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Independent Commissions as Settings for Civil–Military Deliberation: The Case of Women in the Military

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Abstract

US combat operations involving women and revelations of sexual abuse in the US military have periodically sparked intense political debates about women's military roles. In the midst of these debates, US policy makers have repeatedly created independent advisory commissions on issues concerning women in the military. This article uses qualitative case studies of three such commissions to evaluate whether commissions can foster meaningful civil–military dialogue on contentious matters involving the military and society. This article finds that commission deliberations have sometimes led military professionals to change their views of sensitive issues, but that commissioners have been less open to deliberation if they have been affiliated with an organization possessing a distinct political agenda on women in the military. More broadly, the findings suggest that independent advisory bodies can provide valuable mechanisms for civil–military dialogue, so long as policy makers appoint to them individuals who are relatively open minded and unconstrained by political commitments.

Keywords

military, women, gender, deliberation, commissions

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Introduction

Since the United States transformed its military from a conscripted to an all-volunteer force in 1973, American women have engaged in a growing array of military activities. But women's participation in combat has remained a frequent subject of political disagreement, while widespread sexual mistreatment of women in the military has generated additional political controversy. In this context, US policy makers have repeatedly created independent commissions to examine matters related to the role and treatment of women in the military. These advisory commissions—which have typically been composed of civilians as well as active-duty and retired military officers—have investigated issues including combat roles for women, sexual abuse of women in the military, gender aspects of military training and housing policies, and military diversity. Yet these commissions have received very little attention from scholars.

This article aims to enhance understanding of these understudied institutions by answering the following research questions: to what extent have the members of commissions on women in the military engaged in meaningful deliberation and reached agreement on contentious issues? What factors have affected the deliberations and outcomes of these commissions? More generally, what contribution can independent commissions make to civil–military relations? This article attempts to answer these questions through case studies of three US commissions that have examined military policies concerning women since the end of the Cold War.

This article is organized as follows. The next section briefly reviews existing literature on women in the military, civil–military relations, and independent commissions, and draws on the literature to develop an argument and expectations about the potential value of commissions on military and society issues characterized by political or civil–military disagreement. This article then describes the methods used in the qualitative case studies. The core of this article consists of those case studies, which assess the 1992 Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces, 1998–1999 Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues, and 2010–2011 Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MLDC). This article concludes with a synthesis of its findings and suggestions for future research.

Existing Literature and Research Expectations

This article's analysis builds on and contributes to literatures on women in the military, civil–military relations, and independent commissions. Broadly, scholars have found that women's military participation and roles are shaped by a number of factors, including political ideals, social and cultural values, military identities, military technology, the broader job market, and the severity of security threats.[1] Scholars have also found that public arguments about women's military roles have often been framed around the values of military effectiveness and/or equal rights, and that stereotypes and mistreatment of women remain prevalent in many military

institutions.[2] In addition, scholars have debated whether expectations for the physical performance of female warriors should be the same as those for male warriors and whether the inclusion of women in combat units strengthens or weakens military effectiveness.[3]

Scholars have given much less attention, however, to the roles of political institutions in policy making concerning women in the military. One exception is a study of the early membership of the US Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, which found that this committee was created in 1951 to help recruit women to military service.[4] A second exception is a first-person account of the Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues, which shows that the ideological biases of some commissioners greatly colored the commission's work.[5] This article builds on this literature by assessing three commissions with uniform methods, enabling the identification of more general patterns regarding the deliberation and outcomes of commissions on women in the military.

More broadly, this article aims to elucidate whether and how independent commissions can play a significant role in contentious debates over civil–military relations and the military's role in society, which often represent clashes between two perspectives. One perspective argues that military professionals should determine military policies, with minimal interference from civilian leaders.[6] A second perspective advocates greater civilian involvement in military affairs, in part to ensure that military practices are consistent with civilian values.[7] The clash between these perspectives has frequently been the source of civil–military disagreements, including over military personnel policies.[8] The end of the Cold War only increased debates over such policies in many Western countries, as the absence of an existential security threat led many societies to try to make military institutions less distinct from civilian culture.[9] In the United States, an added source of civil–military tensions in recent decades has been a growing ideological gap between civilian and military leaders, as military officers have become much more conservative than civilian elites.[10] This gap has carried over to military and society issues, as US military officers have been much less likely than US civilians to support women serving in all combat roles.[11]

Given such civil–military tensions and gaps, dialogue among civilians and military elites may be particularly valuable. Other scholars have emphasized the importance of civil–military interaction as a means of generating greater trust, understanding, and agreement among civilian and military leaders, including on issues concerning the military's role in society.[12] Such civil–military dialogue may be particularly valuable in the United States since the US military has at times been less responsive to civilian goals than some other Western militaries,[13] but it should be valuable in any country where gaps exist between military and civilian cultures or views. Meaningful civil–military interaction may also enhance the civic consciousness of military professionals,[14] and enhance civilian sensitivity to military perspectives.

There are reasons to expect that independent commissions could provide a valuable mechanism for fostering civil–military dialogue on controversial issues.

Generally, independent commissions are bodies appointed by government officials or lawmakers and composed at least in part of people who are not serving at the time in government or the military. These bodies are typically mandated to examine an issue and then issue a report on it. Such commissions are prevalent in many countries, including the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Israel, South Africa, Australia, and Japan, and they have examined a wide range of public policy issues.[15] Some governments and international institutions have also created commissions composed of individuals from multiple countries to examine global issues.[16]

Scholars have found that, while commission outcomes have varied greatly, some commissions have had substantial influence on political debates or policy reforms. In the United States, commissions have shaped intelligence reform legislation and influenced policy making concerning the Iraq war.[17] Outside the United States, commissions have influenced public discussions of abuses by intelligence and security services in many countries, and shaped international discourse on sustainable development and standards for protecting besieged populations.[18] Previous research has also found that commissions are more likely to lead to policy changes if they issue their reports unanimously.[19]

Scholars have further found that many commissions do achieve unanimity, even though their members are usually diverse politically. This common outcome stems in part from the distinct setting of a commission, which can allow commissioners to spend dozens of hours learning about an issue, hearing different perspectives on it, and deliberating with each other. These experiences have led the members of many commissions to modify their views of issues and find common ground.[20] This track record suggests that commissions could have the potential to serve as valuable mechanisms of civil–military dialogue.

Yet there are also reasons to be skeptical that commissions on military and society issues would be so fruitful. The only analysis known to the author of the operation of a commission on such issues found that ideological biases greatly hampered the commission's work.[21] In other areas of defense policy, moreover, previous research has found that some commissions have failed to conduct meaningful deliberation because some commissioners have remained loyal to the preferences of their military services.[22] Furthermore, it may be particularly difficult for commissioners to reach agreement if they are examining an issue that is often characterized by sharp civil–military tensions or societal divisions, because in such cases some commissioners may have strong and diametrically opposed preexisting views.

Given these competing possibilities—on one hand, commissions may facilitate productive deliberation on military and society issues; on the other hand, preexisting divides may greatly hamper such deliberation—the outcomes of these commissions may depend heavily on the type of people who are appointed to them. In particular, a commission's deliberative potential may be sharply reduced when policy makers appoint people based on their known public advocacy of a particular view, rather than based on their professional experience or expertise—since the former kind of

commissioner will be more likely to see the commission as an advocacy platform, rather than as a setting for learning or the consideration of different views.

This is not to say that people possessing strong preexisting political commitments cannot engage in deliberation or forge political compromises. But it is reasonable to expect that people who have advocated publicly for a particular policy will be more likely than people who have not engaged in such advocacy to feel certain of their viewpoint on that issue. Such individuals may therefore also be less likely than others to deliberate with commissioners of different views in search of common ground that falls outside of their preexisting preferences.[23] This may be all the more true if they also serve as an official of a political advocacy organization because such organizations often rely on funding from donors who possess distinct views on issues addressed by the organization, and these donors may expect the organization's officials to support those views consistently. Moreover, if these commissioners are appointed by policy makers possessing strong views of their own on the issue, those policy makers may expect the commissioners to represent those views on the commission, which may provide a further incentive for the commissioners to remain wedded to that perspective.

On the whole, the existing literature and the argument developed in this section generate expectations that commissions on women in the military have the potential to serve as settings where meaningful dialogue among civilians and military professionals occurs, and that some members of these commissions will in fact deliberate sincerely, change their views, and find common ground. However, the literature and preceding argument also suggest that some military professionals on these commissions will remain loyal to the perspective of their military service, and that individuals who are appointed to the commissions based on their known political advocacy of a particular view on women in the military will be less likely than other individuals to engage in serious deliberation. In addition, the literature suggests these commissions will only generate significant policy changes if they issue unanimous recommendations.

Methods

To answer this article's research questions and evaluate the validity of the argument and expectations laid out in the preceding section, the author investigated the deliberations and outcomes of three US commissions on women in the military. These commissions were identified by searching an existing data set of US commissions that examined national security issues between January 1981 and January 2009, and searching a separate US government database for any additional commissions that operated between January 2009 and December 2013.[24]

The deliberations and outcomes of each of these commissions were investigated using commission reports, transcripts of congressional hearings, legislative proposals, Defense Department regulations, statements by government officials, contemporaneous periodical articles, and interviews of commission participants and

government policy makers who were involved in the issues addressed by the commissions. Using all of these sources, the author sought, in particular, to understand the character and outcomes of the commissions' deliberations, factors that affected those deliberations, and the extent to which the commissions resulted in policy changes or had other significant effects.

The research interviews were set up and conducted as follows. The author requested interviews with the chair and staff director of each commission, as well as with at least two other commissioners and one other senior staff member on each commission.[25] In addition, the author requested interviews with any government officials who were determined by the author to be deeply involved in the principal issue addressed by each commission. In all, interviews were requested with thirty people, sixteen of whom agreed to be interviewed in person, by phone, or via e-mail. Some of the interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis at the request of interviewees in order to protect their anonymity.[26] The interviews covered a variety of questions about the commission's establishment, deliberations, and outcomes.[27]

Given this article's expectation that commissions will be less likely to reach agreement if commissioners are selected based on their known advocacy of a particular view, the author also researched the biographical history of each member of these commissions to determine whether they had served prior to their appointment in a position where their work was dedicated to advocating a certain viewpoint regarding the role of women in the military. This information was gathered from commissioner biographies included in commission reports, newspaper articles about the commissions, and Google searches of commissioner names.

The case studies that follow integrate the information collected from these various sources to present brief histories of the commissions focused on this article's research questions.

Considering New Combat Roles for Women: The Herres Commission

The role of women in the US military became a topic of substantial political debate after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. At the time, women were officially prohibited from serving in nearly all combat positions, but during the Gulf War, five US servicewomen were killed, while two were captured as prisoners—sparking extensive public discussion of women's military roles.[28]

In this context, in May 1991, Democratic Representatives Patricia Schroeder and Beverly Byron proposed repealing the prohibition on women flying combat aircraft.[29] This proposal was approved that month by the House of Representatives, but it faced strong opposition from a bipartisan coalition of US senators led by Democrat John Glenn. In an effort to delay enactment of the proposal, Glenn proposed creating an independent Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces to study the issue.[30] Glenn's proposal, which was enacted into law in December 1991,

was also supported by President George H. W. Bush, who privately opposed allowing women to fly combat planes but wanted to avoid taking a public position on the controversial issue during the 1992 presidential election campaign.[31]

The legislation creating the commission authorized Bush to appoint the commission's fifteen members. Bush appointed twelve people with relevant professional experience or expertise who had not worked at an organization engaged in advocacy on the role of women in the military. These commissioners included seven active-duty or retired military officers, two former civilian defense officials, two military affairs scholars, and a former head of a defense research organization. The other three commissioners—Elaine Donnelly, Kate Walsh O'Beirne, and Sarah White—had worked at organizations that advocated against women engaging in combat. Donnelly had been a communications official at the antifeminist group Eagle Forum, one of whose principal platforms was to oppose "pushing women into military combat against foreign enemies."[32] In March 1991, Donnelly had also argued publicly that military deployments by women harmed their children.[33] O'Beirne was a vice president at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that hosted and published a lecture by the head of the Eagle Forum arguing against women engaging in combat in May 1991.[34] White had been an analyst and writer at Concerned Women for America, an antifeminist advocacy group with close ties to Eagle Forum.[35] Bush most likely appointed these commissioners both because he opposed women's engagement in combat and because their appointments would satisfy conservative activists who represented an important constituency for him.[36]

When the commission began meeting, Donnelly, O'Beirne, and White quickly aligned themselves with two other commissioners—retired Army General Samuel Cockerham and retired Marine Corps officer Ronald Ray—who possessed strong reservations about women engaging in combat.[37] Notably, Cockerham and Ray had served in the two military services where opposition to women's participation in combat was strongest.[38]

In interviews, several commission participants and observers criticized this set of commissioners for not being open to deliberation during the commission's meetings. Robert Herres, a retired Air Force general who served as the commission's chair, commented, "The commission couldn't reach consensus because there were five members of the commission who had their mind made up before they showed up. They were not going to support anything that would give women a broader role."[39] Christopher Jehn, who served as the Defense Department's liaison to the commission, commented similarly: "The premise of a commission is supposed to be that people will come together to find compromise. This commission didn't because there were four or five commissioners who were dogmatic on the issue and unprepared to cooperate with their colleagues."[40] Bud Orr, who served as the commission's staff director, offered a similar assessment and recalled that Donnelly, in particular, acted as if she was "on a mission" to oppose women's combat participation.[41] In a further indication that Donnelly treated the commission as an advocacy platform, she conducted her own news conferences during the commission's field

visits, in which she criticized the media for "hyping" women's ability to perform combat tasks. These news conferences prompted a journalist to note that the commission seemed "less a forum for dispassionate analysis than a soapbox for ideological ax-grinding."[42]

These various accounts are credible because they are consistent with each other and because Orr personally opposed women's engagement in combat, while Herres only supported very limited women's engagement in combat—suggesting that these commission participants did not have an ideological incentive to single out Donnelly or other conservative commissioners for criticism.[43] Moreover, several other commissioners expressed similar frustration with the approach of Donnelly and her allies in statements that they added to the commission's report.[44]

In the commission's report, which was issued a week after the November 1992 presidential election, a narrow majority of eight commissioners recommended that women be assigned to naval combat vessels other than amphibious craft and submarines, but not be assigned to any combat aircraft or ground combat units.[45] Cockerham, Donnelly, O'Beirne, Ray, and White issued a thirty-eight-page dissent arguing against women participating in any combat roles.[46]

The commission's impact on policy making was greatly limited by its internal division and inability to reach consensus—notwithstanding the majority's agreement on the key proposals. A *Washington Post* editorial began, "The report of the presidential commission on women in the military ... arrived Tuesday as a partisan mess."[47] A *New York Times* editorial commented similarly that the commission's division had resulted in a "hash" of a report filled with "inconclusive and contradictory" ideas.[48] Jehn recalled, "Most people wrote off the commission because of its bitter controversy."[49]

After the commission reported, the outgoing Bush administration did not make any policy changes on this issue. In 1993 and 1994, the incoming Clinton administration and Congress did institute major changes, but these changes departed from the commission's proposals by allowing women to serve on combat aircraft, on amphibious vessels, and in some ground combat support positions.[50] The overall result was that a number of military roles were opened up to women, but the sharply divided commission had little impact on these changes.

Assessing Gender Issues in Military Training: The Blair Commission

Five years after the Herres Commission's report, Congress created a commission in response to a major military sexual abuse scandal. In 1996, dozens of female US Army recruits reported that they had been raped or sexually assaulted or harassed at an Army training facility.[51] These revelations led some lawmakers to call for all of the military services to return to gender-segregated basic training. (At the time, the Air Force and Navy conducted gender-integrated basic training for all of their

personnel, the Army conducted gender-integrated basic training for some of its personnel, and the Marine Corps conducted entirely gender-segregated training.)

In May 1997, Republican Representative Roscoe Bartlett introduced a legislative proposal that would require all of the services to conduct only gender-segregated basic training.[52] Bartlett's proposal attracted 121 congressional cosponsors, but also faced opposition from the leaders of the Air Force, Army, and Navy, and from many other lawmakers, including Representative Steve Buyer, the Republican chairman of the House of Representatives subcommittee with jurisdiction over the proposal.[53] In the face of this resistance, Bartlett chose to work with Buyer to establish an independent commission that would study the issue instead. This decision resulted in the enactment in November 1997 of legislation establishing the Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues.[54]

The legislation authorized the leaders of the congressional armed services committees to appoint the commission's ten members. These lawmakers appointed eight people with relevant professional experience or expertise who had not worked at an organization engaged in advocacy on the role of women in the military, including three retired military officers, two former civilian defense officials, two military sociologists, and a social psychologist. The other two appointees were Anita Blair and Thomas Moore. Blair was the executive vice president of the Independent Women's Forum, an antifeminist group that advocated separating men and women in military training.[55] Blair had also publicly defended the all-male admissions policy of a military college.[56] Moore was the director of international studies at the Heritage Foundation, which also advocated against gender-integrated military training.[57] Blair was appointed by Republican Senator Strom Thurmond, who supported male-only military education institutions, while Moore was appointed by Republican Representative Floyd Spence, who opposed gender-integrated military training—suggesting that they were appointed at least in part because of their known political views.[58]

At the commission's first meeting, six of the ten commissioners voted to name Blair the commission chair, suggesting that a majority of commissioners was initially opposed to, or at least skeptical of, gender-integrated military training. Subsequently, Blair's strong commitment to end gender-integrated training shaped her leadership of the commission in ways that fostered internal conflict. She infuriated several commissioners by hiring another known supporter of gender-segregated military education as the commission's staff director, and tried repeatedly to push the commission's research in directions that would support her policy preferences.[59]

During the commission's discussions, Blair and Moore were allied with a third commissioner—retired Marine Corps General William Keys—who also had a strong preexisting view opposing gender-integrated training.[60] Keys' opposition was consistent with the Marine Corps' opposition to the conduct of gender-integrated training. In interviews, several commissioners criticized Blair, Moore, and Keys for having made up their minds on the issue from the beginning.[61] Ron Christmas, another retired Marine Corps general on the commission, recalled that the three commissioners "wanted the commission to have a preordained outcome."[62] Robert

Dare, a retired Army officer on the commission, described the trio as "ideological people who ... were not objective in their approach to the findings."[63] The perspectives of Christmas and Dare are particularly credible, as both of them had joined the commission with relatively conservative views on the issue and had voted for Blair to serve as commission chair.[64]

The commission's June 1999 report reflected the commission's split, but was surprising in one important respect. In the report, a majority of six commissioners recommended that each military service "be allowed to continue to conduct basic training in accordance with its current policies," meaning that gender-integrated training could continue.[65] Blair, Keys, and Moore dissented from this recommendation, while the tenth commissioner abstained from it.[66] The votes of Christmas and Dare for this recommendation surprised some commission participants and observers, given their previous votes for Blair.[67] But Christmas and Dare approached the commission's work with relatively open minds and, over the course of the commission's field visits, came to believe that the Air Force, Army, and Navy should be given the freedom to continue training men and women together.[68] Christmas commented, "People thought the outcome was preordained. But that wasn't the case because there were a number of us willing to listen, observe, and make independent judgments ... I came away better understanding what each of the services was doing and satisfied that this was something the service chiefs should control, and that there is an important role for women in the military."[69] In her own account of the commission's work, Mady Segal concluded similarly: "Despite the negative effects of a strong ideological bias against gender-integrated basic training on the Commission's process, enough Commissioners were fair in their evaluations of the evidence that the radical right zealots lost their battle ... "[70] This outcome shows that even commissions composed in part of individuals with strong preexisting views can deliberate productively and result in surprising outcomes, so long as some of the commissioners are open minded.

The Blair Commission's direct impact on policies concerning women in the military was small, as my research did not uncover evidence that commission recommendations led to policy changes. This outcome in part reflected the fact that the commission's principal recommendation called for maintaining the status quo, and in part reflected the commission's division. Blair noted, "We had less impact because the report wasn't unanimous. If it was unanimous, people would've felt there was a legislative mandate. Because of the split, people could ignore it."[71]

But the commission did have substantial political impact in deflating Bartlett's effort to mandate gender-segregated training across the military. Commission Vice Chairman Frederick Pang, a former civilian defense official appointed to the commission by Democratic Senator Carl Levin, who supported gender-integrated training, commented, "If the commission had recommended what Blair favored, Congress might have passed a law separating training by gender."[72] Instead, Bartlett abandoned the effort to mandate a policy change in this area after the commission reported, no further legislation was introduced on the issue for the remainder of the Clinton administration, and gender-integrated training has since remained in place.

Evaluating Diversity and Combat Roles: The Military Leadership Diversity Commission

The post-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq wars brought renewed attention to the issue of women engaging in combat. While the United States had opened up a number of combat roles to women in 1993 and 1994, US policy continued to prohibit women from serving in units whose primary mission is direct ground combat. The latter prohibition, in conjunction with some related prohibitions, was known as the military's "combat exclusion policies." But in Afghanistan and Iraq, women engaged in many operations that appeared, to many observers, to constitute ground combat, and the line between combat and noncombat activities became highly blurred.[73] These realities called into question the continued merit of the combat exclusion policies.

In this context, a new commission—the MLDC—influenced a major Defense Department decision in January 2013 to rescind the combat exclusion policies. This commission was created at the behest of lawmakers who were concerned about the underrepresentation of minorities among senior military officers.[74] In October 2008, these lawmakers achieved the enactment of legislation establishing a commission to examine issues related to the promotion, advancement, and retention of minorities, including women.[75] The legislation did not refer explicitly to combat roles, but called on the commission to examine assignment opportunities for "gender-specific members" of the military at all levels.

The legislation authorized the Secretary of Defense to appoint the commissioners. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates selected thirty commissioners with relevant professional experience or expertise, none of whom had previously worked at an organization engaged in advocacy on the role of women in the military. These individuals included eighteen retired military officers, six active-duty military officers, two Defense Department civilian officials, two individuals with private-sector experience in diversity issues, and an expert on race relations. Gates named retired Air Force General Lester Lyles as the commission's chair.

The commission conducted its investigation of diversity-related issues in the military without major internal controversy.[76] But disagreement emerged when the commission began considering possible recommendations, as some commissioners argued that the commission should recommend the abandonment or modification of the combat exclusion policies, while other commissioners voiced opposition to opening up ground combat positions to women.[77] Over the course of several meetings, the commissioners struggled to find consensus on this issue. Nelson Lim, who served as the commission's research director, commented that these discussions were "very emotional, very tough," adding: "Senior leaders from the Marines and Army [who were serving on the commission] didn't want to see women in harm's way. But women members of the commission said women need to fight in order to become generals. The process was basically talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, until everybody agreed."[78] Another senior commission staff member added that Lyles played a useful role in these discussions by trying to facilitate dialogue, rather than taking a strong position on the issue himself.[79]

Over the course of these discussions, some commissioners changed their view on the issue, including the commission's vice chairman, retired Army General Julius Becton, Jr. A senior commission staff member recalled: "In one meeting, General Becton was adamant that women shouldn't fight in ground combat. At the next meeting, he said, after discussing the issue with his wife, daughters and granddaughters, and cooking his own meals for three days, he realized that he might not have the right position on this issue."[80] Lim added that the active-duty Army and Marine Corps commissioners showed courage in endorsing a recommendation that differed from the positions of their services: "It took a long time for these members to go against their service and put their star on the line."[81]

In the end, the commission recommended in its unanimous March 2011 final report that the Defense Department "eliminate the 'combat exclusion policies'" and "take deliberate steps in a phased approach to open additional career fields and units involved in 'direct ground combat' to qualified women."[82] This recommendation's impact on policy making has been substantial. In February 2012, the Defense Department announced that it was lifting an element of the combat exclusion policies that banned women from performing jobs near ground combat units, and announced it was opening up additional combat-related assignments to women in the Army, Marine Corps, and Navy. In announcing the changes, the department said they were "based in part on findings the MLDC reported."[83] Eleven months later, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey rescinded the combat exclusion policies entirely. Their new directive made it the Defense Department's default policy to open any combat position to women, requiring the Joint Chiefs Chairman and Secretary of Defense to approve any request from a service to keep a position restricted to men.[84] While the commission was not solely responsible for these changes, their timing and the reference to the commission's report in the Defense Department's announcement of them suggests that the commission contributed significantly to them. A Defense Department official involved in the issue said the commission "influenced" the changes by "hammering home" the need to lift the combat exclusion policies.[85]

Other MLDC proposals were also adopted. In January 2013, Congress enacted requirements that the Secretary of Defense develop metrics to assess the military's efforts to generate a diverse officer corps, meet annually with certain military leaders to discuss progress on the metrics, and report annually to Congress on them.[86] The commission had proposed each of these changes, and lawmakers referred to the commission as a source of the ideas.[87]

Conclusions and Future Research

This article's case studies indicate that independent commissions can play a valuable role in facilitating civil–military deliberation on contentious issues, but that the prospects for such deliberation are heavily constrained by the type of individuals appointed to such commissions. In two of the commissions examined in this

Table 1. Summary of Main Findings.

	Herres Commission	Blair Commission	MLDC
Were any commissioners employed by advocacy organizations with an agenda on women in the military?	Yes	Yes	No
To what extent did commission engage in sustained deliberation?	A little	Some	A lot
Did commission reach consensus?	No	No	Yes
Did commission influence significant policy changes?	No	No	Yes
Did commission have significant political effects?	No	Yes	Yes

Note: MLDC = Military Leadership Diversity Commission.

article—the Blair Commission and MLDC—some of the military professionals on the commission changed their views of a major issue involving women in the military as a result of their commission experiences. Moreover, some of the active-duty and retired military officers on the MLDC ultimately endorsed a recommendation to allow women to participate in ground combat units, even though the proposal conflicted with the position of their military service—suggesting that deliberation with people of diverse backgrounds can lead to a softening of service parochialism.

At the same time, the case studies show that the deliberative potential of commissions is greatly hamstrung if policy makers appoint to them people from advocacy groups that are known for favoring particular policies on the issue in question. The appointment of such individuals to the Herres and Blair Commissions led those commissions to become riven by internal conflict—notwithstanding the open mindedness of the Blair Commission members who changed their views. In addition, the divisiveness within those commissions led them to have less impact on policy making than the unanimous MLDC, which influenced major government decisions to expand women's combat roles. However, the divided Blair Commission did have significant political influence, in helping to deflate a congressional effort to end gender-integrated military training. In the end, two of the three commissions helped to advance or maintain women's integration into the military. (Table 1 summarizes the article's key findings for each commission.)

More broadly, these findings suggest that independent commissions can serve as valuable settings for civilians and military professionals to discuss controversial military matters, so long as policy makers appoint commissioners who are relatively open minded and are not based at organizations with strong political commitments on the issue. Given the capacity of commissions to bring together military professionals and civilians, they appear to be particularly useful mechanisms for fostering deliberation on military and society issues, but they should have the potential to aid civil–military dialogue on any military issue characterized by political disagreement. These findings reinforce the commission literature's

findings that commissions can facilitate productive deliberation and influence policy changes, and extend that literature by showing how the appointment of commissioners of certain backgrounds shapes a commission's deliberative potential. The findings also extend the literature on women in the military by illuminating the role of a political institution involved in policy making on women in the military, and extend the civil–military relations literature by showing that independent advisory bodies can help to forge agreement among civilians and military professionals on contentious issues.

Future research could build on these findings by examining the deliberations and influence of other commissions on military and society issues. In the United States, it is clear that such commissions will remain a fixture of military politics and policy making. For instance, in 2009, the US Congress established a commission composed of military professionals and civilians to examine the transition of military veterans to civilian life, and in 2013, Congress created a commission composed of civilians and military professionals to examine the military's handling of sexual assaults.[88] Further research is needed to determine whether this article's findings are supported in these and other US commission cases.

More research is also needed to identify and study commissions on women in the military and other military and society issues in other countries. Given the prevalence of commissions in many countries, it is likely that such commissions have operated outside the United States, but the author is unaware of any studies of them. Examination of their deliberations and outcomes would enable scholars to move toward cross-national comparisons of them. This would, in turn, be an important step toward developing more general knowledge about political institutions that are involved in policy making on issues that link the military and society.

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Notes

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