

“In Blood and Spirit”

By Colonel Maritza Sáenz Ryan, professor and head of the Department of Law, United States Military Academy at West Point, which recently inaugurated the West Point Center for the Rule of Law

“Si yo hubiese tenido la oportunidad, la hubiera aprovechado!” (“If only I had had the opportunity, I would have taken it!”) So averred my mother, who emigrated from Spain as a young woman in 1958, during a discussion we had about me attending West Point in the late 1970s.

My West Point classmates and I entered as members of the U.S. Military Academy class of 1982—the third year women were admitted, a milestone opportunity made possible by congressional statute, Public Law 94-106. The West Point name is inseparable from the tradition of Duty, Honor, Country, and every male who came here was seen as fulfilling that tradition. For a woman at that pivotal time in our nation’s history, however, it seemed a revolutionary act.

Then again, “here in America,” as Dwight Eisenhower once said, “we are descended in blood and in spirit from revolutionists and rebels—men and women who dared to dissent from accepted doctrine.” One such “accepted doctrine” prevalent in the military as in society had long held that women can’t fight and certainly couldn’t lead in combat—this despite many women across various cultures, including our own, having done so successfully, if mostly anonymously, throughout history.

For over 30 years now, West Point and our sister academies have been educating, training, and inspiring women to lead—alongside men—a highly diverse, integrated force, the most powerful ever on earth. Our engagement in conflicts in distant places where the average woman’s

legal rights are often nil means that military women are proving themselves daily on the most dangerous battlefields. Already, the first female West Point graduate has made General Officer, followed by three more; two ROTC graduates have likewise set new marks as the first female General in the Judge Advocate General's Corps and the first woman to earn the Army's highest rank, four stars. Thanks to pioneering advocates such as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, we can take for granted equal pay for equal work.

Still, daunting challenges—brass and glass ceilings—remain. Women continue to be underrepresented in the highest ranks. Anachronistic attitudes and policies persist, such as the Combat Exclusion Rule. And attaining and retaining critical mass is hindered by grinding redeployments. Likewise, despite the uptick in their numbers in the legal profession overall, women still fall heavily off the ladders of law firm leadership.

As an Army officer, lawyer, and educator, and having personally benefited from the progress wrought by others, I remain optimistic. So long as military service, and the intangible attributes it implies—courage, tenacity, patriotism, and, yes, leadership—continues to be a hallmark of full membership in society as American citizens, and as long as our country needs leaders—smart, ethical, adaptive, and strong leaders—we will need women to lead alongside our male colleagues. And I am certain that, so long as a woman's nation remains one built upon the rule of law, we will have ever greater opportunities to serve our country equally and to the best of our abilities.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense of the United States Government.

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