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At 'em, Girls; Give 'er the Gun: Changing the symbols that shape a military identity

Jamie L. Callahan and Robert Levinson

We are both graduates of the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). Jamie comes from a family with a long tradition of military service dating to the Revolutionary War; she took a voluntary separation incentive after nearly eight years on active duty as a personnel officer and pursued a doctorate to begin her second career in academia. Rob's grandfather served in the Navy in WWI and his father was a draftee in the U.S. Army; Rob served just over 20 years as an intelligence officer before retiring at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and now works as a defense analyst in Washington D.C. We have contributed equally to this editorial and are listed alphabetically.

At the 2017 Air Force vs. Navy football game, Rob watched the game in Annapolis with his family. As always, at the end of every game a song is played to commemorate those graduates who have fallen. This time the lyrics were displayed on the scoreboard as the songs were being sung and, at the third verse, Rob's 24-year old daughter commented on the decidedly masculine perspective of the song. She wondered, in an age when women are Secretaries of the Air Force, four-star generals, and fighter pilots, why did the lyrics fail to recognize those women who gave their all?

While the lyrics were finally changed as of May 2020 (Pope, 2020), we have spent the last few years reflecting on the history of the song and the 'bordering' (Erwin, this issue) that such symbols create within the institution. Women have long been 'othered' in the U.S. Air Force (and other service branches). At the time the Air Force song was written in 1939, women were not part of the combat flying force. Yet, by 1942 they would fly service aircraft for the

precursors of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP's) which was initiated in 1943 (Johnson, 2018). However, the WASP's were considered a civilian organization, without the rights, benefits, or opportunities of being military pilots. So, it was not unreasonable, given the culture of the time, to write a song for an all-male service. Only in 2016, in part due to the efforts of Congresswoman Martha McSally, the first U.S. Air Force female combat fighter pilot (Bergquist, 2006), and a USAFA graduate herself, were WASP's permitted to be buried in Arlington. Culture change is clearly a long and hard-fought process.

Culture and Change

The Air Force song is a symbol of the institution's culture. Put simply, a culture is a shared set of ideas and orientations that are negotiated through social interactions and maintained by symbols (Alvesson, 2011). Culture is expressed through language and behavior on the flight deck or in the squadron, through uniforms and insignia, and in traditions and rituals—like the Air Force song. Words carry culture (Boroditsky, 2011) and, within a given context, a word might have an intensified meaning that signifies something much deeper than just its surface definition.

Any time a change is proposed to a cultural totem, artifact, or institution, there will inevitably be controversy. Despite culture changes over the years, the changes made to the lyrics of this song have consistently, and mostly quietly, reverted back to their original arrangement. Many advocated a reverence for tradition, a respect for institutions, and a sincere belief that although certain words and symbols might at one time have reflected a set of values now outdated, today those intentions are absent; a change, to these individuals, may have represented a sign of weakness or needless conformity to fleeting social fads. Others contended that the language and symbols promote exclusionary ideas, which can lead to exclusionary practices and, in order to promote a healthier institution, messages that honor the culture of the institution must

reflect more inclusive values. We contend, as a number of the authors in this special issue do, that the symbols and structures that undergird our institutions say much to reflect our identities; as such we believe there was strong rationale to change the language in a symbol meant to reflect the identity of our institution and we hope that, this time, the change will be permanent.

Women and Equity in the Air Force

Women are a fundamental part of the United States Air Force; yet, how can women navigate an identity conflict catalyzed by service symbols which suggest that they do not *really* belong (Carpenter & Silberman, this issue)? As of January 1, 2020, women represented almost 21% of the active duty Air Force demographics (21.9% of officers and 20.6% of the enlisted corps are women) (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). Following Defense Secretary Ash Carter's 2015 decision to open all military occupations to women, the Air Force Secretary submitted an implementation plan on December 29, 2015 to enable gender integration in all Air Force jobs (Losey, 2016). While the percentage of women pilots is still low (approximately 6%), that number has continued to grow given that this occupation has not long been open to them relative to their male counterparts. Women were first allowed to enter pilot training in 1976; it was not until 1993 that women could enter training to be fighter pilots (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). Put simply, the Air Force is not the good ol' boy's club it once was—technically.

At the most fundamental level, we know that symbols such as language influence the way we see and understand the world (Boroditsky, 2011). The way we come to know who belongs, who has power, who performs what roles—these are all connected to the symbols we use to identify those statuses. Despite the success of women in the U.S. Air Force, those symbols that generate the collective identity of its members are men. Even when calling for 'Changing the Air Force Narrative' to make the service more appealing emotionally to the American public by

revealing its “true worth” (p. 3), Yadlin and her colleagues (2015) suggest a moving, and exclusively male, docudrama. They reminisce, “Airpower came alive to the public through articles, stories and books written about and by these *men* [emphasis added]. Successfully conveying the Air Force story must rely on championing current Air Force heroes” (p. 40). Their most revered heroes of U.S. Air Force? All are men. They specifically note Richard Branson, Elon Musk, and Chuck Norris as contemporary figures who could inspire the public about the Air Force—not inspiring figures such as Eula “Pearl” Carter Scott (youngest solo pilot in history at 13 years old; Chickasaw Hall of Fame, 1995), Shawna Rochelle Kimbrell (First African American female fighter pilot, 2020), or Christine Mau (commander of the first all-women F-15E combat mission; Jagannathan, 2019). When discussing groups for targeted marketing, the exemplar they raised was that of age; not gender or race. The only gendered terms mentioned in the document were “Iron Man” and “Airmen”, a default to men as the norm.

Stout and Dasgupta (2011) found that women subconsciously felt that they did not belong in novel settings in which only male-exclusive references were made. This suggests that the reverse is also true; when we hear language that consistently sends us cues that we belong, we believe it. In this issue, Fullerton and his colleagues discuss the structural issues of the military that mitigate against equity in Professional Military Education; Erwin highlights how women are invisible as veterans at symbolic sporting events; Procknow explores how the structure of paramilitary training can breed hate; Carpenter and Silberman focus on identity and belongingness. But what if, in its structures and symbols, your ‘group’ implicitly tells you that you don’t **really** belong?

Conclusion

When we were cadets at USAFA, the first female legacy (a child of a USAFA graduate) was introduced at one of our home football games. Jamie remembers hearing someone's comment that the culture of the Academy had surely changed since that had occurred; she responded that, "No, I don't think we'll see real change until a young man walks to center field with his Academy grad mother." The Air Force song is one of those places where a tangible change to the culture could be made, and we waited more than a decade for that change after having seen a young man walk to centerfield as a legacy of his mother.

No matter one's opinion on changing the song, few would deny the myriad contributions of women to the Air Force. Women have achieved in every facet of the Air Force, to include flying combat missions and, indeed, some have paid the ultimate price alongside "their brother men who fly." The time was right to stop implicitly excluding women in this key cornerstone symbol of our institution's culture. We hope it is the first of many structural and identity changes to come that fully welcome equity and equality for all of "the brave who serve on high."

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