

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps: A Compromise to Overcome the Conflict of Women Serving in the Army

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“IT WASN'T JUST MY BROTHER'S COUNTRY, or my husband's country; it was my country as well. And so this war wasn't just their war; it was my war, and I needed to serve in it.”¹ This sentiment, shared by Beatrice Hood Stroup, expresses the feelings of hundreds of thousands of women who helped save the world from tyranny in World War II. Though we now take the idea of women in the military for granted, in the 1940s it was a vigorously debated suggestion. Men protected their country; women stayed at home. Because of conflict over whether women should serve in the army, Congress compromised by creating the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), whose impact still resonates today.

The notion of women in the military has been controversial throughout history. Those who did fight were so rare they have become famous: Deborah, Joan of Arc, Molly Pitcher. As America moved closer to entering a second world war, Representative Edith Nourse Rogers from Massachusetts realized that women could play a vital role in the war effort. Women in other countries had already assumed jobs in factories, the air service, and air raid protection agencies; some European governments had even begun drafting women to participate in “almost every war activity except the actual combat.”²

However, Rogers wanted to avoid a situation in which women did not receive equal pay, medical care, benefits, food, or lodging, as had happened to volunteers during World War I. She “was determined that if women were to serve again with the Army in a wartime theater, they would receive the same legal protection and benefits as their male counterparts.”³ To ensure these rights, Rogers introduced a bill in May of 1941 to create a Women's Army Corps (WAC). Her suggestion was met with a great deal of resistance.⁴

Many people in America didn't want women to work in, with, or near the army. One group that strongly opposed the idea was the Catholic Church. In June of 1942, the National Catholic Women's Union called the service of women in the military “a serious menace to the home and foundation of a true Christian and democratic country.”⁵ Other Catholics were concerned about “submitting innocent and im-

pressionable [girls] to the environment and temptations of the Army.”⁶ The 1942 National Catholic Welfare Conference expressed its major concern, that the government would “use the war as an excuse for assuming control of children.”⁷

However, it wasn’t just Catholics who were gravely troubled by the idea of women serving in the Army. Many men worried that their status in the household would change drastically if women could help fight a war:

Opponents characterized the female soldier as a dire threat to the home and family, and to the privatized gender relationships within them, especially to the husband’s status as breadwinner and head of household. . . . The female soldier epitomized the wartime antiheroine, a figure whose potential . . . independence from men subverted the “natural order” and whose position as a female protector usurped men’s status and power, both within and outside of the home.⁸

Obviously, if men objected to their girlfriends, wives, and daughters enlisting, the women would feel great conflict about joining the military.

Another group against women serving in the army was the army itself, or at least some members of it. According to a woman who served as a USO Club hostess, “the feeling of men in the camps was 99 percent against women going into the Army.”⁹ Some personnel expressed concern that men would not be able to function properly fighting alongside women: “The possibility that male soldiers might seek to defend and protect military women instead of carrying out their assigned missions [was] cited by military experts as a primary example of potential ‘dangers’ in incorporating women fully into the military structure.”¹⁰

Some officers seemed to think including females in the army was just a waste of time: Colonel Adler, civilian aide to the Secretary of War, suggested that they “concentrate their energies first on the tremendously important matter of building up the morale, in which, he declared, women were far more important and effective than men.”¹¹ Colonel McCoskrie, who would later serve as the commandant of the WAAC Training Center at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, was openly skeptical: “Like most of my contemporaries, I wasn’t much impressed by the thought of women in uniform. We had a war to fight, and war was man’s business. Women would only clutter it up.”¹²

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, was “violently against” the idea of WAC at first and predicted “tremendous difficulties” in their service.¹³ Even though Representative Rogers wanted the women’s corps to be a part of the Army so that women could be given equal pay, pension, and disability benefits, the “War Department was very unwilling to have these women as a part of the Army.”¹⁴

Women were split on the issue. Some women’s groups expressed opposition to the idea by writing to Rogers.¹⁵ Others thought submitting to army discipline would be ridiculous when they could just volunteer.¹⁶ However, many women were quite enthusiastic about the chance to serve their country. At the New York Convention for the League of Business and Professional Women, one woman said, “I want to do anything in my power to assist my country, and I know that there are great numbers of women who are of the same mind.”¹⁷

With all this conflict, it's not surprising that Congressional leaders tried to avoid the topic altogether. When Rogers first introduced the WAC bill in May of 1941, "it was tossed aside."¹⁸ Many senators believed that it was inconsequential: "Congressional feeling, particularly in the Military Affairs Committee, [was] that women [had] enough to do... and, moreover, that the Rogers bill [could] wait until more important matters [were] decided."¹⁹ According to Colonel Barbara Wilson, Congressmen did everything they could to evade the issue: "The politicians... made flimsy promises of considering [a women's corps] of sorts while quietly hoping it would all go away and secretly trying to figure out how to stop it."²⁰ Because of the conflict, the WAC bill faced a "dubious future."²¹ All this changed, however, on December 7, 1941.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, War Department officials began to realize that women would indeed be needed to win the war. Army leaders decided to work with Rogers to come up with a group that "would constitute the least threat to the Army's existing culture."²² They compromised by creating the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), a group which, according to Public Law 554, was formed "for the purpose of making available to the national defense the knowledge, skill, and special training of the women of the nation."²³ The corps would be a "separate, supplementary, parallel adjunct of the military establishment."²⁴ Rogers introduced the compromise WAAC bill at the end of December to the House Military Affairs Committee, this time with the full support of Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall.²⁵

Despite the compromise, however, conflict still existed, especially in Congress. Although most of the opposition came from the South,²⁶ Congressman Somers of New York was also vehemently opposed to the idea, as can be seen by his comments from the March 17, 1942, Congressional Record:

I take this opportunity to express my definite and sincere opposition to what I consider the silliest piece of legislation that has ever come before my notice in the years I have served here. A woman's army to defend the United States of America. Think of the humiliation. What has become of the manhood of America, that we have to call on our women to do what has ever been the duty of men? The thing is so revolting to me, to my sense of Americanism, to my sense of decency, that I just cannot discuss it in a vein that I think legislation should be discussed on the floor of this House.²⁷

Congressman Randolph called passing the WAAC bill a "grave mistake"²⁸ which was "not the manner in which we as men can show our deep respect"²⁹ for women. Representative Hare described it as a poor "reflection upon the courageous manhood of the country,"³⁰ while Congressman Fulmer called it the "most ridiculous bill"³¹ he had considered in his twenty-one years in the House. One representative even asked, "Who will do the cooking, the washing, the mending, the humble homey tasks to which every woman has devoted herself; who will nurture the children?"³²

Congressman Hook suggested using men who could not go to combat because of injury or physical defect: "Let us exhaust the manpower first before we try to make a women's auxiliary corps... Let us give these young men... an opportunity to have an honorable discharge from the United States Army."³³ In the same vein,

Representative Hare proposed bringing back World War I veterans instead of using women; he was sure they “would like to demonstrate again their patriotism... and they would be just as efficient as anyone.”³⁴

Despite the arguments against WAAC, most reasonable people realized that women would eventually become vital to the war effort. The size of the war machine necessary to fight the Axis on so many fronts would be enormous; military experts agreed that the United States would face a serious shortage in manpower before the end of the war.³⁵ This idea is stated somberly in a WAAC manual printed in 1943:

Our far-flung battlefield is already requiring millions of fighting men. That many of these gallant soldiers will lose their lives is inevitable. America must stand ready to replace these men with other men. There must be no limit to fighting manpower. Here arises the need for the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps—these women will replace men for the fighting front.... It is said that battles are lost by failing to have enough men and enough weapon power at the right place at the right time.... American women do not intend to let our nation lose.³⁶

Rep. Charles A. Plumley from Vermont summed up the point simply: “You cannot win this war without women.”³⁷

In the end, the two most important opinions on the topic came from Chief of Staff Marshall and Secretary of War Stimson. Marshall wrote Congress, arguing for the bill’s passing: “All of our available manpower and womanpower will be required to win this war.”³⁸ Stimson agreed, adding that speed was vital: “In order that a maximum benefit might be obtained from the proposed auxiliary corps, it is essential that its organization and employment be carefully planned and key personnel properly trained before there is urgent need for extensive expansion.”³⁹

Finally, in the spring of 1942, after “a long and acrimonious debate,”⁴⁰ the WAAC bill worked its way through Congress. It passed the House 249 to 86 on March 17; the vote in the Senate was much closer, ending 38 to 27 on May 12.⁴¹ After President Roosevelt signed the compromise bill into law on May 15, over 13,000 women applied for the first 440 officer slots.⁴² On July 15, 1942, the initial WAAC officer class started an eight-week course at Fort Des Moines, Iowa.⁴³ (See Appendix A.)

In the beginning, the women were considered a novelty and a joke. Multiple magazine articles referred to them as “skirted soldiers”⁴⁴ and discussed frivolous items such as the “silly hats” worn by leader Oveta Culp Hobby.⁴⁵ (See Appendix B.) Not taking the women seriously, “during the first few weeks of WAAC training, cartoonists and wise-cracking columnists had a field day.”⁴⁶

However, the impact of the compromise was felt almost immediately, and military leaders began to change their minds about the abilities of the WAACs. The women filled positions in 239 categories, becoming clerks, drivers, mechanics, cooks, radio operators,⁴⁷ weather observers, laboratory technicians, aircraft warning reporters, weapon repairers, and parachute riggers,⁴⁸ just to name a few of the vital jobs they held. (See Appendix C.)

As WWII progressed, military leaders who had once rejected the idea of women

in the service began to petition the War Department for additional WAACs: "On more than one occasion, the Army became so desperate for women that its leaders seriously considered requesting Congressional approval to draft them."⁴⁹ Instead of resorting to a draft, military officials began to recruit heavily, using posters, radio, newspapers, and even public proclamations to urge women to volunteer.⁵⁰ Women were reminded that every WAAC who enlisted freed a man to fight and brought the troops home sooner.⁵¹ (See Appendix D.)

Colonel McCoskrie, Commandant at Fort Des Moines, found that the women were "a good deal more efficient than many all-male military outfits."⁵² He added, "There are no better soldiers anywhere on earth."⁵³ When WAACs went to Europe, they performed so impressively that they were referred to as "Eisenhower's secret weapon."⁵⁴ After the war, General Eisenhower said, "Every phase of the record they compiled during the war convinced me of the error of my first reaction."⁵⁵ General Douglas MacArthur called WAACs, "my best soldiers."⁵⁶

WAACs were even praised by the enemy. After WWII, Albert Speer, Hitler's weapons production chief, stated, "How wise you were to bring your women into your military.... Had we done that initially, as you did, it could well have affected the whole course of the war."⁵⁷

The impact of the WAAC compromise was so great on the war effort that in 1943 General Marshall decided to remove the auxiliary label, asking Congress to give the women full military status. The auxiliary system had "proved complex and unwieldy, requiring a separate set of WAAC regulations and policies."⁵⁸ Facing less conflict this time, the Women's Army Corps bill passed Congress in July 1943, a little over a year after the WAAC had first become operational.⁵⁹

Now, sixty-six years later, it is obvious that the compromise made to create the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was worth the struggle. More than 150,000 women served in the Army during WWII.⁶⁰ In addition to helping preserve democracy, these women overcame conflict, "performed brilliantly, and laid the groundwork on which military women's efforts and achievements still rest today. In fact, advances in many areas in the years between 1960 and today owe much to these women who served during World War II."⁶¹ Currently, 212,000 women serve on active duty in the United States military, comprising 15% of the armed forces. In 1950, only 2% of American forces were female.⁶² This increase can be directly tied to the compromise of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, "one of the greatest wartime experiments this nation has ever undertaken."⁶³

Overcoming great conflict, Edith Nourse Rogers compromised her vision of a Women's Army Corps to create an auxiliary corps. The impact of this concession still reverberates today. In 1942, Colonel Hobby told her first class of graduating WAACs, "You have taken off silk and put on khaki. You have a debt to democracy and a date with destiny."⁶⁴ The women of WAAC accepted that date because it wasn't just their brothers' war, or their husbands' war. It was their war, and they needed to serve in it.

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Appendix A

Fort Des Moines



Fort Des Moines, Iowa was the first training center for WAACs. I took the above pictures at the museum at Fort Des Moines. On the left is a poster used after the WAACs became WACs. On the right is a picture taken of women climbing a rope wall. At Fort Des Moines the women studied military first aid and sanitation, military customs and courtesy, map reading, chemical attack defense, and physical training.



In this picture taken at Fort Des Moines Museum, I am standing in front of a wall honoring the graduates of the first WAAC Officer Candidate School. A quote fitting WAAC philosophy is engraved at the bottom of the wall: "Do not follow where the path may lead. Go where there is no path and leave a trail."

Appendix B

Frivolous Treatment

(Source: Rice University) Oveta Culp Hobby is shown here being sworn in as the Director of the WAAC. Notice her “silly hat” that so many newspaper articles described.



The uniforms shown above are displayed at Fort Des Moines Museum. These uniforms led newspaper reporters to call the WAACs “skirted soldiers.”

Appendix C

Jobs Done by WAACs/WACs



WAACs did 239 types of jobs in the Army. The poster on the left was used during WWII to show women what kind of jobs were available to them. The photo on the right shows WAAC Pearl Hargrove, General Dwight. D. Eisenhower's driver in Africa. I took both of these photos at Fort Des Moines Museum.



(Source: Curley) WAC Pvt. Mary Delession was a mechanic at Gowen Field, Idaho during WWII.

Jobs Done by WAACs/WACs



(Source: Sanini) A whole series of posters was created to show women the types of jobs they could hold in the army. These four show WACs working in a chemical laboratory, repairing a radio, checking flight conditions for the army air corps, and taking pictures.

Appendix D

Recruiting Posters



These posters were also used to recruit soldiers for the WAAC/WAC. The posters appealed to the women's sense of patriotism and reminded them that they could help end the war sooner. (Source: Sanini)



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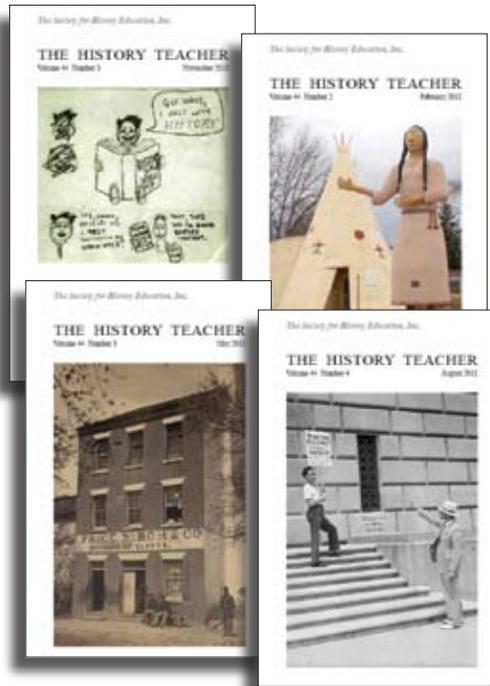
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