

BELFER CENTER REPORT

No Exceptions

The Decision to Open All
Military Positions to Women

Ash Carter



HARVARD Kennedy School
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Cover photo: KFOR Multinational Battle Group-East Soldiers fire the M9 pistol from the firing line during the weapons qualification event for the German Armed Forces Proficiency Badge at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, Dec. 12, 2017. (U.S. Army Photo / Staff Sgt. Nicholas Farina)

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About the Author

Ash Carter is a former United States Secretary of Defense and the current Director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School, where he leads the Technology and Public Purpose project. He is also an Innovation Fellow and corporation member at MIT.

For over 35 years, Secretary Carter has leveraged his experience in national security, technology, and innovation to defend the United States and make a better world. He has done so under presidents of both political parties as well as in the private sector.

As Secretary of Defense from 2015 to 2017, he pushed the Pentagon to “think outside its five-sided box.” He changed the trajectory of the military campaign to deliver ISIS a lasting defeat, designed and executed the strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific, established a new playbook for the U.S. and NATO to confront Russia’s aggression, and launched a national cyber strategy.

Secretary Carter spearheaded new technological capabilities and a more agile approach to the relationship between the Pentagon and the tech sector. He also transformed the way the Department of Defense recruits, trains, and retains quality people, opening all military positions to women without exception.

He earned a BA from Yale University and a PhD in theoretical physics from Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar.

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KFOR Multinational Battle Group-East Soldiers fire the M9 pistol from the firing line during the weapons qualification event for the German Armed Forces Proficiency Badge at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, Dec. 12, 2017. (U.S. Army Photo / Staff Sgt. Nicholas Farina)



Building the Force of the Future

As Secretary of Defense, I devoted a large amount of my time to visiting our troops at bases around the world. These were my favorite trips because they gave me the opportunity to spend time with the most important, dynamic, and inspiring part of the United States Armed Forces: our people.

In June 2016, I visited Fort Knox on one of these trips, where I met with Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) cadets and observed their training. These were college students training to be commissioned officers. Meeting with them, I felt an overwhelming sense of pride. Any American who had the chance to look these young women and men in the eye would be proud to observe how dedicated, disciplined, talented, and principled they are. And to know what they are doing for all Americans—to protect us and make a better world for our children—makes you even prouder.

Over lunch, we talked about why they had joined the armed forces, how they saw their lives going forward, and how the U.S. military could continue to keep, retain, and develop the best among them. I asked them what they thought we were doing well and what we could improve. Their answers were important to me because I was constantly evaluating and rethinking how we manage our personnel. After the event, I spoke briefly and explained my thinking: “The Force of the Future, as I call it, is a major commitment of mine. Among all the other things we need to be doing all around the world and all the other issues that are before a Secretary of Defense, one of my responsibilities is to make sure that the military of the future is as fine as today’s.”¹

This commitment to building the force of the future was the reason behind my announcement, six months prior, that opened—for the first time in American history—all U.S. military positions to anyone, male

¹ “Media Availability by Secretary Carter at Fort Knox, Kentucky,” U.S. Department of Defense, June 22, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/810150/media-availability-by-secretary-carter-at-fort-knox-kentucky/>.

or female, who could meet our high standards. I made that decision with the goal of strengthening America's force of the future—the all-volunteer military that will defend our nation for generations to come—by drawing from the entire pool of talent that the United States has to offer.

During that trip to Fort Knox, I spoke to a large group of cadets and their trainers. Afterward, I thanked each service member, and as part of a long-standing military tradition, I offered my Secretary of Defense challenge coin. By chance, two of the people I “coined” that day were some of the first women to qualify for infantry positions previously closed to them. They were now serving at Fort Knox as shooting range trainers. We spoke only briefly, but the conversation has stayed with me since then. They appreciated my decision, which gave them the opportunity to compete and earn a spot in these infantry roles. But, befitting their duty-first mentality, they were more focused on doing their jobs and keeping their trainees in line.

This was exactly why I made my decision: making sure that the United States Armed Forces is equipped with the best people doing what we need done to make us safer with professionalism, not fanfare.

The What: Opening All Positions to Women without Exceptions

When I became Secretary of Defense in February 2015, nearly 10 percent of all military positions—220,000 in total—were barred to women. These included roles in artillery, armor, infantry, and some special operations units.

This was true despite the fact that women have served our country on the battlefield in growing numbers for decades. These figures rose even more steeply after 9/11. More than 300,000 women have served in combat environments over the past two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.² These conflicts elevated the status of women in combat by demolishing conventional battle lines, making it increasingly difficult to exclude women from combat based on occupational specialty. As these conflicts grew longer and more complicated, the U.S. Armed Forces adapted. Our military adopted a different approach to fighting that made the best use of all the resources at our disposal, regardless of gender.³ Women have fought insurgents in dangerous areas as top-gunners in Humvees and door-gunners on helicopters. They have patrolled streets with machine guns, disposed of explosives, and driven trucks down bomb-ridden roads.⁴ They have led convoys in combat and have flown attack helicopters. They have served on female engagement teams with the Marines, and in cultural support teams that accompany Rangers, Navy SEALs, and other special operators on raids, engaging the enemy directly. Some women gather intelligence as members of the Navy's SEAL Team 6's Black Squadron and the Army's ultra-secretive Delta Force.⁵ Women are, right now, flying in the skies above Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.⁶

Female service members have served our country with honor, bravery, and distinction. Collectively, women have earned more than 10,000

2 Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, "Women in Combat? They've Already Been Serving on the Front Lines, with Heroism," *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1204-lemmon-women-combat-20151204-story.html>.

3 Lizette Alvarez, "G.I. Jane Breaks the Combat Barrier," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/us/16women.html>.

4 Alvarez.

5 Richard A. Oppel, Jr., "Two Female Soldiers Poised to Graduate From Ranger School," *The New York Times*, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/us/two-female-soldiers-poised-to-graduate-from-ranger-school.html>.

6 Kristy N. Karmack, "Women in Combat: Issues for Congress" (Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2016), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42075.pdf>.

combat action badges and Bronze Stars. At least 12 of these Bronze Stars were awarded for acts of valor. Two women have received the nation's second-highest honor, the Silver Star, since World War II.⁷ More than a thousand women have been wounded in action in combat operations since 2003. As of March 2018, 168 women had given their lives to our country.⁸

In recent decades, the Department of Defense had made some strides toward integrating women into the armed forces. In 1975, for example, the Department opened up the military service academies to women. Congress helped by repealing laws prohibiting women from serving in air and naval combat units in the early 1990s. In 1993, the Department allowed women to fly fighter jets and serve on combat ships at sea.⁹

At about the same time, though, the Department also issued the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule, which prohibited women from being assigned to units whose primary mission was engaging in direct ground combat.¹⁰

This rule stood for two decades, until January 2013, when then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta rescinded this rule and opened 110,000 positions to women. This was an important first step. It allowed women all across the services to make impactful strides. Some went on to graduate from the Army's Ranger School. Others serve on submarines out at sea.¹¹

Despite this progress, women remained barred from 220,000 combat positions.¹² During his time in the Pentagon, Leon did not make a final decision about whether these remaining positions would be open to women or whether

7 Lemmon, "Women in Combat? They've Already Been Serving on the Front Lines, with Heroism."

8 U.S. Department of Defense, "Conflict Casualties," Defense Casualty Analysis System, April 2018, <https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/casualties.xhtml>.

9 Art Pine, "Navy Prepares to Welcome Women Aboard Its Warships," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1993, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-12-09/news/mn-65516_1_women-navy-aboard; Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Plans to Allow Combat Flights by Women; Seeks to Drop Warship Ban," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/28/us/pentagon-plans-to-allow-combat-flights-by-women-seeks-to-drop-warship-ban.html>.

10 Leslie Aspin, "Memorandum on the Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule" (U.S. Department of Defense, January 13, 1994), <http://www.govexec.com/pdfs/031910d1.pdf>.

11 Leon Panetta and Martin Dempsey, "Memorandum on the Elimination of the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule" (U.S. Department of Defense, January 24, 2013), <https://www.defense.gov/news/WISRJointMemo.pdf>.

12 Emily Crockett, "'No Exceptions': Women Can Now Serve in All Military Combat Roles," *Vox*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/12/3/9844404/women-military-combat-no-exceptions>.

some would remain closed. Instead, Leon gave 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 study the issue of opening all positions to women and request any exemptions that would keep women out of some roles. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would review these requests, and the Secretary of Defense would decide whether to approve them. This decision effectively kicked the can down the road. This period of study expired in January 2016, a year into my tenure as Secretary of Defense.¹³

When I became Secretary, I knew that the final decision would rest on my shoulders.

I also knew this moment would be historic regardless of the outcome. Bungling this decision would be a colossal mistake. Questions about the operational and political risks involved in integrating women into combat positions were longstanding and would have to be answered. Political football could be played with this matter, as was increasingly true with almost any issue. If done incorrectly, the fallout could have kept certain positions closed to women long into the future.

This meant that the decision needed to be bulletproof. It required immense preparation, with each argument supported by extensive evidence and rooted in the Pentagon's core mission—the safety of our country.

We succeeded. On December 3, 2015, I ordered the military to open all positions to women with no exceptions. To my satisfaction and relief, the announcement attracted, remarkably, little to no controversy. No publication wrote editorials against it. No letters poured in from Capitol Hill. No interest groups issued position papers in opposition. Since then, the implementation has gone smoothly. Women are now eligible to compete for all military positions. Today, there are well over a thousand women in combat positions.¹⁴

13 Leon Panetta and Martin Dempsey, "Memorandum on the Elimination of the 1994 Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule."

14 "Women in Ground Combat: Facts and Figures" (Women in International Security, February 1, 2017), <https://www.servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Women-in-Ground-Combat-Arms-Fact-Sheet-2-1-17.pdf>.

The story of how we got there holds lessons about leadership and decision-making that are valuable to any organization facing a significant change in policy. It can be told in three parts: (1) doing your homework to reach a decision; (2) making the announcement; and (3) effectively implementing the decision.

The methodical process that we applied to make this decision was a testament to the Defense Department's longstanding tradition of doing its homework to reach a decision based in reason and driven by one objective—ensuring that our fighting force remains the strongest in the world. What is the best way to achieve this goal? It is often a difficult question to answer.

Once you determine what the right decision is, you must secure buy-in to see it adopted. In government, this means communicating your decision convincingly and securing acceptance—or at least forestalling censure—from a legion of stakeholders that includes the President, 535 members of Congress, journalists, think tanks, and the public, as well as the service members and leadership inside the Pentagon itself. Our success in securing their buy-in depended on thoughtful communication. In my announcement, I was very careful to reason with the listener and anticipate their questions or objections, allowing me to address them proactively.

Finally, this story illustrates the fact that effective implementation is essential to success—not a secondary consideration. For many issues, including our women in service decision, the devil often lies in the implementation. We had to create a thorough plan that could withstand any operational pressures—a rigorous process that required identifying all the potential consequences of our decision and devising reasonable solutions. Without it, we would have failed, regardless of how well-reasoned our decision was or how carefully we communicated it.

Together, these three components formed one deliberate, methodical, evidence-based, and iterative process to increase combat effectiveness and protect the welfare of the force.

The Why: My Reasoning

Throughout my first year as Secretary, I knew the January 2016 deadline for a decision was looming. Time was winding down, but I thought it likely that a thorough analysis would confirm that the right decision was to open all military positions to female personnel. It would strengthen the force, and any impediments could be overcome with effort.

I also systematically evaluated and laid out the reasoning that backed my position. This was critical. It may seem quaint to many, and maybe it is a little of the scientist in me, but I believe logic still goes a long way. While behavioral science and modern persuasion tactics often emphasize human irrationality, reason remains an integral part of our relationships and communication with others. In my career of public service, spanning 35 years and administrations left, right, and center, I've seen time and again that reason still carries your argument quite far toward winning the day. If you are doing something that makes sense, and you can explain why it makes sense, it is more convincing to others—and more likely to endure others' critiques. When it came to explaining my decision, I knew that I had to convince an entire host of stakeholders—the troops and their leaders, the media, Congress, interest groups, the public—about the merits of my decision. Doing so required first thoroughly understanding my own reasoning.

On this issue, there were two pillars to my reasoning. Both served to accomplish a broader goal—ensuring that our all-volunteer fighting force remains the strongest.

First, building that strong fighting force means finding the most qualified person to fill any position. You can't do that unless you draw from America's entire pool of talent. There are two things that make America's military great: people and technology. I was determined that my decision on women in service would make the first part of this equation stronger.

When I became Secretary of Defense, I was keenly aware of the fact that I was not only the Secretary of Defense of today, tackling the challenges that Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and terrorist groups pose to the U.S. in that moment. I was also the Secretary of Defense of tomorrow. I had an

obligation to leave to my successors a fighting force as fine as, if not better than, the one that I inherited.

Americans sometimes forget that our military is an all-volunteer force with high standards in a competitive labor market. Like the CEO of any other organization, I needed to compete for talent in the general labor pool to recruit the best talent available. To achieve our mission, our force of the future must attract America's finest young people, wherever or whoever they are.

As Secretary, I was concerned about the gap between that aspiration and the reality of our recruiting. For example, the large states of the Northeast and Midwest rank the lowest in percentage of young people who join the military. This means that in these states, we have not made an adequate appeal to Americans graduating from high school, entering college as a potential ROTC candidate, or considering applying for a military academy. We have not given all Americans an equal opportunity to consider public service, nor have we given ourselves the best chance of convincing those who are qualified to join our ranks. There is no logical reason, and there is significant material cost, to neglect able candidates from any state. As Secretary of Defense, I rolled out several proposals as part of my Force of the Future initiative¹⁵ with the explicit aim of giving our military a better chance of attracting top talent across all 50 states.

We faced a similar constraint with women. Women are half our population. To succeed in our mission of national defense, we cannot afford to cut ourselves off from half the country's talents and skills. On the contrary, we must take full advantage of every individual who can meet our demanding standards. If we have a bigger pool of eligible recruits to compete for positions, we may select even more qualified personnel for combat assignments. To me, this is a practical necessity. Obviously, fairness is also important, because everyone who is able and willing to defend our country should have the full and equal opportunity to do so. But the principal

15 I created the Force of the Future Initiative in order for the Department of Defense to maintain its competitive edge in bringing in top talent to serve the nation. Through this program, I introduced reforms to transform the way the Department recruits, trains, and retains quality people. Examples of these reforms included establishing the Digital Defense Service and the Digital Innovation Board, overhauling the officer promotion system, and extending parental leave.

reason to open all military positions to women was to have access to every American who could add strength to the joint force.

Of course, service members must earn their position through a competitive process. The military has high expectations that must be met. That is what makes our force so reliable. But our ability to remain a highly professional and effective force depends on giving ourselves the chance to recruit the best that our country has to offer—regardless of gender.

Consider the alternative. Three months before I made my decision, I called First Lieutenant Shaye Haver and Captain Kristen Griest to congratulate them on becoming the first women to graduate from Ranger School, the Army's premier leadership course and one of the most challenging and exhausting training programs in the military. When we spoke, they were dead tired, but proud of their performance. About 4,000 officers and enlisted soldiers start Ranger School every year, but only two out of five graduate. Only three percent of active-duty soldiers in the Army have accomplished what they did.¹⁶

Second Lieutenant Zachary Hagner, who was in the same Ranger School class, recalled a moment from training, when he was bone-tired after carrying a 17-pound machine gun for three days. He asked his fellow squad members for help with it. "I went to every single person, just in a line, no order. 'No, I'm really tired, too, I'm broken,'" he remembered the men in his squad saying. But when he got to Kristen, "She basically took it away from me," he said. "Nine guys were like 'Well, I'm too broken, I'm too tired.' She—just as broken and tired—took it from me with almost excitement. I thought she was crazy for that, but maybe she was just motivated."¹⁷

Given the chance, Kristen and Shaye proved that women could meet the toughest standards the U.S. military can set. They had earned the right to wear the distinctive black and gold Ranger tab on their uniforms. And yet, despite their achievement and their obvious qualifications, the policies in place at the time prohibited them from serving in a Ranger regiment.

16 Oppel, Jr., "Two Female Soldiers Poised to Graduate From Ranger School."

17 Mark Thompson, "America: Meet Your First Female Rangers," *Time*, August 20, 2015, <http://time.com/4005578/female-army-rangers/>.

We had deprived ourselves of the chance to make full use of their proven talents and risked stalling their career progress in a way that could have caused them to look outside the military. Each qualified woman serving in our military makes our fighting force stronger and the rest of us safer. To keep our fighting force as strong as possible, we cannot afford to pass them by.

The second pillar of my reasoning was to ensure that we are able to recruit and retain high-performing women in the military, regardless of what position they hold.

Our studies indicated that, for a variety of reasons, only a small number of women would compete for the combat positions we would open, at least initially. That is their choice. As a result, even though women are half the population, I did not expect half of applicants for these positions to be women.

Many women in the force have chosen other specialties. They have chosen to fly planes or repair submarines, to carry out communications or intelligence or logistics work—work that is critical to our duty protecting Americans at home and abroad.

To recruit and retain these women, it is important for them to know they are not “second-class citizens” in the military, the institution to which they have dedicated their careers. Our studies showed that when women are not permitted to take up positions like combat arms, it has an indirect effect on the rest of the force’s attitude toward women and women’s career trajectories, as well as women’s own perceptions of how much they are valued. For example, in the military, combat experience is often crucial to promotion into the senior ranks of the services. Barring women from certain combat positions often meant stalling their careers, making military service less appealing as a career choice.

That is the other reason why, even though the numbers may be small, providing women with this opportunity has an outsized benefit.¹⁸ By making the best possible use of the talents and capabilities of women who sought

¹⁸ For example, we learned that since Germany opened all combat positions to women in 2001, the number of overall women in the German Armed Forces has tripled.

combat positions, we would make better use of the talents of all the women in the force.

Drawing from our nation's entire pool of talent and recruiting and retaining high-performing women were the two principal pillars of my reasoning. In my mind, both goals were indispensable to my responsibilities as the Secretary of Defense of today and tomorrow to build the strongest possible force of the future.

The How, Part 1: Doing the Homework

Once your reasoning is clear, you must do your homework thoroughly in order to test that rationale and ensure all relevant information is taken into account. I had a hypothesis based on my 35 years working in or for the Pentagon and past reviews of this issue. But I was open to being proved wrong.

This is true for any effort to change policy—be open-minded, do the homework, assemble the experts, conduct studies, and master the information yourself. As Secretary, I applied this mindset every day, whether I was learning about the geography of a remote village in Syria or the latest cyberthreat facing the Department. The same was true for this question.

This learning process won't be effective unless people across your organization have the opportunity, incentive, and accountability to contribute their best advice. This means advice that offers a comprehensive solution to every aspect of the problem, not only one part of it. This helps ensure, and later demonstrate, that you have applied a holistic and deliberative approach.

In this case, we did our homework to accomplish four goals: (1) verify that this was the right decision for the effectiveness of the force; (2) determine implementation; (3) ensure that it was feasible without incurring significant cost; and (4) anticipate likely questions and objections.

The Department of Defense is a learning organization—a fact that belies its size as the world’s largest employer. This is a point of pride for me. When the U.S. military takes something on, whether it is adapting to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, using unmanned aerial systems, or repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” we do it in a deliberate, analytical, and careful manner. It is a foundational and remarkable characteristic of our institution.

In keeping with this institutional ethos, we carried out exhaustive studies to accomplish each of these four goals before making the decision. I asked for independent analyses and recommendations from the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Secretary of the Navy, the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Commander of Special Operations Command.¹⁹

We asked each component to examine how this decision would apply to them and submit this analysis to me along with their recommendation about whether women should remain barred from any positions. This was a deliberately bottom-up process. The uniformed services who manage service members for the Secretary of Defense are the experts on how decisions like this one would affect their people in their unique operational environment, whether in a foxhole or on a submarine.

Importantly, I did not just want their recommendations. I wanted the basis for those recommendations. That is important, because if you are going to make a consequential decision, you need to make sure that you have really walked around it yourself, considered all the angles, and can fully explain every aspect of your decision. My goal was to ensure that I could always answer the question, “Mr. Secretary, have you thought about this?” with a confident, “Yes.”

The services and United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) conducted extensive examinations of the opportunities, effects, and implementation issues inherent in opening combat positions to women. By July 2015, the Pentagon, including my office and the military departments, had completed 41 studies.²⁰

19 “Women in Service Studies,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Publications/WISR-Studies/>.

20 Kristy N. Karmack, “Women in Combat: Issues for Congress.”

We conducted surveys of the force, male and female. We studied unit cohesion; women's health; equipment, gear, and uniforms; facilities modifications; interest in serving in combat roles; and international experiences with women in combat. We reviewed and validated gender-neutral occupational standards for combat roles to ensure none were lowered. We studied potential effects on living arrangements and sexual assault, recognizing that this decision would put men and women into smaller, more dangerous, more tension-filled circumstances.

We looked at comparable organizations, including more than a dozen other militaries around the world that have opened "close combat roles" to women—those positions that entail engaging an enemy on the ground while being exposed to hostile fire and a high probability of physical contact with hostile forces.²¹ We looked at SWAT teams, which are mixed-gender. We looked at NASA flight crews that were mixed-gender and had to operate in confined quarters. We tried to glean what lessons we could, not only about the decision itself, but also about how to implement it in a way that would fully harness the advantages it could offer our forces.

These studies yielded insights far beyond gender integration. The research and analysis conducted over two years increased our understanding of the physical and physiological demands on service members and the cultural currents that influence unit cohesion and morale.

I received the components' voluminous analyses and reviewed every one of them carefully to ensure I took into account the many different circumstances and concerns across services. I worked hard on this personally. I was going to be the one defending this decision, so I made sure to master the details.

One of the most thoughtful submissions I received was from Special Operations Command, then led by Joe Votel. SOCOM is very good at managing

21 Several countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, have opened all military positions to women. Others, like the United Kingdom, are currently in the process of doing so. Many other nations, such as Pakistan, South Korea, and Israel, have opened some, but not all, combat positions to women. Anna Mulrine, "8 Other Nations That Send Women to Combat," *National Geographic*, January 25, 2013, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/13/130125-women-combat-world-australia-israel-canada-norway/>; Max Fisher, "Map: Which Countries Allow Women in Front-Line Combat Roles?," *Washington Post*, January 25, 2013, sec. WorldViews, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/map-which-countries-allow-women-in-front-line-combat-roles/>.

human capital, and its experience with mixed gender teams was educational. SOCOM had women integrated in its force for quite some time. Its submission focused on outcomes, examining this issue with a focus on what would maximize teams' effectiveness. The SOCOM team brought extensive evidence to bear, such as a framework for maintaining high gender-neutral standards and findings that integrated teams improved Special Forces' ability to carry out their mission in certain cases that required interaction with female communities in the Middle East.²² These analyses proved very useful in my decision-making process.

The Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Air Force, the Secretary of the Navy, the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, the Chief of Naval Operations, and the Commander of Special Operations Command all recommended opening all positions in their components to women, including combat positions. They concluded, from their studies, that some concerns about integration, such as unit morale, cohesion, and readiness, were either unlikely to materialize or could be addressed in implementation.

All of the uniformed services were supportive of opening all positions to women without exceptions for their portion of the force, except the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps had reservations and asked for continuing exceptions that would have applied to 48,779 positions, particularly in the areas of infantry, artillery, armor, and reconnaissance.²³ These patrols are sent out well in advance of the front and are small-unit operations. The Marine Corps was uneasy about integrating women into those mission areas. The Secretary of the Navy did not approve the Marine Corps' request for exceptions. Nonetheless, as Secretary of Defense, I still had to consider it.

Joe Dunford was the Marine Corps Commandant who asked for these continuing exceptions. Despite a difference on this matter, I had asked President Obama to nominate Joe as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that summer. I told the President that Joe was my first choice.

22 RAND National Defense Research Institute, "Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces" (United States Special Operations Command, May 2015), <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/wisr-studies/SOCOM%20-%20Considerations%20for%20Integrating%20Women%20into%20Closed%20Occupations%20in%20the%20US%20Special%20Operations%20Forces.pdf>.

23 Kristy N. Karmack, "Women in Combat: Issues for Congress."

I was often asked at the end of my tenure, “What was the best decision you made as Secretary of Defense?” It was recommending Joe Dunford, who continues to serve as the Chairman at this writing. Joe was so valuable to me because he thought through problems in their entirety, and offered solutions accordingly. For every dilemma we grappled with at the Pentagon, Joe proposed whole solutions, not a piece of an idea that is missing the rest of the answer. It is an extremely valuable—and rare—trait. I had no doubts about recommending him to be America’s highest-ranking military officer.

Even though Joe disagreed with me on this particular decision, he nevertheless brought his comprehensive problem-solving approach to bear on it. Joe made two critical contributions to this decision, which I credited to him in my announcement. First, in his role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joe wrote that whatever decision I made should be “joint”—that is, a consistent decision across the force. It should be the same for all parts of the force, and we should not hive any branch out—in this case, the Marine Corps. I thought that was important, too, that I make the same decision for the force in its entirety. In today’s wars, members of various services fight side-by-side in a way that is different from wars of the past. As a practical matter, a consistent approach would be most effective.

Joe’s second point was that “a decision is not implementation.” This was crucial. What he meant was that once we had made this decision, we had to make sure it was well-executed. That means training people to deal with this new circumstance properly, both female and male, and that all the “little” things, like showers, bunking, and bathrooms are taken care of. It has to be done right.

I took both these points to heart in making my decision. This was how I was able to avail myself of Joe’s advice as Chairman, while not incorporating all of it as Marine Corps Commandant.

Finally, in the fall of 2015, we had done all our homework and assembled all the evidence. Over Thanksgiving weekend in 2015, I took home every binder of the services’ reports home. That weekend, I considered every piece of analysis from each of the components, as well as Joe’s advice. I

discussed the decision with two close confidants—Eric Rosenbach, my Chief of Staff, and Bob Work, the Deputy Secretary.

After reviewing all the evidence, considering Joe's advice, and analyzing the decision from every perspective, I concluded that the data showed that opening all positions to women, without exceptions, was the right decision to assemble the strongest possible military force today and tomorrow.

Doing the homework allowed me to test my original reasoning. It also helped us learn how we could implement the decision effectively and at reasonable cost. In the case of the Marine Corps, I thought their analysis for their particular case was very thoughtful, but I believed that their reservations could be addressed in implementation.

We now had the evidence to defend against any counterargument. Next, we had to announce the decision in a way that would ensure it was embraced. A messy controversy would be bad for everyone.

The How, Part 2: Making the Announcement



Defense Secretary Ash Carter announces his Women in Service Review during a press brief at the Pentagon, Dec. 3, 2015. (Dept. of Defense Photo / Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Adrian Cadiz)

All the while we were doing our “homework,” I could see the January 1, 2016 deadline in the distance. The natural thing to do in circumstances like this is to wait until the specific deadline, walk out on that day to the podium in the Pentagon, and announce a decision. I did not. Instead, I decided to make the announcement about a month before, when nobody would expect it.

I did so for two reasons. First, this was a professional decision that we arrived at through a deliberate, logic-driven process. I wanted the announcement to reflect that. I did not want the spectacle and controversy that would result from making the announcement on the deadline. A splashy decision may garner some praise for doing the right thing, but it also elicits negative views that can block progress. Our surveys indicated that female service members felt the same—they did not think we should turn this decision into a spectacle.

Second, I wanted the opportunity to clearly and fully articulate my argument before anyone else had an opportunity to put forth a different narrative. Afterward, anyone could react to my argument—that would only be fair. Members of Congress could respond and organize hearings. But I would have laid out my argument and preemptively addressed objections. This sequence put me in the driver's seat. First, critics would have to respond to my framing of the issue, and I was confident that my argument—backed by reason and evidence—would win. Second, it allowed us to drive the news cycle. If you publicize a date for the announcement, you give opponents time to distort your case with straw man arguments in the media before you even get the chance to lay out your argument. Once you are behind the curve, responding to a news cycle driven by others' criticisms, defending your position becomes nearly impossible.

That is why I wrote the statement by hand myself, and why I made sure that I had thought through every sentence of it. Given the sensitivity of this announcement, I took extreme care to draft a clear, straightforward statement shorn of rhetorical or ideological flourishes. Instead, I focused on telling a simple story: why this was the right decision for the force and how we thought it through.

The delicate nature of this announcement also meant that Joe and I had to be careful. The announcement carried risk for both of us. Opening all positions in the Marine Corps to women contradicted Joe's stance as Commandant—an uncomfortable position for him. On the other hand, it incorporated his advice as Chairman. As a result, Joe and I agreed that when I made the announcement, he would not go to the podium with me. I was very open about this in the press conference following my announcement. I told the press that I had advice from Joe, which in this instance I was not taking. I remember someone asked, "Why is General Dunford not here?" I said, "I was the one who took this decision." If the press was going to criticize this decision, I wanted them to criticize me, not anyone else.

To guard against leaks, I was also very careful about who I told about the announcement ahead of time. Joe, Bob Work, and Eric Rosenbach were virtually the only people who knew. On the morning I spoke, Pentagon reporters were still guessing what my announcement was about. Many expected I would grant some exceptions, given the Marine Corps' review.

The White House was among those who did not know beforehand. That was a decision that I knew might be difficult. An hour before I walked out to the podium, I called the President's Chief of Staff, Denis McDonough. I said, "I'm about to make an announcement opening all military positions to women, with no exceptions," which I knew was a complete surprise. "You can put me through to the President if you want. I know I'm surprising you, but I think it's better this way. This is a professional decision driven by the mission and the Department's own analysis. If it looks like a White House-led decision, then it will seem political."

Denis being Denis, and Obama being Obama, they understood fully. The decision was correct, the process was professional, and the outcomes were too important to jeopardize with politics.

I did not tell anybody in Congress beforehand. As it turns out, I received almost no backlash from Congress after the announcement. This was remarkable. Typically, when you make a high-profile decision, you always hear something from Congress because any decision of consequence that comes to you as Secretary of Defense is difficult in some way for some legislator. There are going to be individuals and interest groups who disagree with you, and they inevitably register that with their representatives. This decision was a rare case in which we heard almost no disagreement from Capitol Hill afterward. The same was true of the press, with almost all the coverage factual and positive.

The lack of controversy accompanying this decision was a tribute to the basic good sense of the decision-making process and the way we announced it. The Defense Department, from all the services to my staff, had done its homework and considered this problem from all the angles. In my statement, I took the time to answer the objections that I knew would arise. And because we got out ahead of the deadline, this meant that anyone writing about this issue would have to cite and respond to our argument, rather than forcing us to respond to theirs. The result was an important, professional, non-politicized decision that precluded the typical D.C. media circus.

The How, Part 3: A Decision Is Not Implementation

Making this difficult announcement go smoothly was still insufficient for Joe’s “successful integration.” It is one thing to have made a well-reasoned decision, and another thing to announce it. But will it work in practice?

To implement a decision successfully, you must anticipate all its potential consequences, think through them, devise a plan to enact reasonable solutions, and execute on that plan thoughtfully. In this case, it meant recognizing and addressing, for example, the fact that men and women will be in cramped quarters. It meant anticipating potential challenges of working with foreign partners with different values. It meant training to help both men and women to adjust to this new reality.

At every stage of integration, I emphasized that the implementation process must be handled the right way, because the combat effectiveness of the world’s finest fighting force is paramount. This was my overarching approach, and I made this clear in my announcement, stating: “Implementation must be pursued with the clear objective of improved force effectiveness. Leaders must emphasize that objective to all service members, men and women alike.”

Joe and I agreed that implementation should be coordinated jointly, with all the military services working together. To make sure we did this right, I asked the military services to incorporate seven guiding principles into their implementation plans.²⁴

1. **Consistent standards:** The services would need to continue applying transparent and objective standards for all career fields to ensure leaders assign tasks, jobs, and career fields throughout the force based on mission effectiveness, not gender mix.

²⁴ Ash Carter, “Memorandum on Implementation Guidance for the Full Integration of Women in the Armed Forces” (U.S. Department of Defense, December 3, 2015), <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/OSD014303-15.pdf>.

2. **No quotas:** For a variety of reasons, equal opportunity likely will not mean equal participation by women and men in all specialties. There must be no quotas or perception thereof.
3. **Talent management:** Integration provides equal opportunity for men and women who can perform the tasks required; it does not guarantee that women will be promoted at any specific number or at any set rate, as adherence to a merit-based system must continue to be paramount.
4. **Physical demands and physiological differences:** The services' studies indicated that physical and other physiological differences between men and women, on average, are real and that fact must be taken into account in implementation. For example, studies showed that women have higher injury rates than men on average; but some men get injured more than some women.
5. **Operating abroad:** While 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 must be aware that not all nations share this perspective but that our security demands nonetheless that we work with them.
6. **Doubts and concerns:** We will have to address the fact that several surveys suggested that some service members, men and women alike, had the perception that integration would be pursued at the cost of combat effectiveness. While these concerns were neither well-grounded nor a majority view, we needed to strive to help them see it in action and accept the decision.
7. **Assessment and adjustment:** We would embark on integration with a commitment to the monitoring, assessment, and in-stride adjustment that enables sustainable success.

I directed the service chiefs to develop detailed implementation plans based on these guidelines, and to begin executing these implementation plans no later than April 1, 2016. Because of the exhaustive analyses they had completed to inform the decision, which had included implementation concerns, each of the military services and SOCOM were able to deliver thoughtful approaches to implementation ahead of this deadline.

There were a few tricky aspects of implementing the decision. The guidelines sought to manage them and help the services with the implementation process by making them explicit.

1. Consistent Standards

My first and foremost guiding principle was that the services would need to continue to apply transparent and objective standards for all career fields to ensure leaders assign tasks, jobs, and career fields throughout the force based on ability and overall mission success, not gender mix. This was critical to preserving unit effectiveness, cohesion, and morale. In this respect, the services were able to leverage the great amounts of data they gathered over three years' worth of studies to ensure their standards were up-to-date and operationally relevant. These studies and adjustments were ongoing and unrelated to my decision on women in service, but they needed to be taken into account during the implementation of this decision.

Through this research, we found that in some cases we were doing things simply because that was the way we had always done them. For example, previously, one of the tasks to earn the Army's Expert Infantry Badge required soldiers to move 12 miles in three hours with a 35-pound rucksack, but it turns out that the rucksack weight was based on a World War II-era airborne study. It was the minimum weight required to prevent the rucksack from getting tangled in a jumper's static line; it had nothing to do with the equipment paratroopers today need to jump with and to fight with once they land—let alone the modern equipment that infantry soldiers need to hump on a march. This process drove us to take a closer look at our training too. We decided that in some places, we would upgrade standards to be informed by today's real-world operational requirements and experiences gained over the past decade and a half of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, our military would be even better at finding and training not only the most qualified women, but also the most qualified men, for all military specialties.

Importantly though, standards remained gender-neutral and rigorous. I said this again and again. Women and men had to meet the same standards to get

the job. That did not change, and it should not change. This decision only gave women a fair shot at competing and attempting to meet those standards.

War is a serious, demanding business. We have to win. Our performance defines our national security. There is no room for compromise on standards. Female service members themselves stressed that they did not want lower standards. After earning her Ranger tab, Captain Griest said, “No woman that I know wants to go to Ranger School if they change the standards, because then it degrades” the designation.²⁵

2. No Quotas

In some cases, these gender-neutral standards may mean that equal opportunity may not always equate to equal participation. Our studies and the physicians’ studies that we commissioned showed that, on average, men were more able to meet these standards than were women. For example, more men were able to load a certain number of artillery shells in a shorter period of time than women. That is a fact. While there are some women who could do that better than some men, on average, most women would not be able to do it better than most men. That was something we had to anticipate in implementation. I wanted people to take that into account rather than pretend it wasn’t so.

The number of women in these combat positions may remain small compared to the 50 percent of the population that women comprise, and we must be prepared for that reality. In 20 years, I do not expect an infantry unit to have an even gender ratio. This may mean small numbers of women in several demanding roles, which will have implications for equipment sizing, supply, and facilities.

Recognizing this, we turned to lessons learned from past cases, including how the Navy integrated women onto surface ships and, more recently, submarines. The Army and the Marine Corps decided to integrate women

²⁵ Richard A. Oppel, Jr. and Helene Cooper, “2 Graduating Rangers, Aware of Their Burden - The New York Times,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/us/military-weighs-role-of-women-army-ranger-graduates.html>.

officers and senior enlisted women into previously-closed units before integrating junior enlisted women. Where possible, they would assign more than just one woman into a unit at a time. The goal was to ensure that women officers play a key leadership role, set the right example, and enhance teamwork wherever possible.

3. Talent Management

The likelihood of modest female representation in combat positions made it important to address the challenge of maintaining viable career paths for women in fields where physical performance is often not only a baseline entry requirement, but also a differentiating factor for promoting leaders. Recruiting, retaining, and advancing talented women in any highly physical line of work demands careful consideration, and promotions had to continue to be based on objective and validated standards in a merit-based system. This has been a particular focus area for all the military services, and they have paid extra attention to it as they pursued implementation, mindful that it will require sustained effort at all levels of leadership to ensure that when someone gets ahead or moves up a rank, they earned it. We must remember that it takes decades to grow a senior commissioned or non-commissioned officer, so it will take time to see these results.

4. Physical Demands and Physiological Differences

Both the Army and Marine Corps' studies found that women participating in ground combat training sustained injuries at higher rates than men. It was critical that we address these findings in implementation for the sustainability of our combat readiness and our obligation to the welfare of the force.

All the services looked closely at this issue, and they came up with creative methods to mitigate this injury rate and its impact on individuals and the teams in which they operate. For example, in January 2017, the Army began administering its Occupational Physical Assessment Test to all new recruits,

women and men, to better match the recruits with jobs they either are, or with training could be, physically capable of doing.²⁶ Likewise, the Marine Corps plans to use the extra time provided by their delayed entry program so that women who are interested in enlisting in ground combat arms can better prepare themselves for the physical demands of the job they want. And as we gain new insights, as more women integrate into previously-closed positions, all the services will leverage that information to develop new approaches to reduce the potential for higher injury rates. All of this will help maximize effectiveness in the fight and increase mission success.

5. Operating Abroad

Beyond concerns regarding fair and full competition, we also had to address the fact that there can be significant cultural and religious differences with our foreign partners, including on gender. Our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have long dealt with this reality with success, notably over the past 15 years in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the military services have many lessons to draw on when it comes to operating in areas where there is cultural resistance to working with women.

For example, our troops deploy to many countries, such as Saudi Arabia, that openly discriminate against women. That is a reality for our force. While I do not agree with these values, I expect our people to work around such cultural realities in the service of national defense. In each case, I admire how skilled our people are at doing this—completing the mission regardless of the circumstances.

This means that even when all positions are open to women, cultural contexts will affect whether our military can deploy men or women to a certain situation, or how our male and female service members are required to behave abroad. For example, many of my senior staff were women. During the last half hour of our flights to Saudi Arabia, they frequently changed into more conservative clothing. In Riyadh, there were no

²⁶ David Vergun, "Army Implements New Fitness Standards for Recruits and MOS Transfers," *U.S. Army*, January 3, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/180199/army_implements_new_fitness_standards_for_recruits_and_mos_transfers.

athletic facilities for them to use in the entire city. They did not like it, and I did not like it, but tolerating it was in service of our mission.

Similarly, in a village in Afghanistan, under the rules of Afghan society, you cannot send men into a house that includes unaccompanied females. However, to effectively learn about life in that village, you must speak with the women. In these situations, we deploy Female Engagement Teams.²⁷ We simply cannot deploy men in these contexts without compromising mission effectiveness.

It would be disingenuous to pretend that men and women are the same in every circumstance just by opening up the military. There are real circumstances that cause gender to make a difference, whether due to physical or cultural reasons. I believe we must be forthright about these facts and then carefully root our decisions in challenging contexts, such as operations abroad, in data and hard-nosed analysis of what will lead to mission success.

6. Doubts and Concerns

At the same time, we had to acknowledge that biases exist everywhere, including in the military, and consider this during implementation. A few surveys suggested that some service members, both men and women, believed that integration would jeopardize combat effectiveness. This indicated that successful implementation would require a cultural shift in teams that were historically all male.

I take pride in the diversity of experience across our force. It is a reflection of society at its best. This means our service members have had different backgrounds and varied experiences when it comes to working and interacting with women in equal roles. To successfully implement our decision and avoid strife on the ground, we had to be attentive to service members' different backgrounds and perceptions. We recognized that trying to tell service members how they should think would not be effective. Instead, we

²⁷ Christopher McCullough, "Female Engagement Teams: Who They Are and Why They Do It," *U.S. Army*, October 2, 2012, https://www.army.mil/article/88366/female_engagement_teams_who_they_are_and_why_they_do_it.

had to integrate the force in such a way that most service members would come to the same conclusion that we had by themselves—that this is the right thing to do, and it would have a positive impact on their unit. This was critical to the success of implementation—understanding the attitudes of male and female service members and the fact that many of them may have difficulty adjusting to integration. They deserve respect, and they deserve thoughtful treatment.

This meant that we had to address attitudes toward team performance through our policies. We sought to address concerns about combat effectiveness through gender-neutral standards and effective leadership, an approach that had proven successful over the past two decades in combat operations, during which women have played a critical role.

We also tackled concerns about unit cohesion. The primary factor in fostering cohesion is guaranteeing that all members of a team can perform essential tasks effectively and complete their assigned mission. Confidence in standards is vital to trust in the friend fighting alongside you. To that end, we addressed attitudes toward team performance through education and training. We also made clear that sexual assault or harassment, hazing, and unprofessional behaviors are never acceptable, and that everyone must be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. Our core beliefs in good order, discipline, leadership, and accountability were foundational to our success in integration. The services used new educational resources to train everyone up and down the ranks to prepare for the integration of women, from the newest recruits to four-star admirals and generals. While each service did this in its own way, each of them continued to hold our people to the highest levels of honor and trust that we associate with the profession of arms.

7. Assessment and Adjustment

A commitment to monitoring, assessment, and in-stride adjustment throughout the implementation process was also critical to sustainable success. These commitments are core tenets of the Pentagon as a learning organization. Every service is deeply committed to them. For example,

SOCOM continually measures and tracks personnel experiences in a variety of categories—including physical performance, injury rates, health, promotion, qualifications, and retention—to assess how they can improve the integration of women into special operations forces over time.²⁸ The Army also established a four-phase process for assessment to track results across 17 cultural and institutional factors.²⁹ The Marines developed an assessment plan to measure integration success through three operational lenses: (1) combat effectiveness; (2) health and welfare of individual marines; and (3) talent management to “monitor integration progress, measure integration success, and make policy adjustments as required.”³⁰ Each of the services was charged with evaluating the effectiveness of their approaches to implementation and prepared to make changes to ensure success.

28 Joseph L. Votel, “Memorandum to the Secretary of Defense on U.S. Special Operations Command Implementation Plan for the Integration of Women” (United States Special Operations Command, January 13, 2016), https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/WISR_Implementation_Plan_SOCOM.pdf.

29 Mark A. Milley, “HQDA Execution Order 097-16 to the U.S. Army Implementation Plan 2016-01” (U.S. Army, March 9, 2016), https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/WISR_Implementation_Plan_Army.pdf.

30 Robert B. Neller, “Marine Corps Force Integration Campaign Plan” (U.S. Marine Corps, December 2015), https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/WISR_Implementation_Plan_USMC.pdf.

Modernizing the Military



A female U.S. Army recruit practices building clearing tactics with male recruits at Ft. Benning, Georgia, October 4, 2017. (AP Photo/John Bazemore)

Integration has gone smoothly in the three years since my decision. Since 2015, more than 640 women in the Army have entered previously closed combat jobs, one of whom was Captain Griest—the first female Army infantry officer. In the Marine Corps, 181 women serve in non-infantry jobs in previously closed combat units. Hundreds more women are currently in the training pipeline for combat arms jobs.³¹ A 2017 RAND survey of male and female service members concluded, “Our general overall impression from the groups is that there is not a lot of opposition to the policy change in either the male or female focus groups. Many participants were either supportive or neutral on the issue.”³²

Some open questions remain in implementation, including the recruitment, assignment, and career management of women into the new roles. For example, should women have to register for the draft? This question arose immediately after we made this decision. At the time, I said that it stands to reason that if women are admitted to all positions in the military,

31 “Women in Ground Combat: Facts and Figures.”

32 Douglas Yeung et al., “Recruiting Policies and Practices for Women in the Military: Views from the Field” (RAND Corporation, 2017), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1500/RR1538/RAND_RR1538.pdf.

they should be subject to the draft. However, the law remains that women are not currently required to register. In fact, it does not matter much to me, since I do not want a draft. I want to be able to pick who joins us.

Another continuing question is how to re-evaluate and adjust the standards required for all positions. In the course of our research, over many years and unconnected with the gender issue, I came to the view that we needed to modernize our standards. All the services had already come to this conclusion. I did not want to do so in association with the women in service issue because it would be easily misconstrued as relaxing standards in order to let women in—a perception I was determined to avoid. It was not the time to stress this point then, but I stress it now: in many cases, our standards are outdated. This is true of the American educational system and workplace in general. We have established standards based on a limited set of attributes, physical and otherwise, that may not fully reflect how effective a person could be in that job. Lifting artillery shells is only one aspect of the job of being a soldier or Marine in an artillery unit. But the standards for the military operational specialties that had been closed had largely remained physically demanding.

I learned a different approach from SOCOM, a command where many of the positions are also physically demanding. They call their standards system a “total person” approach. This means that, in addition to your physical strength, your ability to reason through a problem, make decisions logically, work in teams, and respond to unexpected circumstances is also considered combat-relevant.³³

The successful implementation of this decision is far from over. But the important thing about how we rolled out this decision is that we paid careful attention to the implementation process. We sought to see all the potential complications that would arise before we made our decision. It was never an afterthought. It was critical to the decision-making process. This gave us the opportunity to proactively address these concerns in my announcement, both heading off others’ objections and giving our decision the greatest chance of success after the announcement.

33 RAND National Defense Research Institute, “Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Operations Forces.”

At Opportunity's Front Door

On July 28, 2016, I conducted the Oath of Enlistment for seven young recruits at the Chicago Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). There are 65 MEPS across the United States and Puerto Rico. Nicknamed “Freedom’s Front Door,” MEPS serve as a gateway through which applicants complete the enlistment process and enter the armed services. I visited the Chicago MEPS as part of my Force of the Future effort to modernize how the military recruits its people. I was the first Secretary of Defense to visit a MEPS since the 1970s. It was a complete surprise to the new recruits and their proud families.

Applicants seeking to enlist go to MEPS, where military and civilian staff screen applicants to ensure they meet all the services’ physical, academic, and moral standards to determine whether they are qualified to join the military. This screening entails aptitude testing, career counseling, medical evaluation, and background screening.

The process culminates with qualified applicants taking the Oath of Enlistment, which states: “I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.”

For all service members, this is the beginning of their military life. After an individual swears the oath, she or he is a full member of the United States Armed Forces.

Among the seven remarkable young women and men I swore in that day in Chicago, there was one young woman who was joining the Army. We spoke briefly before the ceremony, and she told me that her ambition was to join the Army’s Armor Branch. It is an active combat arms branch responsible for tank and forward reconnaissance operations on the battlefield to destroy enemy positions. It had been closed to women before my decision.

She knew she was going to have to qualify for a position in Armor—in fact, she relished the opportunity to fight for her place. Because just a year ago, she would not have had the chance. No matter how much she wanted to—and no matter how capable she proved herself to be—she would not have been permitted to join.

This young woman, and all the other remarkable women who will follow, will make the U.S. Armed Forces stronger. This is why applying reason and homework to make the right decision, and then announcing and implementing it thoughtfully, were so important.

Even as we continue with implementation today, it will not all happen overnight. While at the end of the day this will make us a better and stronger force, there will still be problems to fix and challenges to overcome. We should not diminish that fact.

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 on 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 is one other way we will strive to ensure that our military remains so, long into the future. This decision marked yet another step toward our continued excellence.



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