



DACOWITS Should Be Revitalized

For over 50 years, the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) served as a force for the successful integration of women into the military and steady expansion of women's roles in our armed forces. In the Bush Administration, the Committee's mission and responsibilities were downgraded. For the sake of overall readiness and effectiveness of our armed forces, DACOWITS should be restored as a meaningful advisory body with authority to independently advise the Secretary of Defense on issues concerning military women.

Background:

DACOWITS was established in 1951 as a civilian board of individuals appointed by the Secretary of Defense to provide advice and recommendations to the Secretary on matters and policies affecting women in the armed forces. The Committee served as a vital link between the civilian community and the Department of Defense. The role of DACOWITS in initiating positive change for military women has been chronicled by Major General Jeanne Holm (USAF Ret.) in her definitive history, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution*. Through public meetings, conferences and installation visits, the Committee gathered information and analyzed issues concerning the utilization of women and formulated recommendations for consideration by the Secretary of Defense and the Services. MG Holm observed that "[w]ithout the Committee the senior officials in the Pentagon would have remained oblivious to the women's needs and concerns that were not being addressed." Secretary of Defense William Perry stated that the Committee members were his "eyes and ears" in speaking directly to women service members. Over the years, the Committee gained a reputation for doing serious analysis on integrating women into the military at little expense to the United States Government.

Soon after taking office, the Bush Administration cancelled all meetings, conferences and installation visits of DACOWITS, terminated the appointments of all current members, and failed to renew the Committee's charter. Instead, the Administration introduced a new, more restrictive charter to water down the ability of the Committee to research and highlight issues affecting women in the military and advise the Secretary accordingly. The Bush Administration (1) cut the number of members of the group from 25-40 to a maximum of 15 and significantly reduced its funding, staff support and access to military advisers; (2) revoked the group's ability to set its agenda and call meetings; (3) shifted the focus from military women to a primary emphasis on issues of concern to military families; (4) drastically reduced the

number of military installation visits; and (5) reduced the diversity of the membership. This new group has recently met with as few as six members in attendance. Its recommendations have not addressed critical issues such as war zone assignments of women and sexual assault. As confirmed in a 2004 report prepared by the Office of Congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney, *The Downgrading of DACOWITS: How President Bush Has Failed America's Women in Uniform*, the result of these Bush Administration changes has been the weakening of a source of credible, outside advice on important issues affecting the service of military women.

The next Secretary of Defense will inherit a daunting set of national security challenges, including two ongoing wars, the global campaign against terrorism, with concomitant strain on our fighting men and women. The need to recruit qualified people—men and women—for military service and need for men and women in the military to work together for our nation's defense in the most effective way have never been more important. Policies regarding the assignment of women in combat situations need to be re-examined in light of today's wartime realities, and the need to eliminate sexual assault within the ranks must be addressed. DACOWITS should be revitalized to aid in these efforts.

Recommendations:

1. DoD should re-establish DACOWITS under the Federal Advisory Committee Act with the mission to advise the the Secretary of Defense on a full range of matters and policies relating to women in the armed forces.
2. The Committee should again serve as a vital link between the civilian community and the Department of Defense. Accordingly, the membership should number at least 25 and be chosen from diverse backgrounds and geographic areas.
3. The Committee's focus should again be on military women's issues (and issues concerning military families should be dealt by a separate advisory group dedicated to that subject).
4. Because the work of the Committee directly impacts force readiness, the Committee should report to the Secretary of Defense through the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.
5. The Committee should be supported with adequate staffing and budget and senior military representatives from each of the Services should be designated to provide the Committee necessary technical advice.

December 2008

