specialties to women 30 days from today – that is, after a 30-day waiting period required by law – and to provide their updated implementation plans for integrating women into these positions by that date. Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work, and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Paul Selva, will work with the services to oversee the short-term implementation of this decision, ensure there are no unintended consequences on the joint force, and periodically update me and Chairman Dunford.

Before I conclude, it’s important to keep all of this in perspective. Implementation won’t happen overnight, and while at the end of the day, this will make us a better and stronger force, there still will be problems to fix and challenges to overcome. We shouldn’t diminish that.

At the same time, we should also remember that the military has long prided itself on being a meritocracy, where those who serve are judged not based on who they are or where they come from, but rather what they have to offer to help defend this country. That’s why we have the finest fighting force the world has ever known. And it’s one other way we will strive to ensure that the force of the future remains so, long into the future. Today, we take another step toward that continued excellence.

Thank you.