Mothers in Combat Boots

By Mary Eberstadt

In November 2009, one of the uglier fruits of the current practice of seeding mothers into the American military burst briefly onto the national stage. Ordered to Afghanistan from Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia, an Army cook named Alexis Hutchinson refused to go. A 21-year-old single mother, she explained that there was no one to care for her infant son because initial plans to leave him with her own mother had fallen through.

What happened next should disturb anyone who has so far succeeded in ignoring the fact that the United States now sends soldier-mothers off to war. Specialist Hutchinson was arrested and threatened with court martial and her son was temporarily placed in foster care — because, as the Fort Stewart spokesman explained, the 30-day extension that she had been granted was “plenty of time” to find some other babysitter for that ten-month-old while the only parent seemingly present in his life went off to Afghanistan.

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This is one face of contemporary battle that no one wants to contemplate point-blank. Nevertheless, face it somebody should. Ever since Congress in the 1970s passed a law allowing women with dependent children to enlist in the military, the collision visible in the Hutchinson case between motherhood and soldiering has been waiting in the wings. The wonder is not that an Army cook and mother would choose staying stateside with her child over her deployment. It is rather that — given two wars and current American military policy — more cases like Hutchinson's have not erupted already.

According to an October report issued by the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, 30,000 single mothers have served in those two war zones as of March 2009. That is 30,000 mothers forced to choose, as Hutchinson’s lawyer has put it, between their children and their service careers — a dilemma captured perfectly in a photograph that appeared alongside news accounts of the case. It showed what once would have seemed an unthinkable representation of Madonna and child: Spc. Hutchinson, a female soldier, cradling her baby in classic maternal pose.

Once, pregnancy itself was automatically grounds for discharge from the services. Today it is not. Now pregnant soldiers can request such a discharge, but it is up to their commanders to decide whether to issue one (and whether it is honorable or dishonorable). As to maternity leave, the services generally offer new mothers six weeks beginning the day they leave the hospital. After that they can receive deployment deferrals of anywhere from four months (Air Force) to six months (Army, Marines) to 12 (Navy). Note that of all these, only the Navy offers a deferral that even meets the American Academy of Pediatric’s guideline for breastfeeding, 12 months. Bear in mind too that current deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, at 15 months in length, are longer than any of these deferrals.

It is all well and good to say, as critics did, that Spc. Hutchinson got what was coming to her — that she should have thought of such an outcome before she joined the Army, or considered it again when she got pregnant and decided to keep the baby. Also true, as other armchair moralizers observed, is that the baby’s father — whoever and wherever he is — has not faced nearly the opprobrium delivered to Hutchinson, despite being a rather obvious missing link in this pathetic spectacle. For the record, no one was harder on Hutchinson in public than other men and women in uniform, who understood better than the rest of the country that if everyone acted as she did, there would be no military to do any defending in the first place. As one Army veteran and radio host put it in a printable example, “The court of public opinion has spoken and said, the military should get rid of her and
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anyone else who feels that they can't live up to their obligation. We can’t win a war with soldiers who refuse deployment. She needs to pay for her crime.”

All of these opinions are correct as far as they go. So are certain other, wider lessons that could be drawn from the Army cook’s quandary. One is that recent fabled “changes in family structure” — chiefly, the fact that fatherless homes and fatherless children have become ordinary facts of life — obviously continue to generate problems on a cosmic scale, whether polite people feel inclined to remark upon them or not. Another truth is equally obvious. Hutchinson’s threatened court martial is not, after all, the worst outcome imaginable for her ten-month-old. She could have come home in a coffin instead, as have some number of other military mothers since the wars began.1

Also true is this stipulation: The question of mothers in combat is a separate question from that of women in the military. Obviously, that second question is “settled” in a way that gives few people pause, from military brass on down to the civilian families that are home to most recruits, female as well as male. But the fact that women have been successfully integrated into many aspects of the service does not mean — as it is currently taken to mean — that therefore the question of mothers in combat is settled too. If that is what we think upon first looking into that picture of Spc. Hutchinson with her baby, we are missing the moral forest for the procedural trees.

The facts are these. With the obvious assent of the American people, as well as most of our political and military and other leaders, the United States military now routinely recruits mothers or soon-to-be mothers of babies and young children — and often puts them in harm’s way more or less as it does every other soldier. This is a practice so morally questionable, and in virtue of that fact so fraught with policy difficulties, that both its persistence and its apparent lack of controversy fairly beg for explanation. It is past time to ask the question: Why?

Who should serve?

One reason why those mothers have gone off to Iraq and Afghanistan without so much as a murmur is this: It has become nearly impossible, against the backdrop of two wars involving large numbers of deployed servicewomen, to raise questions about the wisdom of their service without risking public wrath. After all — as the numbers given above go to show — many such soldier-mothers are serving now, or have

1. Government statistics unfortunately do not distinguish mothers from other servicewomen, but all sources agree that American female soldiers are being deployed, wounded, and killed at historic rates. More female troops have died and been injured in Iraq alone than in all the wars since World War II combined. According to the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, over 120 women have died during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, and more than 600 have been wounded in action.

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already served, including overseas and at potential peril to themselves and their families. Who are the rest of us, the thinking seems to go, to question those who have proven themselves so able and so willing to sacrifice for their country?

Nevertheless, it needs to be said: The argument that “women, including mothers, have served in the military, therefore women, including mothers, should serve in the military,” remains a blatant non sequitur. Of course women have, and can, and will serve bravely in all walks of life — including in combat and other violent situations if necessary. As news stories emphasized, for example, the murderous rampage by Major Nidal Malik Hasan at Fort Hood, also in November 2009, was interrupted by the courageous intervention of a female soldier — Sergeant Kimberly Munley, who charged him at point-blank range and fired her weapon till eventually he went down. Sgt. Munley, incidentally, is also a mother. Where was it ever written that men have a monopoly on courage, and if it has been, who knows so little as to believe it? The history of humanity and its literature and art abound with examples of extraordinary valor exercised by mothers in particular — typically, on behalf of their children.

In fact, for that very reason, the ideological fervor over the years by feminists demanding women in the military betrays a bizarre kind of anxiety on the part of those exhibiting it. The literature advocating for female soldiers is shot through with breathless, romanticized insistence that women can indeed behave like men — changing truck tires, crawling through mud, urinating standing up, and killing and wounding as necessary. It is a pattern of protestation that raises questions of its own about the convictions of just such advocates. Did feminists and their allies think somewhere deep inside that women couldn’t do these very things — and more?

Yet again, however, this question of whether certain people can tote guns and endure physical discipline and die for their country too is not the same as asking whether they ought to. Many children and teenagers, for example, could work competently through the workday doing menial labor — as many did throughout the centuries leading to relatively recent laws protecting them from child labor. But most people today would not champion that fact to invalidate the laws against child labor or truancy. And for those who might object that this analogy conflates women with children, consider a few more examples of activities that American law puts the brakes on, even though all involve potentially consenting adults: drugs, prostitution, gambling, suicide, assisted suicide, selling oneself into slavery, having sex in public. In all kinds of ways, the law imposes limits on what consenting adults can do.
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The reason is elementary: because American laws like most others delineate what kind of civilization ours is. And currently, ours is one in which military and political and cultural leaders appear to believe that there is nothing intrinsically wrong about deploying mothers away from their children and into the wars. This apparent near-consensus brings us to another reason the status quo has continued without public protest: because the parties that ordinarily might be expected to be paying attention to this military-social experiment have sidelined themselves for reasons of their own.

First among these are the armed forces, which have apparently adopted lock, stock, and barrel the longings of yesteryear’s feminists — particularly the dream that women, including mothers, be allowed the privilege of serving and dying alongside men, because “equality” is understood to demand as much. Yes, it remains the case that official military policy is to keep women away from combat (the specific rules vary by service). As New York Times reporter Lizette Alvarez summarized the ostensible policy last year, “Women are barred from joining combat branches like the infantry, armor, Special Forces and most field artillery units and from doing support jobs while living with those smaller units. Women can lead some male troops into combat as officers, but they cannot serve with them in battle.”

Yet it is also true, and obviously more important, that Jesuitical maneuvering around exactly these rules has apparently become commonplace. That same New York Times piece, for example, also observes that “Army commanders have resorted to bureaucratic trickery when they needed more soldiers for crucial jobs, like bomb disposal and intelligence” and that “as soldiers in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, women have done nearly as much in battle as their male counterparts: patrolled streets with machine guns, served as gunners on vehicles, disposed of explosives, and driven trucks down bomb-ridden roads.” Numerous other sources, particularly those agitating for more women in combat, have noted the same bending of the rulebook unto breakage. Much of official policy is in practice unenforceable.

Moreover, in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as in most others in the current age, the designation of a “combat zone” is intrinsically problematic, when indeed it is not outright impossible. No one knows this better than the leaders of the military themselves. “Military necessity” and “the desires of the service,” in the words of Philip Gold and Erin Solaro — two among many emblematic advocates of mothers in combat boots — have been prominent factors behind the increase of women and mothers in the ranks. “Both the Secretary of the Army and the Vice Chief of Staff,” they report, “went on record opposing the [proposed 2005] ban [on women in combat] the moment they learned it was under consideration.” The reason for this
aversion is obvious, if perhaps overstated by these advocates of conscription: “The Army is imploding. It needs all the skill, intelligence and courage it can get. Reality pushes the Army toward ever-greater use of women, even as reality pushes America toward a draft that must inevitably include women.”

Other sources confirm that the recruiting picture is not what the services wish it was — a fact that cannot but help keep the armed forces interested in holding on to everyone they can. In November 2009, a widely discussed report called “Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve,” by a coalition of retired military and civilian leaders, detailed charges that some civilian readers found shocking — most dramatic, that some 75 percent of young Americans would be unable to serve in the military anyway because of negatives ranging from overweight and obesity (35 percent) to increasing medical and behavioral liabilities such as asthma, psychiatric problems, and ADHD. Moreover, though such numbers may be inherently slippery, the manpower squeeze is real enough to have resulted in extra and extended tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan becoming commonplace. Under such circumstances, it is scarce wonder that the armed forces are seeking warm bodies where they can find them — including and especially among young women, who typically lack the destructive behavioral traits that disqualify some young men from service.

Distinctions ignored

Yet if the military itself bears obvious responsibility for sending mothers off to war zones with a wink and a nod to official policy, it is hardly alone. Political leadership both inside and outside the government — from left to right — has shared in the desire to pass over the phenomenon in silence.

The progressive end of the political spectrum, of course, particularly the feminists and their allies, bears the heaviest burden of blame. For years leading up to 9/11, relentless ideological cheerleading for sexual integration in the services, including within the Pentagon, led to persistent stonewalling about any practical problems the dream might pose. Were women smaller and weaker than men? In the techno-world to come, advocates argued, such brute differences important in the “old” wars would hardly matter any more. Were women in the military at fairly high risk of being sexually harassed by male peers and superiors? If so, advocates parried, such was not the result of integrating women, but was rather due to a (presumably changeable) sexist “military culture.”

William Saletan at Slate devoted a November 2009 column to the subject of women in combat filled with certitudes typical of the earlier manifestoes for female soldiers — from decrying the “absurdities” of using strength differences as a criterion for excluding women from combat, to declaring their exclusion “a failed social experiment” (which it ironically is, given that the
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attempts at exclusion have failed to prevent women’s deaths in the military). Nowhere does it occur to him that some of these women are also mothers and that a distinction might be lurking there. Similarly, in December, West Point graduate and former Army officer Donna McAleer coauthored an op-ed piece with Erin Solaro in the Washington Post, applauding the fact that 220,000 women have engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and calling for the removal of all remaining barriers to their full participation in war — again without once noting that at least some of those women are also mothers.

For advocates committed to sending women to war, the moral question mark that many other people might see hanging over these soldiers’ children has been invisible. Yet much the same blindness to the distinction between women and mothers runs throughout recent literature. One can search any number of serious books from the past decades on this subject of women and their integration into the armed forces — such as Linda Byrd Franck’s Ground Zero: The Gender Wars in the Military (1997), for example, or Wives and Warriors: Women and the Military in the United States and Canada (1997), edited by Laurie Weinstein and Christie C. White — and find practically no cognizance of what the Hutchinson case made clear: that collateral damage in the form of children left behind was to become an inevitable consequence of cheerleading for women in the military.

Nor has this continuing reality apparently caused any lost sleep among those watching it now. No less an authority than President Obama, for example, declared during his presidential campaign that women ought also to be required to register for the Selective Service, and likened their traditional exclusion from the draft to discrimination against African American troops in wars past. “If women are registered for service,” he opined, “I think it will help to send a message to my two daughters that they’ve got obligations to this great country as well as boys do.”

Such tough public love by the commander in chief brings us to a deeper and more pernicious reason why the realities of deploying women have been resisted by progressives: because they call into question one of the left’s most unquestioned beliefs. This is the feminist-driven dogma that babies and children can be separated from their parents, especially their mothers, for long periods of time without perfectly predictable forms of adversity ensuing from that separation. In a world where many busy moms now see their children only a few hours a day or week, the thinking seems to run, what’s so different about a business trip that lasts overseas for 15 months?

Yet if the American left has come to regard women in the military as a prize worth the costs incurred by their infants and children, the American right, too, bears responsibility for the spectacle represented by Spc. Hutchinson.
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At one time conservatives contributed to an estimable (if presently largely neglected and overruled) policy literature about the problems that bringing women into combat would incur, including Brian Mitchell’s *Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster* (1998) and Stephanie Guttmann’s *The Kinder, Gentler Military: Can America’s Gender-Neutral Fighting Force Still Win Wars?* (2000). Also of significance, in 1997, James Webb published a lengthy article in the *Weekly Standard* about “The War on the Military Culture,” prophetically concluding with these words:

> Political and military leaders must have the courage to ask clearly in what areas our current policies toward women in the military are hurting, rather than helping, the task of defending the United States. We have now endured two decades of experimentation, and data on the experiment’s results would be voluminous if they were allowed to be examined.

It’s worth asking what happened to drive yesterday’s realism into today’s widespread silence on the subject of mothers.

Part of the answer must be 9/11 and the wars that ensued from it — wars started under a Republican president and seen by many Americans, particularly on the right, as litmus tests of party and sometimes even national loyalty. This support for the wars led eventually to a clash of traditional principles. Universal conscription, everyone agrees, was and is politically impossible. So where would the manpower for the wars come from? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that for some, the need to support the wars trumped the need to examine just who we were sending to fight them. And since the right, rather than the left, was the only part of the spectrum dissenting about the use of women in combat anyway, this silence meant that no public opposition remained to sending mothers overseas for any reason.

Thus in an intricate if unfortunate intersection of events, conservatives and liberals together have both played a part in keeping the question of mothers at war below the radar screen of commentary. They have inadvertently created if not the perfect storm, at least the atmospheric conditions in which certain pressing questions are no longer asked — among them, why one face of the American military right now is a single mother sitting in jail without her baby rather than serving in Afghanistan without her baby.

**Consequences overlooked**

Against these political factors that have made the status quo possible there has been little incentive for anyone to ask some obvious questions. But one of them is this: What about the empirical record that is already being assembled, concerning what having mothers in the military under current rules is doing to at least some of them?
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Return for a moment to that October 2009 report by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America ("Women Warriors: Supporting She ‘Who Has Borne the Battle’"). Quite the opposite of a partisan manifesto, this veterans’ association accepts the status quo as a given; it seeks only to help those “serving in new roles, in greater numbers than ever before, and in combat.” For that very reason, it is worth recording that this same report offers detail after wrenching detail of the world in which some military women, and especially mothers, now find themselves.

According to the report, for example, “more than 212,000 female service members have been deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom,” around 11 percent of the total. Again, the casualty count does not distinguish between mothers and nonmothers. The report does however note that more than 40 percent of women on active duty have children, suggesting odds are good that a significant number of those wounded or killed had children waiting for them at home.

Quite apart from the question of the physical endangerment of such people — i.e., mothers — the report also opens a window onto a landscape dark with other hardships incurred by military service. The Army, it notes (and as mentioned earlier), “gives women just 4 months to stay stateside with their newborns before deploying to the warzone, leaving little time to bond with or nurse their infants” — a span so short as to defy all current medical recommendations.

Being separated from home apparently brings another set of woes to at least some significant subset of women when they are deployed — namely, “significant and underreported sexual assault and harassment.” In 2008, according to the report, there were 2,908 incidents of sexual assault reported by service members, an increase of nine percent from the preceding year. An astonishing one-third of female service members, it further details, say they have experienced sexual harassment while serving. Not only are these numbers extraordinarily high — and “may only be the tip of the iceberg,” according to the authors — but they are accompanied by another factor that perhaps makes such problems more rampant in the military world than in the civilian one: a very low rate of prosecution. “In 2007,” we are told, “only 8 percent of sexual assailants were referred to courts martial, or military court, compared with 40 percent of similar offenders prosecuted in the civilian court system.”

Then there is more unfortunate fallout from deployment in another way: divorce, which is apparently not an equal-opportunity risk. In the past three years, says the report, “a very troubling pattern emerges”: Marriages of female recruits are almost three times more likely to fail than those of male service members. Also, as the report notes, little is known about a related
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subject, namely the marital and other family outcomes for more than a million veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. “Further study,” it observes, “is needed to evaluate stressors such as multiple deployments, mental health injuries, dual-military marriages, and gaps in family support programs, particularly for the families of female troops and veterans.”

There is a corollary question as well: What is watching Mommy go off to war doing to some of these children? “A recent study,” the report deadpans, “found that military mothers’ deployments can have a negative effect on the health and behavior of both the women and their adolescent children.” Their reference is to research conducted by George Mason University Professor (and Lieutenant Colonel) Mona Ternus, who analyzed responses by 77 women returning home from military deployment to children aged ten to 18.

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Among other findings, she reports a “strong correlation” between the amount of time deployed and the appearance of diverse health problems in the women. But it is the findings she relays about the children left behind that are perhaps more troubling: “A longer deployment leads to increased risk behaviors among adolescent children such as non-accidental physical injury, physical fights, incidents involving weapons, cigarette smoking/chewing tobacco, alcohol, illegal drug use, self mutilation, drop in school grades and attempted suicide.” Moreover, these behaviors are not magically solved by Mom’s reappearance in the States: “[w]hile 75 percent of the adolescents exhibited no risk factors prior to deployment according to parental responses, just as many of the children engaged in risk behaviors during and after deployment [emphasis added].” “Adolescence,” concludes this researcher — who herself was deployed several times away from her teenaged daughter — “is a turbulent period with an increased number of risk behaviors. It follows that separation from the military mother during these potentially dangerous deployments has an impact on the adolescent.”

In sum, the suffering described in this new literature is a product of a head-on collision: The military’s needs — for personal endangerment, deployment far away, and deployments ever longer-lasting — are inimical to the need of a child for Mommy and vice versa.

It is the job of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America to make life easier for the afflicted, not to ask the more radical question unavoidably raised by such facts — namely, whether the moral hazard of having mothers in the military outweighs any benefit of pretending there is none; or whether at least some of the women whose travails are so compellingly outlined in its report and elsewhere are not victims of an egregious failed experiment in social and political engineering.
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In December 2009 more points were made about the suffering of children left behind by deployment in an article in *Pediatrics* — published by the American Academy of Pediatrics — called “Children on the Home Front: The Experience of Children in Military Families.” Using interview data from over 4,000 families, its study found “a positive association between the number of deployment months and child difficulties, suggesting that with greater total months a parent is deployed (or absent from the home), the stressors of maintaining a healthy home life increase.” The data also suggested that “children from military families may be at greater risk for emotional or behavior problems” and called for extra resources to address these issues. Most of the children in the study had fathers, not mothers, who were deployed, and the study authors stressed that they could not evaluate how different that experience might be. But given the seriousness of the impact on children of deployed fathers, would anyone expect children with deployed mothers to be any better off?

A better way

A final reason current policy has not attracted more comment is this: It is obviously difficult to distinguish women service members with children from women service members without them. Such a distinction of necessity remains a moving target every day, in every way. At any given time, for example, it appears that some 10 percent of women serving in the military are pregnant (one 2007 study showed that 1,881 of 16,942 women assigned to ships were pregnant — over 11 percent). Not all of them, it seems safe to bet, enlisted with the idea of becoming mothers. But then again, few things in life could be more certain than that in almost any place — let alone in a place surrounded by healthy and fit and attractive young men — many of today’s healthy twenty-something females are tomorrow’s mothers.

For that reason, disentangling the question of women in the military from that of mothers in the military is intrinsically thorny, and if done will require a delicate balance of incentives and disincentives. Women ought not, for example, feel so attracted to remaining in the military that pregnancy *ipso facto* makes them opt for abortion; in other words, we don’t want the incentives bar set too high. On the other hand, neither should it be impossible for female service members who become mothers to adjust their lives accordingly without unduly harsh penalties, in keeping with what motherhood demands. In that sense, the disincentives bar — courts-martial, jail, custody threats and the like faced by Spc. Hutchinson — shouldn’t be set too low. Perhaps women service members who become mothers could defer during the years when they have minors at home, finishing up their service after that. No doubt any number of creative options would emerge if an honest and open discussion about changing the status quo could be stoked.
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At a minimum, any change in policy will require what this current practice abjectly lacks: specifically, nuance and wisdom about how the world and the people in it really work.

Meanwhile, however, such difficulties in and of themselves should not delay a public reassessment both inside the military and out of where we are now — and that emblematic news blip about Spc. Hutchinson remains as good a place as any to start. Sending fathers into military zones has been a tragedy for as long as war has been around. Sending mothers along with them makes life unimaginably worse. To do so as a matter of policy is a sad but correctable error, and one that the rest of the country ought not to keep ignoring. If we’re uncomfortable staring at that picture of Spc. Hutchinson and her baby, maybe we should ask ourselves why.