

Sexual Assault against Women in the U.S. Armed Forces

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It has been a rough month for females in the armed forces. Two weeks ago a bill that would have finally taken sexual assault cases out of the military chain of command was perfunctorily killed in the US Senate the same moment that another high ranking military commander in charge of prosecuting sexual assault in the US Army was being investigated for sexual misconduct himself. Ever since the epidemic of sex abuse in the military skyrocketed onto the headlines a year ago with the [Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office](#) announcement that 26,000 assault cases of women including men were reported in 2011, up from 19,000 the year before, all the military services have been scrambling to correct this embarrassing problem by implementing numerous programs designed to sensitize men in uniform to respect women and lower the incidence of sexual crimes amongst its ranks.

Last year's Department of Defense increase of reported incidence rose by 34%. Yet a full year after Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel called for an open case review in the Senate of sexual assault crimes in the military, rates appear to remain high, accompanied by case after case of male officers responsible for the programs and training to lower the alarming incidence of sexual assault, guilty themselves of the very crimes they have been assigned to reduce.

According to a [New York Times article from March a year ago](#), about one in three women in the armed forces has been sexually assaulted, twice the civilian rate. The Department of Defense Sexual Assault and Response Office reported that of the estimated 19,000 sexual assault victims in 2010, only 14% of them reported any crime. Few incidents of rape get reported in the military, and then of those that are reported, even fewer are prosecuted, and then of those few that are prosecuted, even fewer accused ever get convicted. In fact, an estimated rate of less than one tenth of one percent result in conviction. Thus with the US Senate recently voting to not transfer jurisdiction to civilian courts, the prospect of women in uniform getting a fair shake appears to remain no different than a year ago. Instead, it appears it will only be business as usual in all the military services.

This hot topic of sexual assault in the military reached another low on March 6th, 2014. After New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's yearlong crusade on behalf of women in the armed forces to finally remove handling of sexual assault cases from male commanding officers, per [the New York Times](#) 55 US Senators voted in favor of her bill, falling just five votes short of passing into law changing the jurisdiction from military to civilian court. Old mostly white men at Capitol Hill caved in to the old mostly white men at the Pentagon who successfully pressured the good ol' boys club in Congress to continue subjecting women to the

traditional practice of mostly old white men in uniform letting male rapists get off lightly or scot free. The two court verdicts yesterday merely confirm and reinforce this unresolved problem.

On the same day the Senate ruled against a chance for greater justice for victimized women in uniform, across the Potomac Pentagon officials were having to confess the latest bombshell that their top Army officer in charge of prosecuting sexual assault himself is being investigated for allegedly groping and attempting to kiss a lawyer at a conference on sexual assault. Adding insult to injury, even in the face of yet more humiliation coming from another top officer, this time in the Army entrusted to ensure justice for women assault victims, last year the Air Force top gun was investigated for the exact same sex crime.

Then to make matters worse, yesterday the highest ranking officer ever tried in a court martial on a sexual assault charge in one of the highest profile cases ever was given what most would call a slap on the hand punishment. At Fort Bragg, North Carolina former deputy post commander Brigadier General Jeffrey Sinclair was merely given a \$20,000 fine, but never served any jail time, nor demoted and is allowed to stay in the Army and retire at full benefits despite pleading guilty to adultery, maltreatment of his accuser and two other improper relationships. In [today's edition of the Christian Science Monitor](#), Representative Jackie Speier, D-Calif., is reacting to Sinclair's sentence as "laughable." She goes on to say, "Even when the world is watching, the military has demonstrated their incompetence at meting out justice. This is another sordid example of how truly broken the military justice system is. This sentence is a mockery of military justice, a slap on the wrist nowhere close to being proportional to Sinclair's offenses."

Also at the exact same time not far away Washington DC in another military courtroom came the announcement of acquittal of Naval Academy ex-football player Josh Tate on trial for rape in yet another high profile case. While the world has been watching how the military would respond to this out of control epidemic amongst its ranks this entire last year, all the outcomes this month from the Congressional vote, to yesterday's verdict and sentence appear to be setting back any progress women have been striving to make for military justice. And for all intents and purposes, at face value these high profile decisions indicate that a message to the waiting world has been sent, that the US military will only continue looking the other way when it comes to punishing sexual predators amidst its ranks. This message may be taken by men in uniform that they can still expect to be protected by a traditional good ol' boys system while women can only expect that the system will continue neither respecting nor protecting them.

This abhorrent attitude and behavior has not changed in the forty years since I was a US Army officer. I observed it alive and well at West Point as a cadet attending hops, the dances the US Military Academy sponsors for its Corps of Cadets and young co-eds in the outlying local area. I distinctly recall what cadets referred to as "pig pool contests" where a group of cadets would agree to participate in a chauvinistic and degrading competition where each cadet would attempt to locate the ugliest girl at the hop and ask her to dance. After the dance all the "good ol' boys" would gather round to vote on the ugliest girl chosen and reward the cadet who dared to dance with her \$10 from each contest loser. I was appalled by this inhumane treatment and utter contempt for women, but based on observable events in the armed forces today, it appears that nothing much is changing. The culture of disrespect toward women as the prevailing attitude and exploitive, aggressive, criminal behavior against women so reprehensible then is still obviously being pathologically

acted out today.

What I observed as a young man years ago is merely representative of how males in the military have traditionally treated and viewed women. Higher military rates of sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence and divorce compared to the general civilian population consistent over time all confirm a longstanding significant correlation measured between sexism, sexual violence and America's culture of violence and war. In a hyper-masculine sub-culture like the military, where physical aggression and fighting the designated enemy is mandatory, a direct link between physical violence and sexual aggression co-exists.

But the current epidemic of sexual violence throughout all the armed services up and down the rank and file by officers and enlisted men alike is off the charts. The inordinate number of incidents of sexual violence perpetrated against women in the military is unprecedented – 26,000 reported cases in 2012 alone according to the Department of Defense findings. Per that same report, that means that near ten times that amount actually occurred since the vast majority of 86% never even get reported. The daily headlines in recent months of high ranking officers groping and assaulting women have finally brought much attention to this long overlooked problem. But most embarrassing for the military is that so many of these sexual perpetrators have been in charge of programs set up to reduce the rampant sex crimes.

Recently it has become a systemic epidemic partially because more women are reporting cases of sexual assault than ever before. But it has been a huge blight on the military for a very long time. Male soldiers generally tend to be old school traditionalists regarding their view of "the weaker sex." Often sexist by nature, many easily feel threatened and emasculated by women's rising social and economic power in modern US culture. Compound that with multiple combat tours at multiple warfronts that damage both the human psyche and mental and emotional stability, with concurrent movement toward more women serving alongside men together in combat in hostile environments all over the globe, and America's military manifests its current out of control epidemic of sexual violence.

For the first time the Air Force Academy recently hired a woman general as the Air Force Academy Superintendent (the first major academy to do so), primarily because Air Force Academy has especially been plagued with sexual problems for years, although West Point and Annapolis are not that far behind. The frequency of sexual assaults at the three service academies in recent years has soared from 41 reported cases to 65 and then to a high of 80 in 2011-2012. Though all the academies began accepting women back in 1976, the vast majority of incidents of sexual violence throughout the decades has sadly gone unreported.

Rising incidence of rape has spiked throughout the academies and military services in recent years because more courageous women are coming out from the shadows and finally reporting these shameful crimes. But in the past those brave enough to accuse men of abuse were systematically harassed and re-traumatized after coming forth to claim assault charges. The good old boys network has a horrendously bad track record for bringing so few male offenders to justice. Service women have been painfully aware of the additional stress caused by reporting and therefore simply have chosen to remain silent and suffer alone. And of course most of the victims today still choose not to go to the authorities and still suffer in silence.

Additionally in the past, many females have known it would adversely affect their military careers. Or they observed the horrors that other women were forced to endure when they reported incidents. The male military chain of command has historically discouraged women from reporting and often dismissed cases filed. In a hostile culture and work environment, few women dare to file cases that typically involve males of higher rank, and then those who do have been viewed as troublemakers and singled out by many male soldiers for further harassment.

The silver lining to all these disturbing trends and developments in recent months is that the military currently faces mounting pressures to both stop the violence and abuse as well as change its culture and policies to support and protect women in general, but victims in particular, and do a far more effective job bringing sexual perpetrators to justice with court martials and serious prison sentences for those found guilty. In response, the military lobbied hard during the last twelve months to retain this domain of responsibility under the commanding officer's control, engaging in a major PR campaign to convince Congress and the American people that incidence of sexual assault have not actually been rising but only the rates of women reporting abuse have increased. The military would have us believe that the primary reason for increased reporting amongst women is that women feel safer coming forth due to the armed forces' concerted and successful efforts to provide a more secure environment and culture for women. But when the officers in charge of the very programs designated to educate the troops are guilty of the groping, assaulting and harassing women, it proves to be more of a case of the blind leading the blind. Of course this highly disquieting, disturbing trend renders any claims the military makes insisting that conditions for women are actually improving far less credible.

In direct contradiction to the military's claims of improvement and progress, [the annual 2014 Department of Defense report](#) released in January describes "a culture of disrespect and bad behavior" at the three major service academies still driving future male members of the elite officer corps to frequent sexual assault and sexual harassment. The annual report specifies that sexual victims believe that academy leadership fails to adequately respond to harassment and sexual violence within its ranks. Many female cadets are still not coming forward with their complaints and charges against male cadet perpetrators, fearing recrimination from the good ol' boys club that historically protects the guilty.

Degrading acts of sexism appear to be the norm particularly amongst Academy sports teams. The West Point rugby team was temporarily disbanded after remarks insulting women were found circulating amongst team member emails. Annapolis had several football players up on gang rape charges of a female student with the one facing court martial just acquitted yesterday. The Air Force Academy alone accounted for two thirds of the total reported cases numbering seventy this last academic year, reason enough to hire its first female Superintendent. The only slightly positive news coming out of this account is that the total number of cases reported at three Academies is down this last year by ten from the year before, from 80 to 70, though cases went up slightly at the Naval Academy by two. But these latest academy figures are reflective of a dismal picture from top to bottom in all the armed forces, especially with this month's turn of events.

Despite the fact that women have been attending the academies side by side with men now for nearly four decades, it appears the battle between the sexes is still raging with

little progress amongst America's future leaders of the free world. What does this say about

America's "cream of the crop" – our finest young men as Academy cadets are so often ascribed, if they regularly denigrate women as simply their cultural norm, all soon commanding both male and female soldiers? If anything, it sadly says the blind are still leading the blind, that disrespecting women amongst the military has such longstanding historical roots that resistance to positive change continues to prevail. If at this nation's most honored institutions of leadership widespread gender disrespect, criminal sexual activity and sexism remain the entrenched norm that has been condoned for centuries, no wonder incidence of rape and harassment throughout our armed forces today remain rampantly out of control. Though sex crimes appear far more pervasive in US military than the US civilian population, they reflect an across the board alarm signal nationally as well as globally. The [Centers for Disease and Control](#) released findings last year that one in three women in the world is sexually assaulted by her intimate male partner.

Tradition in the military has always reigned supreme, apparently even when barbaric, brutal rape going relatively unpunished becomes an upheld traditional norm. With recent outcomes this month not favoring women, it appears the armed services are failing to correct their epidemic problem. Rape is not so much sexual as an act of violence, power and control. It is neither surprising nor shocking that men whose occupation is fighting wars have more serious anger and violent tendencies than their male civilian counterpart, be it in the US or elsewhere. Again accountability has been grossly lacking for way too long, allowing so men in uniform to regularly get away with both disrespecting and violating women. And based on these recent events and developments, it appears little is changing.

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