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978-1-107-04976-5 - Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth that Women Can't Fight

Megan Mackenzie

Excerpt

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Introduction: myths, men, and policy making

From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 1598

The male combat unit lies at the heart of American military identity. The story of a group of men risking their lives to violently defend the United States has been a consistent national narrative. "Bands of brothers," "comrades in arms," and "a few good men" are examples of well-worn tropes that signal men's unique connection to one another and their ability to overcome extreme odds to protect the nation. According to military historian Martin van Creveld, war is "the highest proof of manhood" and combat is "the supreme assertion of masculinity."¹ In his Afghanistan war memoir, US Army Infantry Officer Andrew Exum described the infantry as "one of the last places where that most endangered of species, the alpha male, can feel at home."² These accounts of soldiering depict male troops as the natural and rightful protectors of society.

In contrast, women are often seen as potential spoilers to military culture. There are fears that the integration of women into the military – particularly into combat roles – "feminizes" and weakens

¹ Martin van Creveld, "Less Than We Can Be," 2.

² Andrew Exum, *This Man's Army* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 35.

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the military. Stephanie Gutmann explains, "I do not think we could have a capable integrated combat arms without real androgyny, without real suppression of male and female qualities."³ Such portrayals of the military imply that restricting women from the front lines of war is essential to national security. This rationale was at the heart of the combat exclusion – a US military policy designed to keep women from combat units. The policy was founded on the understanding that women were not natural soldiers, were physically inferior to men, and would ruin the bonds necessary for combat missions.⁴

For decades, the combat exclusion was heralded by Congress and the Department of Defense (DOD) as crucial for national security. At the same time, the all-male combat unit was lauded as the key component, or "the tip of the spear," of US military operations. In other words, American security was directly linked to male-only groups and to the exclusion of women from some military jobs. Given this, the Pentagon's announcement on January 24, 2013, that it was removing the combat exclusion came as a shock to many Americans and raised two questions: Why now? And what did the change mean? Although there are competing theories as to why the combat exclusion was removed, there is little understanding of how the combat exclusion survived for so long and the role it played in shaping military identity. The intense effort to keep women from combat roles, even in the face of evidence that women were already "doing the job,"⁵ signals that the combat exclusion policy is an important site for understanding gender dynamics within the military.

This book is not a historical account of the combat exclusion or an evaluation of whether women should or should not fight in combat. It also does not predict whether the removal of the combat

³ Stephanie Gutmann, *The Kinder, Gentler Military: Can America's Gender-Neutral Fighting Force Still Win Wars?* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 272.

⁴ As discussed in subsequent chapters, a number of other reasons are given for the combat exclusion, including concerns over privacy, sexual violence, and logistics.

⁵ See Chapters 2 and 3 for more discussion on women's contribution to combat missions.

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exclusion will produce positive or negative outcomes for women or for the US military. Instead, the book uses the combat exclusion as a vehicle for a broader analysis of military identity. The foundational argument of the book is that the combat exclusion in the USA has always been about men, not women. There are two pillars to this position. The first is that the combat exclusion was an evolving set of rules, guidelines, and ideas primarily used to reify the all-male combat unit as elite, essential, and exceptional. The second is that the combat exclusion was not designed in response to research and evidence related to women and war, but rather was created and sustained through the use of stories, myths, and emotional arguments.

In particular, the myth of the band of brothers shapes our understanding of what men and women can, and should do, in war. Specifically, the band of brothers myth conveys three key “truths.” First, the myth casts the nonsexual, brotherly love, male bonding, and feelings of trust, pride, honor, and loyalty between men as mysterious, indescribable, and **exceptional**. Second, male bonding is treated as both primal and an **essential** element of an orderly, civilized, society. Third, all male units are seen as **elite** as a result of their social bonds and physical superiority; it is assumed that these qualities render them more capable of accomplishing military missions and defending the country compared to mixed-gender units. The physical differences between men and women are particularly emphasized and cited as evidence of women’s inferiority. In other words, difference is equated with superiority. Moreover, combat units are treated as the most elite component of the military; as van Creveld put it, “warriors . . . occup[y] an elevated position on the social ladder.”⁶ As well as these three truths, the overarching message of the band of brothers myth is that the exceptional, elite, and essential characteristics of the male group depend on the exclusion of women.

In addition to developing and supporting this central argument, one of the broad objectives of this book is to contribute to debates

⁶ van Creveld, “Less Than We Can Be,” 3.

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about the motivation and justifications for wars. The book offers a unique answer to the question “Why do we fight?”⁷ Many analyses of the military-industrial complex focus on the economy and overlook the social and cultural justifications for perpetual militarization and war. Building on the work of gender scholars such as Aaron Belkin⁸ and Cynthia Enloe,⁹ I argue that the logic of war depends on the preservation of gendered stories and myths about “real” men, “good” women, and “normal” social order. One could call the constant perpetuation and dissemination of such gendered ideals a militarized-masculinity complex.

The all-male combat unit lies at the heart of gendered depictions of war, and the band of brothers myth serves as a linchpin to social and cultural justifications for war. The ideal of the heroic, brave, masculine, and mysterious all-male unit legitimizes male privilege within the military institution, represents war as “the ultimate expression of masculinity,” and casts violence as a necessary political strategy. In turn, I argue that we fight because the myth of the band of brothers presents war as natural, honorable, and essential for social progress. Moreover, we fight because the band of brothers myth casts outsiders as inherent security threats and presumes that violence is the most efficient way of solving political problems. In light of these broader objectives, this book is not merely an account of the combat exclusion policy; rather, it uses the combat exclusion as a medium for unpacking

⁷ For two interesting perspectives on this question, see Eugene Jarecki’s excellent documentary *Why We Fight*, which traces the military-industrial complex and the inability of governments or American citizens to detect or prevent the pattern of perpetual war, or what, in the film, Gore Vidal summarizes as “the United States of amnesia” [Eugene Jarecki, *Why We Fight*, Documentary, History, War (2005)]. In their book *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, July 2003), Leonard Wong et al. make the case that cohesion, or the bonds between soldiers, is the primary motivation for combat soldiers.

⁸ Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898–2001* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁹ Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2000). See also the lecture by Enloe, “Women and Militarization: Before, During and After Wars,” for an excellent summary of the role of “good” women and “real” men in perpetuating wars. *Women and Militarization: Before, During, and After Wars* with Cynthia Enloe, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfCktWyARVo&feature=youtu>

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and unraveling one of the greatest – and most destructive – political myths: the myth of the band of brothers.

In addition to unraveling gender norms, this analysis provides an alternative perspective to those who laud the removal of the combat exclusion as a watershed moment. Using historical evidence, I will illustrate that it has been necessary for the US military to regroup and rebrand itself after almost every major military operation, particularly following the Vietnam War. Female soldiers are, and always have been, central to this rebranding and rewriting of history. Restricting women from combat units has served to confirm men's superior role in the military and reassure the public of the masculine identity of the military. This book traces the fluid and evolving stories and justifications associated with the combat exclusion throughout US military history. In doing so, it reveals a pattern in which women's exclusion from combat has been used to shape military identity, support militarization, and uphold male supremacy within the institution.

The removal of the combat exclusion is not a watershed moment and does not signal a new era for gender relations in the military. This characterization discounts women's historic contributions to combat operations – contributions that had been formally recognized in the form of combat badges and combat pay for years before the announcement. This characterization also overlooks ongoing sexism plaguing the institution, including a widely publicized yet largely unaddressed epidemic of sexual violence. Enthusiastic depictions of the combat exclusion policy change could be seen as part of a broader effort to revive a somewhat battered military image at the "end" of two largely unpopular wars, and in the face of ongoing scandals and criticism. This book demonstrates that the policy change did not mark the end of band of brothers narratives; rather, it served to recover and reshape the band of brothers myth, as well as military identity more broadly.

When seeking to understand the issues surrounding women and combat, a vast range of academic and nonacademic resources are available. In terms of nonacademic contributions, there are a number of monographs aimed at convincing readers that women

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should not be allowed in combat, or in some cases even in the military. These are largely polemics by former military staff – typically men – including *Co-ed Combat: The New Evidence That Women Shouldn't Fight the Nation's Wars* by Kingsley Browne¹⁰; Robert L. Maginnis' *Deadly Consequences: How Cowards Are Pushing Women into Combat*¹¹; and *Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster* by Brian Mitchell.¹² There are also several autobiographies and personal accounts of individual women's experiences of soldiering.¹³

In contrast to the polemics and individual features, there are excellent academic resources that examine the wider issues associated with gender and war,¹⁴ gender and the military,¹⁵ women's experiences of war,¹⁶ violent women,¹⁷ militarization,¹⁸ women in

¹⁰ Kingsley Browne, *Co-Ed Combat: The New Evidence That Women Shouldn't Fight the Nation's Wars*, 1st edition (Sentinel HC, 2007).

¹¹ Robert L. Maginnis, *Deadly Consequences: How Cowards Are Pushing Women into Combat*, 1st edition (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2013).

¹² Brian Mitchell, *Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster*, 1st Edition (Regnery, 1997).

¹³ Michele Hunter Mirabile, *Your Mother Wears Combat Boots: Humorous, Harrowing and Heartwarming Stories of Military Women* (AuthorHouse, 2007); James E. Wise Jr. and Scott Baron, *Women at War: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Conflicts* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2011); Kirsten Holmstedt, *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq* (Stackpole Books, 2008).

¹⁴ Carol Cohn, "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War," in *Gendering War Talk*, edited by Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 227–46; Carol Cohn, editor, *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012); Laura Sjöberg, *Gender, War, and Conflict*, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014).

¹⁵ Melissa S. Herbert, *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), and Paige Whaley Eager, *Waging Gendered Wars: U.S. Military Women in Afghanistan and Iraq*, New edition (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014).

¹⁶ Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2012); Sylvester, "The Art of War/The War Question in (Feminist) IR." *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (June 1, 2005): 855–78; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Robin L. Riley, editors, *Feminism and War*, 1st edition (London: Zed Books, 2008).

¹⁷ Carol Cohn, *Women and Wars* (December 4, 2012).

¹⁸ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*; Laura Sjöberg and Sandra E. Via, editors, *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives*, 1st edition (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).

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combat in other militaries around the world,¹⁹ and women's participation in militant movements and terrorist activities.²⁰ Feminist scholarship on women, gender, and war has challenged mainstream perspectives on war by asking critical questions, providing alternative understandings of key concepts such as security and post-conflict, and employing unique and reflexive methods for studying war and its aftermath.

Despite these valuable feminist contributions to war studies, there is a noticeable absence of feminist scholarship focused on Western militaries. Among the few feminist analyses of American women and combat, liberal feminists often characterize the combat exclusion as an example of gender exclusion and discrimination. For example, Kathleen Jones argued, "The best way to insure women's equal treatment with men is to render them equally vulnerable with men," including within the military.²¹ Some of those who lobbied to have the combat exclusion removed contended that the policy was a "gender-based barrier to service"²² that created a "brass ceiling"²³ for women in the armed forces. From this perspective, the removal of the combat ban is a sign of improved gender relations within the military, an opportunity for women to advance their careers, and even potentially a catalyst for reducing the rates of sexual violence within the military.²⁴

¹⁹ See, for example, Maya Eichler, "Women and Combat in Canada: Continuing Tensions between 'Difference' and 'Equality,'" *Critical Studies on Security* 1, no. 2 (August 2013): 257–59; Orna Sasson-Levy, "Feminism and Military Gender Practices: Israeli Women Soldiers in 'Masculine' Roles," *Sociological Inquiry* 73, no. 3 (2003): 440–65.

²⁰ Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2008); Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Paige Whaley Eager, *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008); Swati Parashar, "What Wars and 'War Bodies' Know about International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 615–30.

²¹ Jones, 1984.

²² Quoted in Mark Thompson, "Women in Combat: Shattering the 'Brass Ceiling,'" *Time*, accessed September 8, 2014, <http://nation.time.com/2013/01/24/women-in-combat-shattering-the-brass-ceiling/>.

²³ Ibid. ²⁴ Service Women's Action Network.

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Debates on women's capabilities and the potential impact of removing the combat exclusion tend to focus on physical statistics, historical evidence of women's contributions to war, and the effect of the combat exclusion on the careers of women. Data about women's physical bodies and the "average" physical differences between men and women is deliberated and assessed ad nauseam in attempts to determine if women can or should serve alongside men. There have also been extensive discussions about whether women's essential nature, in particular their presumed sensitivity and propensity for weakness and emotional reactions, presents an obstacle to their ability to serve on the front lines. Although such reflections and resources have merit, they can close off space for broader critical reflections on militarization, military identity, and gender hierarchies. More specifically, such debates ignore the ways that gender is constructed within, and in relation to, the military. By examining the relationship of the combat exclusion to the male combat unit, this book provides a unique perspective on both the policy and the centrality of the band of brothers myth to US military identity.

WHY MYTHS?

Myths are typically defined in two ways. The first – *myth as fiction* – treats myth as an untruth, or something contradictory to "reality."²⁵ The second – *myth as symbolic* – depicts myth as stories or narratives that are widely known to particular communities and that explain, justify, or legitimize certain cultural beliefs and practices. The former understanding of myth is widely represented within the field of international relations (IR). There are a number of IR resources that use myth interchangeably with error or untruth, including titles such as "The Myth of 1648," "The Myth of the Autocratic Revival," and "The Myth of Post-Cold War Chaos." The second definition of myth – as

²⁵ For example, John McDowell described myths as narratives that are "counterfactual in featuring actors and actions that confound the conventions of routine experience" in "Perspectives" on "What Is Myth" in *Folklore Forum*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1998.

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symbolic – remains relatively underexamined in IR. This definition treats myth as central to the way that social groups, including nations, identify themselves and make sense of the world around them.

In this analysis this second definition of myth is employed. I argue that myths matter to international relations (IR) and to foreign policy. They are not simply fables, stories, and untruths; rather, they are deeply embedded narratives that shape how we understand the world. Myths send explicit messages about appropriate, ideal, acceptable, and legitimate behaviors, identities, and practices. This analysis builds on a strong body of work examining how myths shape politics and identity. In his book *Political Myth*, Christopher Flood defines political myths as “ideologically marked narratives” that convey explicit norms, beliefs, ideologies, and identities.²⁶ Cynthia Weber’s work is at the forefront of IR scholarship engaged with myths.²⁷ For Weber, the study of myths is not aimed at locating flaws or untruths, so that “more accurate” approaches to IR might be constructed. Rather, myths reveal the unstable and constructed nature of truths that are treated as “common sense” within the field. In other words, the objective is not to “abandon the myth” but to “abandon the apparent truths associated with the myth.”²⁸

MYTH AS SECURITIZING

Drawing on Weber’s work, my objective in this book is to consider how the band of brothers myth shapes “truths” and “common sense” ideas associated with security and women’s place in war. The analysis does not replace these truths with more accurate ones. Rather, it traces the origins of these ideas in order to destabilize them and to

²⁶ Christopher Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (Psychology Press, 1996).

²⁷ Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Psychology Press, 2005). Also, in their book on Harry Potter and international relations, Iver Neuman and Dan Nexon argue that myths “serve as the frame into which other phenomena are fitted and then interpreted.” Daniel H. Nexon, *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

²⁸ Weber, *International Relations Theory*.

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create space for their critique and unraveling. Myths alone are certainly not capable of securitizing. However, myths are an essential element of the securitization process. Myths inform our understandings of international and social order, group identity, and appropriate norms and behaviors.

There is a particular gendered aspect to the relationship between myth and security. The “order” that is implicit to notions of peace and stability depends on multiple gender constructions, many of which can be traced back to myths. In particular, binaries such as disorder/order and insecurity/security largely stem from the gendered norms that myths evoke. For example, conjugal order is a term I developed in my 2012 book *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security and Post-conflict Development*. The term refers to the multitude of laws, rules, and social norms associated with the family and social order in particular contexts. It concluded that the myth of the nuclear family informed post-conflict security policies and defined female soldiers as a domestic “problem” rather than a security priority. By contrast, men were categorized as “real” soldiers and prioritized as security threats in the postconflict era. The term “conjugal order” helped illustrate how moments of insecurity or crisis are shaped in relation to peaceful, domestic order. This book examines how ideals of peaceful, weak, and vulnerable women help to define a hypermasculine military and are central to mythologies of the military and its bands of brothers. Building on existing work looking at emotions in international relations, this analysis also highlights the significance of, and the value placed on, emotion and “gut” feelings about the policy.

THE BAND OF BROTHERS MYTH

The band of brothers myth is another myth that shapes our understandings of order and security. The band of brothers myth refers to an all-male military unit, uniting to protect each other and defend their country. Although there have been references to “bands of brothers” for centuries, the band of brothers myth attained hegemonic status in relation to American military identity in the decades following the