

Set Standards: Gender Does Not Justify Exclusion

By Ray Mabus

September 25

As the military departments approach the Oct. 1 deadline to submit requests for exemptions to the policy for women serving in ground combat positions, there are two things that I, as Secretary of the Navy, would like to make clear: First, the Marine Corps is the world's foremost expeditionary fighting force, and every decision I make is purposefully in support of maximizing its combat effectiveness. Second, this question is about standards, not gender; gender alone is not a justification for prohibiting a Marine from serving in a position for which she is qualified.

In 2013, after substantially studying the topic, then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey mandated that all the services open all positions to women, instructing that every position be open to all service members absent a compelling reason, backed by data, that supported leaving a position closed.

Before this decision, some integration efforts were already underway, including women serving aboard submarines. But as a result of the decision, new efforts launched: Navy SEALs began studying the effects of having women participate in their highly competitive, difficult program; Marines began their study on the integration of women into ground combat roles.

The Marines spent substantial time, effort and funds on their research, and the report they produced in August included a meaningful finding that will significantly improve the combat effectiveness of the Marine Corps: All Marines must be held to the same operationally relevant, occupation-specific, gender-neutral individual standards.

As soon as I received the study, I reviewed the Marine Corps data in detail and saw that it pointed to the importance of establishing individual standards. The Marines deconstructed each job in a unit to specifically detail its requirements so that individual members could function better as a team. During the study, however, the Marine Corps did not rely on the data for, or evaluate the performance of, individual female Marines; instead, it used only averages. Averages have no relevance to the abilities and performance of individual Marines.

The Marines' finding demonstrated the value of high standards: They maintain and enhance the corps' combat effectiveness. Clearly, it follows that if you meet the standards, you should be allowed the opportunity to serve.

Through the extensive work the corps has done, it is clear that there are justifications for excluding someone who does not meet the standards for a position; there are none that justify excluding someone who meets all of the standards because that person is a woman. The use of averages to disqualify every woman from ground combat positions in the Marine Corps — even one who meets the standards — does not meet the clear goals set by Panetta and Dempsey.

The rule that Panetta and Dempsey rescinded had its roots in 1992, when the Presidential Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, appointed by President George H.W. Bush, recommended continuing to exclude women from direct ground combat positions. As a result, in 1994, the Defense Department issued guidance consistent with that recommendation.

The department's civilian and military leadership recognize that our thinking, the way we fight and the landscape of our battles has significantly evolved from a quarter-century ago. However, the Marine Corps, in conducting its most recent analysis, relied on the 1992 language.

As the nature of warfare becomes more dynamic and unpredictable, we need to be the strongest force possible, and diversity is one of our greatest strengths. When we talk about diversity, we mean the full spectrum of demographics, but even more important, we mean diversity of thinking. The Marine Corps Times has highlighted an anecdote about the creative, expeditious way a four-woman team in the Marine Corps' study confronted an 8-foot obstacle; an American Forces Network report featured female Marines who demonstrated that gender does not define their service. These are the thinkers we need in every part of our force; they will maximize our combat effectiveness.

The few, the proud, the Marines have never been about being average; this issue is about setting high standards to keep Marines exceptional. Our shared commitment to maximizing the combat effectiveness of the corps requires us to maintain validated, high individual standards. There is

no other conclusion than that everyone who meets the standards should be permitted the opportunity to serve.

Click [here](#) to read this article on The Washington Post's Web site.