THE DOWNGRADING OF DACOWITS:

HOW PRESIDENT BUSH HAS FAILED AMERICA'S WOMEN IN UNIFORM

A Report Prepared by the Office of Congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney (NY-14)
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Summary

In 1951, Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall established The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), a civilian committee to advise the Secretary of Defense on how to obtain more women to serve in the armed forces, increase their retention rate, and better use their capabilities. DACOWITS has earned an excellent reputation and the support of both Republican and Democratic administrations over the past five decades. Most improvements in the integration of women into the military were first articulated by DACOWITS.

In 2002, the Bush Administration changed the charter for the first time in 51 years. The changed charter, coupled with additional management changes, reduced the number of members on the committee, decreased the committee's funding, cut the committee's staff support, and took control of the agenda away from the committee and gave it to the Pentagon, among other things. Even though women currently make up 15% of our nation's armed forces, the services continue to face significant challenges with respect to the acceptance of women in the male-led military. There has only been one female service Secretary. Women continue to be underrepresented at the higher ranks. Domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual assault of women in the military are unfortunately persistent problems that the military has failed to effectively handle for decades and has yet to resolve. In light of the continued need to devote efforts to promoting full integration of women into the armed forces, President Bush has nonetheless chosen to reduce these efforts.

The president's actions are problematic not only because they are unjust to women, but also because they threaten our nation's military readiness. In the words of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz: "As we consider the issue of womanpower in the service today it's not just a matter of women being entitled to serve this country. It is a simple fact that we could not operate our military services without women. And as skill levels essential to our missions continue to increase, it will be even more essential that we draw from all our citizens, that we draw from the largest pool of talent available."[1] As Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz says, servicewomen are essential to our military readiness. Military women need to be able to focus on the job of defending our country without internal hindrances. By purposely rolling back efforts to address the obstacles that remain for women in the armed forces, President Bush's actions do not support our women in uniform and thereby put our nation's military preparedness at risk.

Report

In celebration of International Women's Day this year, President Bush asked: "How can society achieve progress while women, who represent half the nation, see their rights violated and suffer as a result of injustice and violence and marginalization?"[2] That's a good question. He should have considered it before actively working to guarantee continued marginalization of women in the United States military. Since taking office, President Bush has purposefully reduced the authority and diluted the efforts of the well-respected Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), the one entity focused on integration of women into the United States armed forces.

What is DACOWITS?

DACOWITS has served as a civilian board that advises the Secretary of Defense on issues affecting women in the armed forces since 1951. It has a reputation for doing serious analysis on integrating women into the military at little expense to the United States government. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz said in 2001: "we've come to expect from DACOWITS... practical and sensible advice that cuts to the heart of issues as it considers the overall good of the armed forces."[1] For over half a century, DACOWITS has effectively monitored the integration of women into the military by allowing servicewomen to voice their concerns without their commanding officers present. These concerns were then translated into recommendations that were sent to the military services and to the Secretary of Defense. General Henry Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at the DACOWITS spring 2001 conference, "DACOWITS has worked hard to open doors for women and to help ensure that women who serve in our armed forces do so on an equal basis with men...Clearly, we would not have made the great strides in gender equality without the outstanding work of DACOWITS"[3]

Why is DACOWITS Necessary?

In order to fully incorporate women into the military and to stop sexual harassment and other failures of leadership, the culture of the military must change. Historically, DACOWITS' recommendations have been instrumental in defining the direction for cultural change in the military through law and policy changes. In fact, according to one Assistant Secretary, "every positive change for military women has originated with DACOWITS."[4] DACOWITS strongly supported the establishment of co-ed basic training, the implementation of family-friendly policies, and the broadening of roles for women in the military. Lory Manning, a retired Navy Captain and director of the Women in the Military project at the Women's Research and Education Institute said that DACOWITS was often able to detect problems before they became large scandals such as the recent one at the Air Force Academy. "It was a very effective early warning device," Manning said.[5] As early as 1976, when women were first admitted to the service academies, DACOWITS recommended changes in how the military addressed sexual harassment. DACOWITS continued to issue alerts about sexual harassment in nearly each of its

biannual reports. And this year, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld is finally addressing how the military cares for victims of sexual assault - an issue that DACOWITS first brought to the Defense Department's attention over ten years ago.

Women continue to face obstacles to full acceptance in the military. Until 10 years ago, the core tasks of the military - the combat roles - were completely closed to women. In 1994, the door was opened for women to serve on Navy surface combat vessels and in combat aircraft, but all combat positions in the Army and Marine Corps remain closed to women. According to a 2001 DACOWITS report, "[t]here has only been one female service Secretary. There are no females in the O-10 pay grade, and women are underrepresented at senior officer and enlisted ranks."[6] Sexual assault in the military is an ongoing problem that has been brought to the public's attention because of several scandals including the Tailhook scandal in 1991, the Aberdeen scandal in 1996, and the Air Force Academy scandal in 2003. On June 3, 2004, the Total Force Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee received testimony from the Miles Foundation, a private non-profit organization devoted to victims of violence associated with the military, stating that 178 women serving in Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Bahrain have made credible reports of sexual assault.[7] During the same period, the Miles Foundation received 457 credible reports of sexual assault associated with regular military installations. In addition, the Army recently issued a report saying that sexual assaults increased in the Army by 19% between 1999 and 2002.[8] What is even more worrisome than these assault statistics is the way that the military deals with assaults. Sexual offenders in the military often go unpunished, and the victims of sexual assault tend to be further victimized by the military. Often victims jeopardize their careers if they report an assault. Secretary Rumsfeld, as well as each of the Secretaries of the service branches, has denounced sexual assault as unacceptable in the United States armed forces; yet DoD has had little success to date establishing a system that supports victims of sexual assault and effectively punishes the assailants.

5 Ways that the Bush Administration has Weakened DACOWITS

Soon after taking office, President Bush effectively silenced and stopped the work of DACOWITS by canceling all meetings, conferences, and installation visits and failing to appoint a new chair. On March 6, 2002, for the first time in the organization's history, the Pentagon released a new charter for DACOWITS and unceremoniously dismissed all but two of the members serving at the time. Rather than automatically renewing the DACOWITS charter, as had been done every year for 50 years, the Bush Administration wrote a more restrictive charter, watering down the committee's ability to research issues affecting women in the military and advise the Secretary of Defense accordingly. The Bush Administration reduced the number of people on the committee and the resources allocated to it while at the same time increasing the range of issues to be addressed by the committee. The end result is a weakening of effort to incorporate women completely and fairly into the armed forces.

The old charter stated that "the Committee serves as a vital link between the civilian community and the Department of Defense."[9] This statement was removed in the revised charter, and replaced with a statement saying "the Committee serves as a conduit of information and advice to the Department of Defense"[10] on specific issues. The new charter changed DACOWITS from a "vital link" to a "conduit of information," reflecting the Bush Administration's reduced estimation of this important civilian committee.

1) Administration Cut Members, Staff, and Funding

The Bush Administration reduced the number of committee members from 30-40 to a maximum of 15. It cut the budget. It decreased the committee's support from more than 30 service representatives to 6 liaison officers. In the past, the service representatives, comprised of individuals from both the officer ranks as well as the enlisted ranks, were not assigned to DACOWITS full-time but assisted DACOWITS on an as-needed basis to interpret and explain how things worked in the military. In the words of 1996 DACOWITS chair, Holly Hemphill, the over 30 military representatives were "extremely helpful to the committee." Under the former charter, DACOWITS held two large public conferences each year where each of the services provided a formal briefing followed by a question and answer session. These conferences effectively gave the public access to the Department of Defense through DACOWITS since any citizen could attend, listen, and talk with DACOWITS members. Several additional smaller public meetings were held each year where DoD often responded to queries made at the previous conference. These conferences and executive meetings no longer exist under the new charter. Now, DACOWITS holds several business meetings each year without briefings from the services. The service briefings were a formal line of communication that guaranteed a dialogue between DACOWITS and each of the services. With the discontinuation of the briefings, DACOWITS is no longer guaranteed to be informed of what the services are doing, reducing the committee's ability to address problems.

2) Administration Revoked Committee's Autonomy

Since its inception, one of the greatest strengths of DACOWITS has been its independence. The committee has always set its own agenda and provided DoD with a nonaligned perspective on issues surrounding women in the military. In 2002, the Bush Administration eliminated this defining characteristic of DACOWITS by revoking much of the committee's autonomy and giving control to the Pentagon. The Bush Administration changed the charter language from the committee advising the Defense Secretary "on the full range of matters relating to women in the services"[9] to advising on "specified matters"[10] to be identified by the Bush Administration. Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness David Chu, who oversees DACOWITS for DoD, said in March 2002 that he wants more control over the issues that DACOWITS reviews and is moving the committee from a "free form charter" to an agenda set by his office.[11] The Pentagon now has the authority to call and adjourn meetings whereas formerly, committee members exercised that authority. Because DACOWITS members now have less authority - and the Bush Administration has more authority - over the group's agenda, DACOWITS is less able to provide the independent oversight and insight for which it has earned its stellar reputation.

3) Administration Diluted Committee's Emphasis on Women

The Bush Administration watered down DACOWITS' attention to women's issues. The committee's charter was expanded in 2002 to include not only issues affecting women in the military but to "provide advice and recommendations on family issues"[10] as well. A DACOWITS report to the Secretary of Defense written before the charter changed states:

> "The advances made by women in the military over the past fifty years have led some to suggest that the role of DACOWITS should be broadened. However, among the dozens of interviews of senior officials conducted by the Self Study Group, fewer than twenty percent suggested that the focus of DACOWITS' work should change.....The charter is broad enough to allow the Committee to look at a wide variety of issues, but the focus must remain on women. Without that specific emphasis the Committee would dilute its effectiveness. As one senior military official noted, 'DACOWITS does not need to [address an issue such as child care] unless it is unfair to women. DACOWITS should focus on what is unfair to women, not on conditions that exist that we are aware of that are just about inadequate resources for the services.'...This does not mean that DACOWITS must limit its study to issues that affect *only* women; indeed, many issues considered affect both women and men. However, it is important that topics grow from and be examined in light of their impact on women."[4]

Family issues are of equal importance to men and women, and there is no suggestion in the new charter that DACOWITS address family issues in light of their impact on women. While family issues in the military are certainly important to address, adding them to the DACOWITS charter is inappropriate because it takes needed resources away from the committee's focus on women in the military.

4) Installation Visits Less Common, Less Effective

Under the new charter, the number of installations that DACOWITS visits each year has been dramatically reduced, the Bush Administration now decides which installations the committee visits, and the committee members now travel to installations in groups. This significantly reduces the amount of data gathered by DACOWITS and also prevents a DACOWITS member from visiting an installation where she/he may know of a particular issue facing women. Previously, each DACOWITS member visited at least two installations per year on her/his own and conducted group discussions with women and men, enlisted personnel and officers. This resulted in DACOWITS visiting approximately 70 military installations each year. Under the new charter, Undersecretary Chu and others pick the bases that members may visit, and in 2003, they visited only 15 installations. DACOWITS has often performed the necessary task of giving the Defense Department information that is difficult to hear; with the Defense Department now choosing the installations for DACOWITS to visit, it is probable that the installations with the greatest problems will not be chosen. The end result is that efforts to understand the obstacles facing servicewomen have been obstructed because information is now collected from far fewer women at a much smaller number of installations, and the installations are chosen by DoD.

5) Committee Membership Less Diverse and Process Less Transparent

The DACOWITS membership is now less diverse than it was in the past, and the member selection and replacement process is less transparent. DACOWITS members were formerly "selected on the basis of equitable distribution of demography, professional career fields, community service, and geographical representation."[9] This resulted in a very diverse committee. Few of the former members of DACOWITS had served in the military although many of them had family or work ties to the military. Before the charter changed in 2002, the committee was made up of 4 military veterans, 10 academics, 8 lawyers, 2 psychologists, 1 social worker, 6 business executives, 4 consultants, 1 TV reporter, a nurse, and a state senator. After 2002, members are "selected on the basis of their experience in the military, as a member of a military family, or with women's or family-related workforce issues."[10] As Republican Representative Heather Wilson, the only woman veteran in the United States Congress and a former DACOWITS member, said in March of 2002, "[t]hey're going to change the membership primarily to military, prior military or families of military members. That means you're going to have a much narrower perspective and experience base to draw from."[12] Additionally, before the charter was changed, a member's term was a straightforward 3 years. Now, term lengths are less definitive and more at the whim of the Secretary of Defense. The DACOWITS handbook now states that "DACOWITS members serve at the pleasure of the Secretary of Defense, the term of membership is 1 to 3 years."[13] Reportedly, the last remaining appointee from the pre-2002 DACOWITS recently received word via e-mail during an overseas base visit that it would be unnecessary for her to go on any more installation visits despite the fact that she already had another one planned. The Bush Administration then dismissed her and replaced her with a new appointee. An ungracious ending, to say the least, to five years of voluntary service to her country.

Recommendations

The following changes would help to restore the effectiveness of DACOWITS.

1) Restore the number of members on the committee to "30 - 40"[9] from the "not more than 15"[10] that the committee was reduced to in 2002.

2) Restore charter language back to the committee advising the Defense Secretary "on a full range of matters,"[9] from the current phrase, "advising on specified matters."[10] This would reinstate DACOWITS' authority to choose which issues it addresses.

3) Remove family issues from DACOWITS' charter. Military family issues are important and should be dealt with in their own committee. Family issues should not take the focus of DACOWITS away from issues that affect women in the services.

4) Remove the requirement that members of DACOWITS be "selected on the basis of their experience in the military, as a member of a military family, or with women's or family-related workforce issues"[10] in order to facilitate a more diverse membership.

5) Reestablish the more than 30 military representatives as DACOWITS advisors.

6) Reestablish the practice of DACOWITS holding two large public conferences each year at which each of the services provides a formal briefing and where citizens are allowed to talk with DACOWITS members.

7) Reinstate pre-2002 total annual operating budget levels, adjusted for inflation.

8) Reestablish the previous procedure whereby DACOWITS members independently pick which United States military facilities to visit.

Ramifications and Conclusion

President Bush's action to dramatically curtail the influence of DACOWITS is particularly troubling at a time, according to Representative Ike Skelton (MO-4), Ranking Member on the House Armed Services Committee, when the Pentagon is taxing its reserve soldiers "nearly to the breaking point"[14] with repeated and extended deployments in its two ongoing wars. With military resources stretched thin, it is extremely important that the armed forces be able to recruit quality men and women into the services. The military will not be able to recruit quality women in large numbers if obstacles preventing their full and fair integration into the military are not addressed and resolved.

Over 200,000 women are currently serving in the armed forces, and at least 21 United States servicewomen have died in Iraq. As commander in chief, President Bush should be doing all he can to remove the barriers that continue to marginalize women in the military. Instead, he appears to be giving tacit approval to the status quo by purposely reining in efforts to remove these obstacles. DACOWITS has been a unique and effective tool in understanding impediments that servicewomen face and facilitating the integration of men and women together into a ready, fighting force. Former 1999 DACOWITS chairwoman, Mary Wamsley, said that DACOWITS, as modified since 2002, is a "weak and ineffectual shadow of its former self."[5] By disempowering DACOWITS, President Bush's actions have made a clear statement that he does not support our women in uniform, and in doing so, he has put our nation's military preparedness at risk.

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FOOTNOTES

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[2] http://www.state.gov/g/wi/30414.htm
[3] *DACOWITS in the 21st Century: Fulfilling the Commitment; A Report to the Office of the Secretary of Defense from the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services*. (2001, September). p. 3.
[4] *DACOWITS in the 21st Century: Fulfilling the Commitment; A Report to the Office of the Secretary of Defense from the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services*. (2001, September). p. 5.
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