

Women in combat

Clive Hamilton

With women now to take on combat roles in the military it is time to sound *The Last Post* over the rotting corpse of feminism.

It's not the moulding of women's bodies into combat readiness that gives the game away, but what has to be done to their minds. When the Defence Minister says that the individual has to have "the right physical, psychological and mental attributes", the mental attributes he is thinking of are male ones, the ones needed to kill.

Putting women in the front line is a victory for feminism only if one understands feminism as the campaign to obliterate difference, as if everything women were before the advent of feminism was the creation of patriarchy. But didn't women's life experiences and history have value in itself, providing distinctive qualities that are more needed than ever? If women have their own history then we should celebrate the uniquely female rather than bury it under the demand for equality.

Women's morality differs from that of men. Feminist philosopher Carol Gilligan argues that they are more motivated by care than duty, and more inclined to emphasise responsibilities than rights. They seek reconciliation through the exercise of compassion and negotiation rather than demanding "justice", through force if necessary.

Nothing better represents the continued hegemony of male-thinking than the institutions of war, which reaches its highest intensity in the "close killing corps", where the grunt culture of hyper-masculinity is inescapable because survival depends on it.

And no institution more purely reflects the male understanding of power than the armed forces, built on the idea that the world is a place of conflict where disputes can be resolved by lethal force, and the more lethal the better. It's an institution of structured dominance, where obedience to hierarchy trumps negotiation, where brotherhood reaches its greatest concentration.

The facile clamour for equality is the capitulation of the sisterhood to the brotherhood. Women in combat is the last move in a four-decade history of betrayal of the goals of the liberation movement—the final annihilation of difference and thus the transformation of the radical demand for social change into the easily-accommodated demand for parity.

Patriarchy, it now seems, was not endemic to the social body but was only a blemish that could be wiped away. The six o'clock swill may be gone but our society is more male-oriented than ever—more competitive, more individualistic, more money-hungry.

And more sex-soaked. Backed by the porn industry and popular media, sex is increasingly presented as a pleasant past-time devoid of sentiment and commitment. The centuries-old male fantasy of "ridding sexuality of any emotional connotation in order to bring it back into the realm of pure entertainment", as Michel Houellebecq put it, has finally been fulfilled.

Who can argue against the claim that if a woman can meet the physical and psychological criteria then she should be allowed on the front-line? Yet the silent discomfort remains. In the arguments for women in combat we see at work the subtle process of turning a demand for

social change into accommodating the aspirations of select individuals. Transforming social threats into individual challenges is the *modus operandi* of the established order.

So the far-reaching social change envisaged by feminism in the 60s and 70s attains its pinnacle with targets to put more women into boardrooms and cabinets. But why bother putting women into boardrooms if the corporations they run continue to despoil the environment, evade their taxes and pay their chiefs obscene salaries? What is the point of women in cabinet if to get there they must be fed into party machines then extruded as those who can be trusted with levers of power, competent managers of a dysfunctional political system?

No one can deny the historic victories of the women's movement. But the easy accommodation of these demands only revealed the astonishing adaptability of a social and economic system built by men. As Germaine Greer lamented, women sought liberation but settled for equality.

It was the great betrayal of the women's movement, diverted to male ends, so that young women could be freed to duplicate the boorish behaviour of young men, from driving like hoons to spewing in the gutter after a big night out.

After the carnage of the Great War, communities around Australia began to hold commemoration ceremonies as a way of integrating traumatised men back into society, so that the violence of the battlefield would not flare up at home. In recent decades the brutality of the enterprise has been spun by politicians into a mawkish jingoism. One day, when we have been shaken from this collective reverie, we may find ourselves asking what it means when those who had once pacified the beast have gone off to join it.

We are all so terrified of being accused of sexism that we refuse to acknowledge that most of us shudder at the thought of women going into battle—to slice bodies with bullets, blow them up with mortars and slit throats when ordered. We do not want to think about women-soldiers returning with their faces blown off for we know we will feel a special kind of guilty revulsion.

It is not sexist to have these reactions; it is to allow oneself to feel that we are blurring a line between peace and war, and compromising a subtle, civilising power that has always worked to restraint the violent tendencies of men.

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