

# Mr. Rogers' Military

by Patricia Hausman

**OUR MILITARY** may have met its Waterloo. It has all but surrendered—not to a superpower of greater prowess—but to history's oddest enemy: the confused ideology of radical feminism.

Not that this brand of feminism has prevailed by offering the more coherent argument (or much in the way of logical argument at all). Making sense of its belief that women are strong enough to withstand the hardships of combat, but too fragile to endure the slightest off-color remark is no easy task. Ditto for its view that women are so similar to men as to be essentially interchangeable, yet so different that they must have special workplaces designed to be "female-friendly."

How a movement so steeped in contradictions managed to become such a formidable opponent has been a story waiting to be told. In *The Kinder, Gentler Military*, Stephanie Gutman proves herself more than up to the task. Her highly readable prose vividly brings to life the triumph of ideology over evidence that has prompted the military's unprecedented effort to "ungender" its ranks.

Gutman is admirably blunt in her assessment of a military brass gone bonkers. She lambastes leaders who handed over their soldiers to social planners in love with an unworkable (and in many senses undesirable) vision of a politically correct utopia. That perfect world is one in which "men and women toil side by side, equally good at the same tasks, interchangeable, and, of course, utterly undistracted by sexual interest."

Sentiments like these all but guarantee that Gutman will be painted as an apologist for an

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institution that many assume (quite wrongly) to be the epitome of sexism. But she is nothing of the sort. Her message is hardly that females have no place in the military; she recognizes that women have served with distinction, and no doubt always will. What concerns her are two issues sorely in need of honest debate. The first is a familiar one: whether women should participate in direct combat. But the second will be new to most. It is whether attempts at "gender integration" have so backfired that the military is having trouble attracting and retaining personnel.

Military leaders generally acknowledge, albeit apologetically, their opposition to allowing women in direct combat. But on other aspects of gender integration, they rarely utter a discouraging word. There can be little argument with Gutman's interpretation for their shyness. In today's politically correct military, expressing the slightest doubts about current policies is a "career killer."

Fortunately, Gutman has little patience with those who traffic in noble lies. She tells it like it is, revealing "gender-neutrality" to be a classic example of doublespeak. Policies described as "gender-neutral" or "gender-blind" are, in fact, precisely the opposite. Our military is not indifferent to sex, but beholden to it.

Actually, the military's inability to treat the sexes identically is hardly surprising—nor necessarily to its discredit. It is the pretense of great success that is so troubling. Like the feminists whose wrath they fear, military leaders have greatly overestimated their ability to defy Mother Nature.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in Gutman's first-person accounts of life in

today's military: first, at an Army boot camp, and later, aboard a Navy ship. Here physical differences between the sexes play out in realities too compelling to ignore. Army experience, for instance, shows that if trained to the same standards long expected of males, females suffer disproportionate rates of injury. Similarly neither wishful thinking nor world-class trainers have been able to alter fundamental realities of human physiology. Those who run the fastest, throw the farthest, and have the least difficulty with the heavy lifting remain overwhelmingly male.

The logical way to deal with these realities is to train the sexes separately, as the Marines still do. But to the rest of the PC Pentagon, this approach is now unthinkable. Even the Army, which tried gender-integrated training years ago and abandoned it as a failure, has brought it back to fend off its feminist tormentors.

As a result, today's gender-integrated boot camp is a barely recognizable version of its former self. Physical demands have been dumbed-down to a point that males often find slow and unchallenging. Competition is discouraged, lest anyone's self-esteem be damaged. And despite official denials to the contrary, double standards abound.

How female recruits feel about gender-integrated boot camp is not clear from Gutman's account. But one has to wonder how they benefit from being forced to train with males who, as a group, clearly have superior physical abilities. The possibility that their best interests are being sacrificed to satisfy the ideological whims of gender activists seems all too real, as does the likelihood that males are also denied optimal training.

With less emphasis on physical conditioning, more time is spent on sensitivity sessions and, of course, the requisite harangues about sexual harassment. The very definition of the

term is Orwellian. According to one guidebook, such harassment need not be sexual at all. "A preconceived notion associated with gender" will suffice.

But if such notions are harassment, the brass itself has some explaining to do. Preconceived notions about gender define the New Age Navy. Its leaders see the female psyche as so fragile that it must be protected from words and deeds that, if traumatic at all, pale in comparison to the realities of soldiering. Accordingly, they have banned words that women hear regularly without fainting (and actually use themselves). No matter—sailors apparently cannot even talk about the famed youthful indiscretion of the nation's first commander-in-chief. The fruit involved is on the unmentionable list.

Accompanying the policing of language is an *in loco parentis* scrutiny of behavior so stifling that one sailor describes his vessel as "a Mommy ship." It is a sentiment that Gutman hears repeatedly:

The mommy ship imagery, the image of the "New Navy" as feminized, specifically, as a nurturing-to-the-point-of-infantilizing Mommy . . . who corrects your language, who takes away your booze, who slaps you if you gawk at a woman or tell a dirty joke, who worries overbearingly about danger and prescribes tons of tiresome safety procedures—comes up again and again from disgusted sailors.

Yet, for all the policies that assume females to be readily offended by males, the record tells a different story. Unbelievable as it may seem, many males and females in the military actually like each other! They primp. They flirt. They fall in love. They have moments of passion. And as a result, unplanned pregnancies are not uncommon—especially when the sexes are deployed together in isolated environments. (Asked about this phenom-

anon, one former defense secretary reportedly replied, “What else is there to do in Iceland?”)

Whether due to pregnancy, the responsibilities of motherhood, or lesser interest, the record also shows that females have higher attrition rates than males. While at sea, they are twice as likely to require release from duty. This being the case, Gutman’s view that the services should make “good use of the relatively small numbers of women” attracted to military careers seems eminently sensible. But politics has given logic a discharge. Recruiters are under intense pressure to enlist almost any female, even if more promising males must be refused as a result.

Ultimately, the picture that emerges is one of a military led by men courageous enough to storm the beaches, yet strangely incapable of saying no to feminist fantasies. And in Gutman’s view, the bill has come due. She sees policies that put political correctness before mission as a primary cause of manpower problems now plaguing the Army, Navy, and Air Force. In recent years, all have experienced lagging recruitment, excessive attrition, or both.

The official spin attributes these problems to the booming economy and other causes beyond the military’s control. But Gutman doesn’t buy it. The Marine Corps, she points out, has weathered the same circumstances quite well. She believes its resistance to feminist-style gender integration explains its success at maintaining its forces.

This is a compelling argument. It is strengthened by her intuitive understanding of why, despite its hardships, military life has long attracted many—and how political correctness has eroded this appeal. Reflecting on her experience aboard the naval ship, she captures the essence of what she believes has gone wrong:

*The fact is, the kind of guys who are capable and willing (under the right conditions) and even eager (under the right conditions) to pursue and demolish an enemy have some very hot stuff in their veins, and on a long cruise—especially one in a war zone, where one has to stay primed for action . . . people build up a lot of steam. In the old days, said F-14 pilot John Gadzinski, who left the service at thirty-three, “we built up a lot of steam and we let off a lot of steam. Now with all the valves blocked off, the only way to let off steam is to walk right out of the Navy.”*

Naturally, how the military became such a willing vehicle for social experimentation is a question that begs to be answered. Gutman cites a variety of factors to explain the new military mindset: the dwindling numbers of elected officials with military experience; a pervasive, but erroneous belief that technology has rendered physical strength irrelevant to combat; and, of course, changing roles of women. Still she sees an obvious last straw: the 1991 Tailhook convention that rocked the Navy to its core.

Gutman revisits the infamous event. While hardly a whitewash, her version is not nearly as lurid as press accounts. Yet in a sense, it is far more chilling. She presents evidence that harrowing tactics were used to exaggerate the extent of misconduct at the convention. The motive, she believes, was political: a perceived need by naval leaders to present themselves as change agents committed to creating a female-friendly Navy. She makes a strong case that careers, as well as an environment receptive to reason, were destroyed in the process.

Since then, thousands of combat support positions have been opened to women. Some have taken advantage of the new opportunities, but

the response has hardly been overwhelming. There simply aren't very many women whose idea of a dream job is working in combat support (never mind direct combat). In fact, women in the ranks seem far less preoccupied with "gender-neutrality" than senior female officers and gender-crazed civilian activists.

In her final chapter, Gutman lays out her own vision for restoring sanity to military policy. Again, she shows the common sense that the brass apparently lost in battle. Among her recommendations are single-sex basic training; abolition of sex-based recruiting quotas; job-specific standards independent of sex; and a formal apology to those unfairly penalized by unsubstantiated Tailhook allegations. Her justification is clear. "Our freedom and prosperity," she writes, "is dependent on getting the best people for the job. There are enough women in the pipeline so that some-times a woman will be that best person. But the best person for the job will usually be a man."

This is the one point where I felt the book could have been stronger. Gutman amply documents the physical differences between the sexes that affect their ability to perform certain military tasks. But significant psychological differences are mentioned only in passing, or not at all. For example, there are well-documented differences in values and interests that make males more likely than females to find satisfaction in military careers. Similarly, certain cognitive differences are especially relevant. Males are heavily overrepresented among those with high levels of mechanical aptitude and navigational skill—abilities that matter enormously in many military occupations.

This, however, is mere quibble. *The Kinder, Gentler Military* is one of those rare books that addresses an issue of great importance in a witty and engrossing style. It's simply too good to leave on the shelf.

