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## MILITARY

# Women Should Be Required to Register with the Military, Too

Recruiting more female officers might increase our chances of finding better solutions to our military problems

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACristakis | Jan. 03, 2012

As we wind down another war, it's worth asking why we exclude women from the selective-service rolls. Registration is required of all men over 18, including even undocumented and foreign residents, and military recruiters use these lists. Currently, women make up just under 15% of active-duty military personnel and 16% of commissioned officers, and the Department of Defense has been paying more attention to this paucity of female soldiers. This is a good thing, too, since we know first hand that there are many young women, including at Harvard, who are interested in serving.



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(PHOTOS: [Barack and Michelle Obama Visit Troops on Christmas](#))

But it's not altruism or a sense of fair play that motivated last year's recommendation by the Military Diversity Leadership Commission (an advisory panel established by Congress) to increase opportunities for women in the armed forces. The Commission noted in a March [report](#) that "the shrinking pool of qualified candidates for service in the Armed Forces is a threat to national security," and has even recommended that combat-exclusion policies against women be eliminated, in part to remove barriers to career advancement and in part because enemy techniques are increasingly blurring the line between combat and noncombat situations.

In fact, the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century armed services are arguably well matched to attributes that women can

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master as well as, or better than, men, even if they are indeed physically less strong on average: flexibility, creative problem-solving, ability to work with a diverse population, linguistic ability, higher levels of education and so on. In 2010, General James Mathis, then-commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command said: “I don’t care how tactically or operationally brilliant you are, if you can’t create harmony on the battlefield based on trust across service lines, across coalition and national lines, and across civilian/military lines, you really need to go home, because your leadership is obsolete.” But the critical importance of supposedly “soft” skills to the strategic mission of the armed forces is often minimized, leaving the military vulnerable to serious gaps in personnel with everything from linguistic ability to management skills.

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There is another potentially harmful consequence of denying full access to women in the armed forces: we may be losing too many of our soldiers to deadly conflict. An increase in the number of women in leadership positions might increase the chances that we will find better solutions to our military problems. To be blunt: women soldiers don’t form the same judgments about fighting wars as their male colleagues. A recent Pew [poll](#) found that 63% of women soldiers thought the war in Iraq was “not worth fighting for” compared to only 47% of male soldiers. This gender gap is wider than in the general public, where majorities of both men and women feel the war in Iraq was not worth fighting.

It is possible that senior women officers might be better able to foster the kind of non-lethal forms of engagement that leaders like General Mathis have described as essential for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and also make a better case for increased funding for diplomatic efforts and development assistance to poor countries that are stockpiling weapons. They also might advocate for more research and treatment for our disabled and wounded vets. This is all speculation — we really won’t know unless we recruit and retain more women officers. We are not suggesting that women should serve in positions for which they are unqualified or that put others at risk, but by making it easier for more women to make a sacrifice, we might find that fewer service members will have to pay the ultimate price.



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