

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN THE MILITARY

**For much of its history, the U.S. military has been a testing ground for groups seeking inclusion in the mainstream of American society. Today, new groups, including women and homosexuals, are seeking equal treatment.**

[Colin Powell](#), the retired chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, is not only an African-American success story, but also a success story for the racially integrated military services. Born in Harlem, New York, Powell grew up with little thought about what he wanted to do in life until he joined the Reserved Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) in college. At once, he knew he was destined for a career in the military

Powell was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army in 1958, just 10 years after racial segregation in the military had ended. Reflecting about this exciting time in his life, Powell wrote in his book, *My American Journey*:

I was in a profession that would allow me to go as far as my talents would take me. And for a black, no other avenue in American society offered so much opportunity.

Indeed, Powell rose through the ranks to become in 1989 the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest job in the U.S. military. This would have been impossible when the military was mired in racial prejudice and segregation. But the military services were forced to change their long tradition of treating the black man as a second-class soldier. In much the same way, equal opportunities have opened for women in all branches of the armed forces. While moving slowly, and at times not at all, the military has nevertheless demonstrated that groups once unfairly branded as inferior are fully capable and deserving of equal opportunity in American society.

### **Can the Black Man Fight?**

African Americans have fought in every U.S. war since the American Revolution. At the outset of the Civil War, however, neither free blacks nor escaped slaves were allowed to enlist in the Union forces. The prevailing racist view among Union officers was that the black man lacked mental ability, discipline, and bravery and could never be trained to fight like the white soldier.

As the Civil War ground on and the need for manpower increased, African Americans began to be admitted into the Union Army, mainly as laborers. Large numbers of free blacks and ex-slaves were recruited for combat only after several successful experiments satisfied military leaders that black soldiers could fight in battles.

African Americans were organized in racially segregated infantry, artillery, and cavalry regiments led by white officers. The black recruits were paid \$3 less per month than white privates. After participating in over 400 battles and winning 12 Congressional

Medals of Honor, there was little doubt by the end of the war that the black man could fight and fight well.

After the war, Congress established several peacetime black Army regiments, again led by white officers. Assigned mainly to the West, black regiments fought Indians, manned forts, escorted wagon trains, and did other hard and thankless "bad duty" that white soldiers preferred to avoid. Experienced and battle-hardened from the Indian Wars, black soldiers saw much action in Cuba and the Philippines during the [Spanish-American War](#).

When the United States entered World War I, black volunteers flooded recruitment stations. Most of these men, however, ended up assigned to labor units. One poorly trained segregated combat division did not do well in battle. White officers often pointed to it as proof that black men did not make good soldiers. But another black division was dispersed among a number of French combat units. These American black troops, under the command of French officers, not only fought well, but participated in combat shoulder-to-shoulder for the first time with white soldiers. A major step forward for blacks in the military took place during the war when the U.S. Army set up a separate war college to train black officers to lead black troops.

Shortly before the United States became involved in World War II, President [Franklin D. Roosevelt's](#) War Department announced a new policy expanding the role of African Americans in the Army. Blacks were to make up 10 percent of enlisted men (up from 2 percent) and were to be admitted to officer training as well as the Army Air Corps. Nevertheless, African Americans remained in racially segregated units. The Navy discouraged the recruitment of blacks and assigned most who did enlist to mess duty. The Marines barred blacks entirely.

While a million African Americans served in World War II, large numbers of them were assigned as laborers away from front-line duty. Top military leaders clung to beliefs that blacks were not as good at soldiering as whites. These leaders also continued to justify segregating whites and blacks as necessary for unit cohesion and morale.

Although black Army Air Corps units entered the war fairly early, black infantrymen did not see combat until nearly the end of the fighting. Because of military necessity, black and white Americans fought successfully together for the first time during the [Battle of the Bulge](#) in Europe late in 1944. By this time, many in the military began to think it was wrong to waste manpower because of foolish racial stereotypes.

Studies conducted after the war confirmed that maintaining separate sets of military organizations and facilities for blacks and whites was inefficient, wasteful, and counterproductive to the mission of the armed forces, which is to defend the nation. On July 26, 1948, President [Harry S. Truman](#) signed an executive order declaring that "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."

Despite continued opposition from some military leaders, the services succeeded in rapidly desegregating during the [Korean War](#). By 1954, all branches of the active armed services were racially integrated on the basis of equal treatment and opportunity. In accomplishing this, the U.S. military moved in advance of the rest of American society, which was just beginning the struggle against racial injustice.

### **Should Women Take Part in Combat?**

Before World War I, women assisted the military during wartime mainly as nurses and helpers. Some women, however, did become involved in battles. [Molly Pitcher](#), a Revolutionary War water carrier, singlehandedly kept a cannon in action after an artillery crew had been disabled. During the Revolutionary and the Civil War, a few women disguised themselves as men and took part in hand-to-hand combat.

The first enlisted women served in World War I as telephone and radio operators, translators, and clerks. But it was not until World War II that women became part of the regular military. Each service had its own women's corps commanded by female officers. The first of these units, the [Women's Army Corps \(WACs\)](#), enlisted 400,000 women during the war to work in jobs that freed men to fight.

Following the war, the Women's Services Integration Act of 1948 established a permanent place for women in all branches of the military. But promotions for female officers were limited, and women were banned from ground combat jobs as well as from most Navy ships and Air Force aircraft. By the mid-1960s, about 70 percent of enlisted women worked in clerical and other office jobs.

The Army and the other services at first resisted sending women to Vietnam fearing that they would not be able to handle the stress of being in a war zone. But 7,500 military women, mainly nurses, eventually served in Vietnam. Several died in hostile action.

When the all-volunteer military replaced the draft in 1973, the armed forces accelerated its recruitment of women. In 1977, a [Department of Defense](#) report clearly identified both the limitations and potential of female recruits at that time:

The average woman available to be recruited is smaller, weighs less, and is physically weaker than the vast majority of male recruits. She is also much brighter, better educated (a high school graduate), scores higher on the aptitude tests and is much less likely to become a disciplinary problem.

As the military modernized and weapons grew more sophisticated, education and technical skills became important. This development opened up more military jobs for women, including some combat-related jobs. For example, women became Army transport helicopter pilots and were assigned to nuclear missile sites. The rapid increase in military technology as well as changes in the whole concept of modern warfare blurred the old line separating combat from non-combat jobs.

When larger numbers of women entered the military in the 1970s, pressure mounted for more female officers. Consequently, college ROTC programs and officer candidate schools became co-ed. In 1976, the first female cadets entered [West Point](#) and the other service academies. Soon, female officers began commanding men, a concept that had been ridiculed as unworkable only a short time earlier.

During the [Gulf War](#) in 1991, about 40,000 women served in the combat zone. This was the largest such female deployment in U.S. military history. During this short war, five women were killed in action and two taken as prisoners of war.

The important contributions made by women in uniform during the Gulf War led to a reevaluation of the combat restrictions on females. Starting in 1993, the bans against women serving aboard Navy warships and flying combat aircraft were lifted. Today, there is a small but growing number of women trained and qualified to fly fighters, bombers, and attack helicopters. Fully 92 percent of all career fields in the military services are now open to women. The only major military careers still off-limits are those in infantry and tank combat units.

There are those who question the idea of integrating women into nearly all military jobs. Brian Mitchell, author of *The Weak Link: Feminization of the Military*, contends, "What we've got is a policy that says we want women in these jobs not because it's good for the military, but because it's the political will. . . ." Other critics worry that men and women serving together in close quarters will become distracted from effectively carrying out their military duties. Some doubt that females are emotionally prepared to participate in wartime killing, something American women have traditionally not been asked to do.

### **Gays in the Military**

As the military opens up to groups it once excluded, another group is pushing for acceptance in the military--gays and lesbians. During World War II, the military made it official policy to exclude gay people. Military leaders believed that gay personnel could hurt troop morale.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, candidate [Bill Clinton](#) promised to lift the ban on gay people in the military. He noted that many gay persons had served honorably, although secretly, in the armed services. Once elected, Clinton ran into a storm of protest from military and congressional leaders. Clinton and Congress quickly agreed to a compromise policy, called "Don't ask, don't tell." Under this policy, the military may not inquire whether an individual is a homosexual, and homosexuals may not reveal their sexuality. If they do reveal it, they may be discharged. This policy has been challenged in court several times as a violation of first amendment free speech rights and of fifth and fourteenth amendment equal protection rights. In 1997, a district court rule that the policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was unconstitutional, but this decision was reversed by a federal appellate court. Although the appellate court's decision was appealed, the Supreme Court refused to review the case.

## For Discussion and Writing

1. What stereotypes about African Americans and women kept them from fully participating in the military for many years?
2. Identify the barriers to equal opportunity that were overcome in the past by African Americans and women in the military.
3. Gay people have recently demanded entry into the military services. Is this issue different from women and African Americans in the military? Do you think gay people should be admitted? Explain your answers.

## For Further Information

[Chronology of What's Been Happening with Don't Ask, Don't Tell](#): A web site tour chronicling the last few years of developments regarding the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

[Women in the Military](#): A web site describing the role of women in the history of American war.

[Blacks in the American Military](#): A web site describing the role of African Americans in the history of American war.

## A C T I V I T Y

### Women in Combat

As women in the military move into more combat-related jobs, the question remains whether this is a good idea. This activity enables students to examine their own beliefs about women in combat.

**A.** Meet in small groups to discuss and decide which of the following combat jobs should be opened and closed to women. Keep in mind that the main mission of the military is to maintain a superior fighting force to defend the nation.

<u>Combat Job</u>	<u>Opened or Closed?</u>	<u>Reasons</u>
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- |                            |  |  |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| 1. "Top Gun" Fighter Pilot |  |  |
| 2. Bomber Pilot            |  |  |
| 3. Attack Helicopter Pilot |  |  |
| 4. Nuclear Missile Crew    |  |  |
| 5. Tank Crew               |  |  |
| 6. Artillery Crew          |  |  |
| 7. Infantry Soldier        |  |  |
| 8. Ship Gunner             |  |  |
| 9. Submarine Navigator     |  |  |
| 10. Army Gen./Navy Adm.    |  |  |

**B.** After the groups have completed the chart above, list for the whole class the combat jobs that any of the groups have identified as "closed." The class should then discuss the

pros and cons of closing to women each of the listed combat jobs. Finally, a class vote may be taken to determine the class's majority view on the listed jobs.