

POLICY FOCUS

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The Role of Masculinity in Military Effectiveness and Lethality

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HIGHLIGHT

The military's primary function—defeating enemies—requires traditionally masculine traits like aggression, resilience, stoicism, and physical dominance. Recent cultural movements mislabeling masculinity as toxic and reorienting the military to prioritize inclusivity threaten combat effectiveness and readiness. To maintain military lethality, the U.S. must reaffirm masculinity within military training, standards, and ethos, emphasizing psychological and biological realities—ensuring forces remain prepared to confront adversaries decisively and successfully.

INTRODUCTION

The military's primary function is to provide for our national defense by defeating enemies with overwhelming force. Lethality—[defined](#) as the capability and capacity to destroy—is the military's core metric for success.

Historically, it has been men who have waged war. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the traditional characteristics of men—physical toughness, aggression, dominance, and stoicism—are viewed as essential to battlefield success and, ultimately, to maintaining national security.

Unfortunately, over the last two decades, there has been a rise in associating masculinity with

toxicity and affiliated movements encouraging men to disregard more traditional masculinity. Such movements have insisted men should “cry more” and, in general, eschew the aforementioned traditional masculine traits.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with men crying. However, the explicit encouragement to disregard adaptive masculine traits carries broader societal danger and presents challenges for fielding an effective fighting force and winning our nation’s wars.

This is particularly concerning today as the world becomes more dangerous, and America must be prepared for full-scale war against a near-peer aggressor, like China or Russia. Masculinity in warfare is not merely a social construct to be deconstructed during a college seminar but a fundamental reality that must be upheld to protect and defend our country and her allies.

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Nations that cultivate and encourage these virtues in their military forces remain strong. Those that reject them invite weakness. When conflict inevitably arises, it will be predominantly men who step forward to defend our nations—just as they always have.

THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF MEN IN WARFARE

War is not an aberration in human history, it is a constant. Conflict is the state of mankind, shaped by competing ambitions, scarce resources, and the will to dominate or defend. Nations rise and fall on the strength of those willing to fight for them. Men and masculinity have always been central to this reality.

The survival of civilization has depended, and continues to depend, on men who are prepared to meet violence with strength and return conflicts to order by their discipline.

From the earliest days of human existence, warfare was inevitable, and societies structured themselves around it. In ancient Greece, particularly in Sparta, **masculinity was defined through martial prowess**. Boys were not merely encouraged but required to become warriors. To be a man meant to be prepared for battle; anything less was failure. **Greek epics like “The Iliad” immortalized warriors like Achilles**, whose worth was measured by his ability to lead, fight, and sacrifice for something greater than himself.

This pattern held across cultures. **In Rome, the ideal of *virtus***—from *vir*, meaning man—represented martial excellence. In tribal

societies worldwide, status was not bestowed but earned through combat. These societies did not merely assign men the role of warriors; they cultivated and expected it. Civilization endured because men bore the burden of defending it. Without their strength, societies crumbled and were taken over by other nations with stronger armies.

As warfare became more structured, the warrior class was imbued with a moral code. In medieval Europe, the **chivalric ideal** demanded not only skill in battle but duty, loyalty, and righteousness. Knights were not mere fighters but protectors, leaders, and men of principle. The legend of King Arthur’s Round Table reflects this evolution, and masculinity became tied to notions of responsibility and service.

Similar principles emerged in Japan's samurai culture. The [bushido code](#) demanded honor, self-discipline, and unwavering duty. Across continents and cultures, similar standards of manhood emerged.

The advent of gunpowder and professional standing armies in the 16th and 17th centuries transformed warfare, but it did not diminish the demands placed on men. [The Prussian military model of the 18th century](#), for example, emphasized discipline, endurance, and sacrifice. Individual heroics still mattered, but now, a man's masculinity was also defined by his ability to fight as part of a cohesive force.

With the rise of nation-states, military service became an expectation of manhood. A man's duty was to his country, and his worth was measured by his willingness to defend it. Masculinity and patriotism became inseparable, reinforcing the reality that a nation's strength was tied to the strength of its men.

The trenches of World War I and the battlefields of World War II tested men in unprecedented ways, yet the fundamental principle remained unchanged: toughness, sacrifice, and brotherhood defined masculinity.

The industrial-scale warfare of the 20th century only further entrenched the expectation that men serve in war. Mass conscription was not just a military necessity but a societal contract—every able-bodied man was expected to answer the call. Propaganda reinforced this, with slogans like [“Your Country Needs You”](#) not as a suggestion, but a demand.

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not in uniform were presented with [white feathers](#), a symbol of cowardice. Oftentimes, the feathers were presented by women as a part of a campaign to induce men into serving. Societies understood that national survival primarily depended on men willing to bear the burden of war.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MASCULINE TRAITS IN WARFARE

The link between men, masculinity, and combat effectiveness, particularly in terms of aggression and lethality, is not just a historical observation but a psychological and physiological one.

Controlled aggression is an essential trait for battlefield success, with psychological studies of combat performance demonstrating that when [aggression is properly channeled](#),

it enhances a soldier's ability to engage decisively with the enemy. This trait, often more pronounced in men, provides a strategic advantage crucial for mission success in hostile environments.

At the core of this concept is the fight-or-flight response. There are differences in this stress response exhibited by men and women characterized by [“fight-or-flight” in men](#) and [“tend-and-befriend” in women](#). This is supported by [neuroendocrine and behavioral evidence](#). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that masculinity is more frequently associated with a psychological readiness to confront danger rather than retreat, an inclination vital to combat effectiveness.

Additionally, men are known for more **suppression of emotional displays** than women. In combat, this is critical. **Fear is a contagious emotion** that is amplified in groups. And **substantial evidence indicates women**, in general, report greater fear. Fear can lead to hesitation, and in warfare, hesitation can prove fatal. The ability to face an enemy head-on, without hesitation, and the willingness to absorb and act upon the inherent risks of direct confrontation marks the difference between success and failure on the battlefield.

psychological resilience to push through fear, pain, and exhaustion—traits that are deeply embedded within masculine constructs of strength and perseverance—determines the success of military operations. Soldiers who embody this mindset, driven by controlled aggression, are more likely to maintain focus, outlast their adversaries, and achieve mission objectives despite overwhelming adversity.

The acknowledgment of biological reality engenders successful and concrete

This is not to say women are incapable of waging war or serving their country in uniform. As a combat veteran of Afghanistan and former Jumpmaster and paratrooper, I know many women do so with great success and effectiveness. However, when looking directly at subsets of warfare—like hand-to-hand combat—such women are more often the exception, not the rule.

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analysis and policy-making. Irrespective of technological advancements, the psychological and physiological readiness to engage aggressively remains foundational.

BIOLOGICAL REALITY OF MEN VERSUS WOMEN

Due to biological and social conditioning, men typically exhibit a heightened propensity for direct confrontation, which aligns with the operational needs of combat. Moreover, the development of the “Warrior Mindset” through military training underscores the integral relationship between aggression and combat readiness.

This connection between masculinity and aggression is not merely a psychological predisposition but is also a physiological reality. Men, on average, have greater levels of testosterone, which influences behaviors such as aggression, risk-taking, and endurance—qualities that are essential for lethal effectiveness in combat.

Military institutions around the world have long understood that fostering controlled aggression in soldiers enhances their combat performance. This mindset is cultivated through rigorous physical and mental conditioning, enabling soldiers to operate effectively under extreme pressure. The

Tragically, there has been a casual disregard of such data in favor of a political agenda. One such example was the out-of-hand rejection by then-Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus of a **2015 Marine Corps study** concluding that gender-integrated combat formations did not move as quickly or shoot as accurately as all-male formations. Or that women were twice as likely as men to suffer combat injuries.

At the time, many of these disparities were dismissed and reframed as opportunities to train women more comprehensively with a push towards equal fitness standards between men and women. Neither the Marine Corps nor the Army followed through.

This is not helpful to women and makes it more difficult for them to earn the trust and the confidence of those they serve alongside. In fact, the lowering of standards can have negative effects on unit morale and worse impacts on combat effectiveness.

Recognizing women’s unique strengths and weaknesses does not impede women but encourages their success and the success of the mission.

According to [Kristen Griest](#), one of the first women to graduate from Army Ranger school, “[I]t is wholly unethical to allow the standards of the nation’s premiere fighting units to degrade so badly, just to accommodate the lowest-performing soldiers.” She further argues, “[T]he intent [of a single standard] was not to ensure that women and men will have an equal likelihood of meeting those standards. Rather, it is incumbent upon women who volunteer for the combat arms profession to ensure they are fully capable and qualified for it.”

When we recognize the biological differences between men and women, we increase lethality. An example is the heroic and lauded efforts of the [Cultural Support Teams \(CST\)](#) and [Female Engagement Teams \(FET\)](#) in our most recent conflicts. The Cultural Support Team (CST) program [was an initiative established by the United States Army Special Operations Command](#) to recruit and train female operators in specialized skills to support Special Operations Forces (SOF). In the Middle East, women represent approximately half the population; however, cultural norms frequently restrict interactions between local women and male-dominated SOF teams. This limitation significantly

hindered intelligence collection and trust-building with local communities, often leaving Operators without critical information and situational awareness.

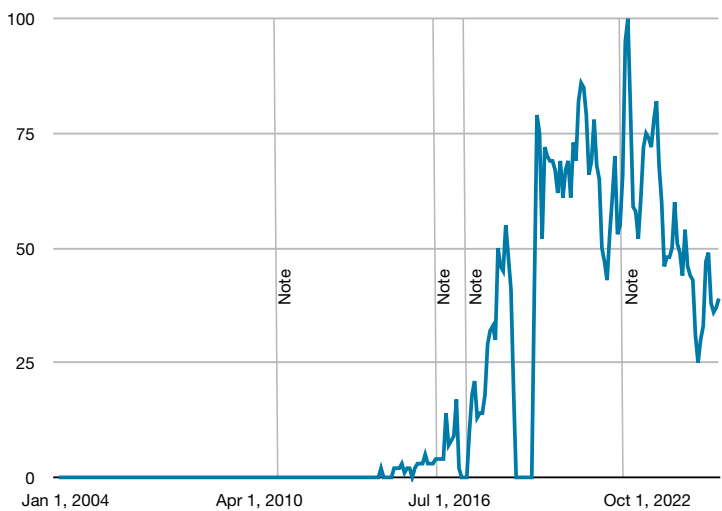
The creation of these teams was rooted in the recognition that women and womanhood are unique and thereby would allow access to places, people, and resources that would be denied to men. Recognizing women’s unique strengths and weaknesses does not impede women but encourages their success and the success of the mission. It has been the past,

frequent Department of Defense denials of the differences between men and women which undermine women and unit cohesion and, ultimately, place lethality at risk.

DEI, EROSION OF MASCULINITY, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR MILITARY LETHALITY

Under the previous administration, [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion \(DEI\) initiatives rapidly proliferated](#) within the Department of Defense (DoD), permeating virtually every aspect of military culture, training, and operations. Although recent efforts have [successfully eliminated official DEI programs](#), the cultural aftermath continues to erode essential elements of traditional masculinity within certain areas of the military, significantly compromising operational effectiveness and readiness.

Within the DEI framework, for years, masculine attributes were mischaracterized as inherently toxic or problematic. Assertiveness, necessary for strong leadership and clarity of command, was unfairly depicted as unchecked dominance. Competitiveness, crucial for driving excellence and continuous



*Google trends: search word "toxic masculinity"

improvement, was discouraged under misguided notions of equity. Stoicism, vital for maintaining composure and decision-making under pressure, became stigmatized as emotional suppression.

Moreover, DEI's strong emphasis on identity-based grievances replaced traditional military values of resilience and personal accountability with a damaging culture of victimhood. Rather than cultivating internal strength and adaptability, soldiers were subtly encouraged to view external factors as responsible for personal shortcomings or setbacks.

The introduction of identity-based quotas and affirmative action measures further eroded masculinity by undermining meritocratic ideals essential for military success. Meritocracy, deeply tied to masculine values of achievement, discipline, and personal responsibility, ensures that individuals strive for excellence based solely on their proven capabilities and performance. DEI-driven quotas diminished incentives for personal excellence, bred resentment among ranks, and ultimately weakened unit overall cohesion and effectiveness by prioritizing immutable traits over demonstrable competence and capability.

As traditional masculine values were discouraged, recruitment and retention rates

declined, particularly among young men who once viewed the military as an arena for proving their strength and toughness. Until recently, there were **significant challenges with recruitment and retention**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: REAFFIRMING MASCULINITY FOR MILITARY READINESS

To restore and maintain military lethality, the U.S. military must reaffirm the importance of masculinity within its training, culture, and operational standards. The following policy recommendations provide a strategic pathway toward reestablishing a decisive, mission-ready force:

A. Reinforce Masculine Warrior Culture

1. Revitalize Aggression-Based Training:

Combat training should be refocused on cultivating controlled aggression, mental toughness, and physical endurance. Exercises must simulate high-stress combat environments, developing soldiers capable of decisive action under extreme pressure. Emphasizing realistic scenarios and rigorous conditioning will ensure that personnel are psychologically prepared for battlefield challenges.

2. Promote Stoicism and Resilience:

Training programs must emphasize emotional discipline and mental fortitude, equipping soldiers to manage effectively stress, hardship, and trauma. Reinstating resilience and emotional control programs will reinforce the importance of maintaining composure and operational effectiveness, especially in prolonged combat situations.

3. Encourage Fraternal Bonding:

Unit cohesion remains integral to military effectiveness. Enhancing team-

building exercises that encourage mutual reliance, shared hardship, and camaraderie will build stronger bonds between service members. This fraternal environment fosters loyalty, reduces the psychological toll of combat, and enhances overall unit lethality.

B. Maintain High Physical Standards

1. Combat Roles Must Prioritize Lethality:

Direct combat roles should exclusively prioritize physical readiness and combat effectiveness. Rigorous and objective fitness and performance standards must be maintained to ensure only individuals who meet or exceed essential criteria serve in these demanding positions. This policy safeguards the military's capability to perform demanding combat missions without compromise.

2. Resist Political Pressures to Lower Standards:

Military readiness must remain insulated from political or social pressures aimed at diluting standards. Any compromise in physical or operational standards undermines combat effectiveness and endangers mission success. Military leaders must advocate consistently and publicly for the maintenance of standards empirically linked to mission performance and combat readiness.

C. Reframe Military Masculinity as a Strength, Not a Problem

1. Combat Stereotypes Against Masculinity:

Public messaging and institutional communication should highlight masculinity's essential role in effective combat performance, reframing masculinity positively and proactively.

Strategic communications should focus on how masculine attributes—such as courage, decisiveness, physical strength, and resilience—directly enhance military effectiveness and national security.

2. Restore the Warrior Ethos:

Military culture must re-embrace a clear, cohesive warrior ethos, emphasizing core values such as bravery, honor, sacrifice, discipline, and battlefield dominance. Educational programs, leadership training, and institutional rituals should explicitly reinforce this identity, ensuring that every service member internalizes these essential qualities as fundamental to military service and readiness.

Implementing these policy recommendations will restore clarity, focus, and capability to the U.S. military, strengthening national defense through renewed emphasis on combat-proven principles.

CONCLUSION

Masculinity has been, and must remain, a cornerstone of military effectiveness. The historical and psychological evidence overwhelmingly supports the argument that masculine traits—aggression, resilience, physical dominance, and unit cohesion—directly contribute to military lethality. As the U.S. military faces **increasing external threats**, it cannot afford to compromise on the fundamental qualities that have defined warrior cultures throughout history. A military stripped of its masculine ethos is a military less prepared to win wars and fails women and men alike. Reaffirming masculinity in training, culture, and operational standards is a strategic necessity for national security. Women, like men, need a lethal military ready and able to protect our country.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

Get Informed

Learn more about the role of masculinity in the military. Visit:

- [America Must Prepare for War](#)
- [Military Readiness is a Crucial Election Issue](#)
- [Congressional Hearing: Ensuring Force Readiness](#)

Talk to Your Friends:

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community:

Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically:

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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