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The Military as Social Experiment: Challenging a Trope

Jacqueline E. Whitt and Elizabeth A. Perazzo

The phrase “The military is a fighting force, not a social experiment!” has become something of a rallying cry in contemporary conservative discourse about the American military. It is usually deployed in response to policies related to religion, gender, and sexuality. This phrase, though, misrepresents the real social and political history of the United States military, and it presents a false choice between experimentation and effectiveness. In reality, the choice is more complex.

Labels such as “social experiment,” “social laboratory,” “social engineering,” and “social agenda,” signal opposition to certain kinds of military personnel policies, and they carry intentionally provocative, and often partisan, political connotations. Experiments hinge on uncertainty. They often fail. And although failed experiments may be a path to deeper understanding, the failures can produce unforeseen effects or raise undesirable questions. Social experiment connotes both experimentation on people and manipulation. Social experiment may echo other unmentioned government-directed experiments or initiatives, such as those carried out in the Tuskegee syphilis study or in eugenics and sterilization programs. Engineering suggests manipulation, changes to the natural order of things. A social agenda signifies a program of action designed to subvert or to advance a particular political position, usually at the expense of “traditional” values.

The claim the military should not be a social experiment, the locus for advancing a social agenda, or a product of social engineering—which we collectively term the *social experiment critique*—has been used primarily by political conservatives to criticize diversifying the American military.

This essay exposes the social experiment critique using two arguments. First, the social experiment critique fundamentally distorts the social and political history of the American military and sets up a false binary: the military can be either an effective fighting force or a social experiment. This critique further assumes the choice is obvious: national values must be sacrificed for militarization and military effectiveness. Yet, the American military has always been a social experiment, especially when determining who can and cannot serve and why. Thus, today’s social experiment critique misleads the audience.

Second, the social experiment critique is deployed selectively, namely against populations other than heterosexual, white, Christian, native-born cisgender men in the military. Thus, the social experiment critique operates as a political trope, gaining traction specifically in conservative political circles. We demonstrate this rhetorical device by highlighting the sources of the critique, including mainstream politicians, political pundits, the media, and the public at large. The participation of veterans

(especially retired general officers) and currently serving military members reveals additional complexities about this construct.

Importantly, this commentary is not about whether increased diversity is good or bad for the military, whether women should be integrated into combat roles, whether transgender people should be allowed to serve, or whether unit cohesion is an argument worth engaging in the twenty-first century. Countless other works explore these issues in great depth, and the issues remain contested. Instead, we trace a specific discourse and criticize its contemporary usage to encourage military professionals to engage in meaningful conversations about the relationship between military effectiveness and inclusivity.

Historicizing the Military Social Experiment

Discussions about the function and composition of the armed forces must take into account the relationship between the military and the society it serves. Each society must answer the question of who fights, and under what terms. In the United States, the ideal has been the citizen-soldier, motivated by patriotism and American spirit. Historian Richard H. Kohn has written, “Americans have long believed that how they have behaved in service and in battle reflected their character as a people and their virtue as a nation.”¹ Yet this vision glossed the systematic and purposeful exclusion of many Americans from military service. Even under conscription regimes, the American military has never truly been a cross section of American society; rather it has always been a social experiment—changing over time, cobbling together a fighting force designed to fight and win the nation’s wars, and signaling what it meant to be fully American.

The American military has never been homogenous. It has always limited service based on demographic characteristics such as race, class, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, gender, and sexuality—often at the expense of “objective” considerations about military effectiveness. For most of its history, these categories were used to preserve the prevailing social and political order based on hierarchies of race, class, ethnicity, and gender. The American military, defining and redefining itself in relation to who serves in uniform, cannot truly be understood, except as a social experiment.

During the American Revolution, the social experiment impulse meant enshrining in law exemptions based upon racial, economic, and religious distinctions that valued certain classes of people. The ranks of the Continental Army were disproportionately filled with men from the lower third of the socioeconomic ladder and other disadvantaged groups. In a foundational piece of legislation constituting military force for the new nation, considerations of race, gender, citizenship, religion, and class are clearly evident: the Militia Act (1792) called on every “free able-bodied white male citizen” to enroll in a local militia. But some state statutes included exemptions—for example, Pennsylvania made

1 Richard H. Kohn, “The Social History of the American Soldier: A Review and Prospectus for Research,” *American Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (June 1981): 555. For US military demographics in the twentieth century, see Jennifer Mittelstadt, “Military Demographics,” in *At War: The Military and American Culture in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. David Kieran and Edwin A. Martini (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 87–107.

exceptions for congressmen and judges as well as conscientious objectors and those who had volunteered for military service for seven years.²

During the American Civil War, the military social experiment was not just about who was included but also about who was excluded. The Enrollment Act (1863) meant Union men could pay substitutes to fulfill their enlistment obligations, which reflected the value of wealth and social class to the obligation of military service. There, draft riots threatened social and political stability as young men objected to being sent to war.³ The Confederate States of America wrestled with how to constitute its army given its smaller pool of available manpower, but service exemptions, such as the Twenty-Slave Law (1862), and restrictions on slaves' military service conveyed the Confederacy's value of social order over military effectiveness until the very end of the war.⁴ In the Confederacy, the social experiment related to conscription led to the widespread belief that the Civil War was a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight."⁵ The military social experiment in the mid-nineteenth century demonstrated the United States and its Confederate enemy could make decisions about who would fight based on social status rather than military fitness or political interest.

The United States confronted massive military manpower requirements during the First World War. Questions about the relationship between service, citizenship, and equality came to the forefront of political and military discussions. Conscription required many, but not all, to serve. In addition to what seemed like obvious exclusions—women, the disabled, the aged, or the infirm—the legislation allowed for other exemptions. Exemptions for college students, clergy, and others in professions deemed vital to the war effort signaled their political value and caused more lower- and working- class men to be conscripted. The military also wrestled with questions about citizenship and military service. Some immigrants were permitted to join the ranks while others, such as German immigrants, were initially excluded. But this exclusion, which many in society found unacceptable, shifted the burden and dangers of service onto native-born whites.⁶

In the Second World War, maintaining segregated units reified prevailing social structures. Arguments were couched in grounds of effectiveness, but little supporting evidence was offered. In a speech to black newspaper editors, a representative of the Army's adjutant general said: "The Army is not a sociological laboratory; to be effective it must be organized and trained according to the principles which will insure

2 *Militia Exemption Books, 1801–13* (PA: Office of the Comptroller General), 6 vols., RG/004/35, box 1, microfilm roll 5151, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.

3 Michael T. Meier, "Civil War Draft Records: Exemptions and Enrollments," *Prologue* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 282–86; and Barnet Schecter, *The Devil's Own Work: The Civil War Draft Riots and the Fight to Reconstruct America* (New York: Walker, 2009).

4 Paul D. Escott, *Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006); William L. Shaw, "The Confederate Conscription and Exemption Acts," *American Journal of Legal History* 6, no. 4 (October 1962): 368–405; and Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

5 For a straightforward expression of this idea, see Charles H. Wesley, *The Collapse of the Confederacy*, with a new introduction by John David Smith (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). For a contending interpretation, see Joseph T. Glatthaar "Everyman's War: A Rich and Poor Man's Fight in Lee's Army," *Civil War History* 54, no. 3 (September 2008): 229–46.

6 Nancy Gentile Ford, *Americans All! Foreign-born Soldiers in WWI* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001).

success. Experiments to meet the wishes and demands of the champions of every race and creed for the solution of their problems are a danger to efficiency, discipline and morale and would result in ultimate defeat.”⁷

In the postwar period, the newly formed Department of Defense explored options for conducting explicit “experiments” to desegregate some units.⁸ But the services objected. In 1948, Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which ordered the desegregation of the armed forces. But opponents of racial integration, often from within the military, continued to employ the rhetoric of social experimentation to argue against the policy. In 1949, for example, Marine Corps Commandant General Clifton B. Cates argued segregation was a national, rather than military, problem because the military “could not be an agency for experimentation in civil liberty without detriment to its ability to maintain the efficiency and the high state of readiness so essential to national defense.”⁹

During the Vietnam War, local draft boards, wielding complicated rules about exemptions, held extraordinary power to manipulate which men served and under what conditions. These boards often exempted or offered choices to the sons of the wealthy while providing few alternatives to working class Americans.¹⁰ The military social experiment went apace when it served the interests of the economically and racially privileged. At the same time, the Department of Defense instituted another experiment—Project 100,000 that ostensibly aimed to uplift the “subterranean poor” by lowering conscription standards and allowing “rejectees” to serve.¹¹ Project 100,000 is almost universally considered a failed experiment that weakened readiness and effectiveness without producing positive long-term effects for the populations it sought to bring into the military.

After the Vietnam War, with the implementation of the all-volunteer force, the military services made conscious efforts to recruit women and racial minorities to meet manpower requirements. In practice, this move meant recruiting, training, retaining, and promoting more women and more racial and ethnic minorities than previous iterations of the American force demanded. This expansiveness is most readily evident in the US Army, which had the highest personnel requirements. The all-volunteer force required recruiting a willing and qualified force, which was, in theory and reality, a diverse one.¹² The all-volunteer force is best understood as a social experiment that offered a new vision of how the military would relate to society.

7 Col Eugene R. Householder (speech before Conference of Negro Editors and Publishers, December 8, 1941), quoted in Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940–1965* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2001), 23.

8 MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 328–30.

9 Gen Clifton B. Cates, Commandant of the Marine Corps, for the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air, memorandum, “Proposed Directive for the Armed Forces for the Period 1 July 1949 to 1 July 1950,” March 17, 1949, AO-1, US Marine Corps files, quoted in MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 336.

10 Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

11 Lisa Hsiao, “Project 100,000: The Great Society’s Answer to Military Manpower Needs in Vietnam,” *Vietnam Generation* 1, no. 2 (1989): 14.

12 Beth L. Bailey, *America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

As in the 1940s, critics of expanding access to military service in the era of the all-volunteer force used pervasive language of social experimentation to target women in the armed forces who sought expanded roles as well as servicemembers who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. During the period from 1970 to 1980, women went from less than one percent of the force to nine percent. In 1979, James Webb, then a professor at the Naval Academy, lambasted the integration of women into the armed services and the academies, accusing politicians of endangering effectiveness in return for political favor. He wrote the armed forces cannot be “a test tube for social experimentation. Nowhere is this more of a problem than in the area of women’s political issues.”¹³ Webb joined a loud chorus that used this particular rhetorical formulation, often embedded with other critiques about standards, sexuality, and human nature.

The social experiment critique gained momentum throughout the 1990s. Charles Moskos, a prominent military sociologist, suggested the “postmodern military” wrought unwelcome developments in the civil-military arena. At the height of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” debate and the Clinton administration’s policy toward open homosexual service in the military, Moskos wrote, “Once thought of as the institution through which citizens—at least male citizens—discharged their basic civic obligation, the military is now coming to be seen as a large and potent laboratory for social experimentation.” After briefly examining the history of racial integration within the military, he rejected comparisons between racial integration and integration of women and gay, lesbian, and bisexual servicemembers: “We live at a time when the combat mission of the armed forces appears to be of secondary importance. . . . We can only hope that our postmodern military never has to face the uncivil reality of war.”¹⁴ Moskos’s article exemplifies the way the social experiment critique makes a binary distinction between social experimentation and military effectiveness.

The social experiment critique resonated in popular culture, too. In the 1997 film *G. I. Jane*, a female Navy lieutenant is selected to undergo elite SEAL training—and the men are none too happy about it. In a confrontation with the commanding officer, the Navy lieutenant says she believes the commanding officer resents her. The captain, though, disagrees—at least on the details—and tells her, “What I resent, lieutenant, is some politician using my base as a test tube for her grand social experiment.” The captain goes on to elaborate on all of the things he resents, which he sees as both a violation of his command and the sanctity of the masculine space of the elite unit.¹⁵ In this critique, the problem was not with the lieutenant as an individual, but with the perceived encroachment of the outside world on a closed culture and the deleterious effects of broader representation on the group.

13 James Webb, “Women Can’t Fight,” *Washingtonian*, November 1, 1979. Webb later became a senator from Virginia and walked back these comments. Dan Lamothe, “Under Pressure, Jim Webb Declines To Be Recognized as a Distinguished Naval Academy Graduate,” *Washington Post*, March 28, 2017.

14 Charles Moskos, “From Citizens’ Army to Social Laboratory,” *Wilson Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 83, 94.

15 C. O. Salem to Lt. Jordan O’Neil in *G. I. Jane*, directed by Ridley Scott (Caravan Pictures et al., 1997).

Contemporizing the Social Experiment Critique

The binary construct pitting experimentation against effectiveness reveals the politicization of questions about representativeness and inclusivity in the military. The social experiment critique is used in conservative media and political circles critical of what they deem to be politically correct efforts to diversify the force.

At the national level, the Republican Party clearly expressed its opposition to the advancement of social concerns at the alleged expense of military readiness and effectiveness. The 2016 Republican Party distinctly stated its intent to repeal inclusivity policies initiated during President Barack Obama's term. The platform called for "an objective review of the impact on readiness of the current administration's ideology-based personnel policies," promised to "correct problems," and "reject[ed] the use of the military as a platform for social experimentation," which it saw as an attempt to "undermine military priorities and mission readiness."¹⁶ The social experimentation is characterized as a direct threat to military priorities and readiness, but the nonspecific nature of the critique protects its utility and flexibility as a trope.

Politicians employing the social experiment critique run the risk of sending mixed messages. The 2016 Republican platform further states, "We reiterate our support for both the advancement of women in the military and their exemption from direct ground combat units and infantry battalions." Republicans know that the all-volunteer force cannot function without women, but it also desires to designate combat as masculine space. But the messaging is inconsistent. In 2016, Congressman Mac Thornberry (R-TX) stated, "I do not believe that the military should be an experimental laboratory for social issues." But he continued, "I also believe that you focus on capability and getting the job done, protecting the country, and don't worry so much about a person's color or gender."¹⁷ Nonetheless, policies that perpetuate systematic exclusion of certain groups eliminate their chance to demonstrate their ability to do the job.

The social experiment critique is often voiced by conservative senior retired military officers attempting to resist civilian-initiated policy changes that appear to challenge military culture and tradition. These veterans are powerful messengers, and many are held in high regard by the public. Before the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy was repealed, more than 1,160 retired generals and admirals signed a letter stating that repealing this law would have a detrimental effect on the military.¹⁸ These critics objected to involving the military in a social agenda and insinuated the change would break the all-volunteer force. Another firestorm of critique using the social experiment language ignited in late 2015 when Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter opened all occupational specialties to women. As he reasoned, "the military

16 Republican National Committee (RNC), *Republican Platform 2016* (Cleveland, OH: RNC, 2016), 44.

17 Joel Gehrke, "Lawmaker: Obama Using Military for Social Experiments," *Washington Examiner*, February 1, 2016.

18 Aaron Belkin et al., "Readiness and DADT Repeal: Has the New Policy of Open Service Undermined the Military?," *Armed Forces & Society* 39, no. 4 (December 2012): 587-601; and "Concerns Regarding Recruiting, Retention, and Readiness," Flag and General Officers for the Military, accessed September 11, 2018.

services will be better able to harness the skills and perspectives that talented women have to offer.”¹⁹ This statement, however, was often read as yet another example of a social agenda being forced on the military.

The social experiment critique emanates from conservative media and activist organizations as well. A search for “experiment” on the Center for Military Readiness, a conservative political advocacy group, yields 156 hits.²⁰ On the *Federalist*, a conservative online journal that offers political and cultural commentary, many articles that address gender, sexuality, or diversity in the military employ the language of the social experiment critique.²¹ On social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, searches for “military social experiment,” “military political correctness,” and “military social engineering” yield thousands of hits, almost all of them decrying inclusivity policies and suggesting military readiness and effectiveness has been dangerously degraded. Many participants in these online forums claim to be veterans or currently serving military members, although such affiliations and identities are difficult to verify. These phrases and ideas circulate within a relatively closed ecosystem and generally do not engage with detailed analysis or evidence. Altogether, the discourse of the contemporary social experiment critique exists largely separate from the detailed social and political history of the American military.

Ultimately, the social experiment critique defines military service as a privilege for those deemed fit to serve rather than a broad obligation of citizenship. This definition has potentially significant consequences should the United States find itself in a major war. The perceived value of military service in the United States changes. Sometimes being in the military is an honor. The soldier represents the best ideals of the United States and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Military service ennobles and valorizes individuals and the state’s purpose, and it confers respectability and legitimacy on those who serve. At other times, military service seems a punishment. The military represents the overreach of the state that magnifies divisions among social classes, and distinctions of race, class, and gender can be used to marginalize servicemembers when public support for war ebbs. The social experiment critique finds more purchase in the first instance, when the “experiment” serves to broaden representation and inclusion, expanding the boundaries of citizenship and the legitimacy of American identities. When the experiment serves to exclude populations in order to preserve perceived social statuses, the critique is less robust, if it exists at all.

19 Cheryl Pellerin, “Carter Opens All Military Occupations, Positions to Women,” Department of Defense, December 3, 2105.

20 “Search Results: Experiment,” Center for Military Readiness, accessed July 9, 2018.

21 For examples, see Sumantra Maitra, “Dear Trans Lobby: The Military Is Not a Social Experiment,” *Federalist*, August 28, 2017; and Walt Heyer, “Thanks to the Trump Administration, the U. S. Military Will Not Become a Sex-Change Clinic,” *Federalist*, March 27, 2018.

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