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Presenter: Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey

**January 24,
2013**

Press Briefing by Secretary Panetta and General Dempsey from the Pentagon

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LEON E. PANETTA: Good afternoon. One of my priorities as secretary of defense has been to remove as many barriers as possible for talented and qualified people to be able to serve this country in uniform. Our nation was built on the premise of the citizen soldier. In our democracy, I believe it is the responsibility of every citizen to protect the nation. And every citizen who can meet the qualifications of service should have that opportunity.

To that end, I've been working closely with Gen. Dempsey and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We've been working for well over a year to examine, how can we expand the opportunities for women in the armed services?

It's clear to all of us that women are contributing in unprecedented ways to the military's mission of defending the nation. Women represent 15 percent of the force, over 200,000. They're serving in a growing number of critical roles on and off the battlefield. The fact is that they have become an integral part of our ability to perform our mission.

Over more than a decade of war, they have demonstrated courage and skill and patriotism. A hundred and fifty-two women in uniform have died serving this nation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Female servicemembers have faced the reality of combat, proven their willingness to fight and, yes, to die to defend their fellow Americans.

However, many military positions, particularly in ground combat units, still remain closed to women because of the 1994 direct ground combat definition and assignment rule. Military and civilian leaders in this department have been taking a hard look at that rule based on the experiences of the last decade.

In early 2012, we announced a series of modifications to that rule which opened up more than 14,000 new positions to women, including positions that were collocated with ground combat units and certain positions in ground combat units below the battalion [brigade] level. These changes have been implemented, and the experience has been very positive.

Every time I visited the warzone, every time I've met with troops, reviewed military operations, and talked to wounded warriors, I've been impressed with the fact that everyone -- everyone, men and women alike -- everyone is committed to doing the job. They're fighting and they're dying together. And the time has come for our policies to recognize that reality.

The chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I believe that we must open up service opportunities for women as fully as possible. And therefore today, Gen. Dempsey and I are pleased to announce that we are eliminating the direct ground combat exclusion rule for women and we are moving forward with a plan to eliminate all unnecessary gender-based barriers to service. In a few moments after we speak, we'll both

sign a memo that will rescind the '94 barrier.

Our purpose is to ensure that the mission is carried out by the best qualified and the most capable servicemembers, regardless of gender and regardless of creed and beliefs. If members of our military can meet the qualifications for a job -- and let me be clear, I'm not talking about reducing the qualifications for the job -- if they can meet the qualifications for the job, then they should have the right to serve, regardless of creed or color or gender or sexual orientation.

Having conducted an extensive review, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have developed a very thoughtful approach to integrating women into occupations across the force. I strongly agree with their guiding principles and the specific milestones that they propose.

We are all committed to implementing this change without compromising readiness or morale or our warfighting capabilities. Positions will be open to women following service reviews, using the Joint Chiefs' guiding principles, and following congressional notification procedures established by law.

For this change and policy to succeed, it must be done in a responsible, measured, and a coherent way. I'll let Gen. Dempsey describe our plan of action in greater detail. But the bottom line is that further integration of women will occur expeditiously, even as we recognize the need to take time to institutionalize changes of this importance.

The steps we are announcing today are significant. And in many ways, they are an affirmation of where we have been heading as a department for more than 10 years. Nevertheless, it will take leadership and it will take professionalism to effectively implement these changes. I am confident in our ability to do that, because I am confident in the leadership that Gen. Dempsey and the Joint Chiefs of Staff have demonstrated throughout this process.

This has truly been a team effort, and I deeply admire the extremely thorough and considerate approach that they have taken. I want to express my deepest thanks to Marty Dempsey for his leadership and all of the service chiefs who have been working on this issue and as a group came forward with the recommendation that we are implementing today.

Our men and women in uniform could not ask for more from their leaders in uniform. I fundamentally believe that our military is more effective when success is based solely on ability and qualifications and on performance.

When I look at my grandsons and my granddaughters -- you know, I've got six grandchildren, three grandsons and three granddaughters -- I want each of them to have the same chance to succeed at whatever they want to do. In life, as we all know, there are no guarantees of success. Not everyone is going to be able to be a combat soldier. But everyone is entitled to a chance.

By committing ourselves to that principle, we are renewing our commitment to the American values our servicemembers fight and die to defend. As secretary, when I've gone to Bethesda to visit wounded warriors, and when I've gone to Arlington to bury our dead, there is no distinction that's made between the sacrifices of men and women in uniform. They serve, they're wounded, and they die right next to each other. The time has come to recognize that reality.

By opening up more opportunities for people to serve in uniform, we are making our military stronger and we are making America stronger. We honor -- we deeply honor all of those past generations -- combat soldiers and Marines, who fought and died for our freedom. And in many ways, their sacrifice has ensured that the next greatest generation will be one of men and women who will fight and die together to protect this nation. And that is what freedom is all about.

GENERAL MARTIN E. DEMPSEY: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Today, we are enacting -- we are acting to expand the opportunities for women to serve in the United States armed forces and to better align our policies with the experiences that we have had over the past

decade of war. Ultimately, we're acting to strengthen the joint force.

Congress acted first in 1948 by legislating that women became a part -- a permanent part of the armed forces. Last year, as the secretary mentioned, we acted to open thousands of mission-essential occupations at more echelons and in more ground combat units. After months of work, the Joint Chiefs and I recently submitted to the secretary our unanimous recommendation to rescind the direct combat exclusion rule for women. In so doing, we're acting to eliminate all unnecessary gender-based barriers to service.

The Joint Chiefs share common cause on the need to start this now and to do it right. We're committed to a purposeful and a principled approach. Specifically, we will extend opportunities to women in a way that maintains readiness, morale, and unit cohesion. We'll preserve our warfighting capability to defend the nation. And we will uphold the trust and confidence of the American people as we go forward. Our nation demands no less.

We'll also integrate women in a way that enhances opportunity for everyone. This means setting clear standards of performance for all occupations based on what it actually takes to do the job. It also means ensuring that these standards are general [gender] neutral in occupations that will open to women.

As we introduce to women to previously closed occupations, we must make sure that there are a sufficient number of females entering the career field and already assigned to the related commands and leadership positions in order to sustain success over time. Our servicewomen and our servicemen deserve no less. These principles will guide the work ahead.

The services and Special Operations Command will begin expanding the number of units and the number of women assigned to those units this year. They will continue to assess, develop and validate gender neutral standards so that we can start assigning personnel to previously closed occupations. And they will take the time needed to do the work without compromising the principles I just mentioned.

In fact, adherence to the principles may lead to an assessment that some specialties and ratings should remain exceptions. In such cases, however, the services will bear the responsibility for providing the thorough analysis needed to better understand and better articulate what's best for the joint force and the women who serve in it.

At the same time, women will continue to serve with distinction throughout our armed forces, in and out of combat, on land and at sea and in the air. We all wear the same uniform, and we all fire the same weapons. And most importantly, we all take the same oath.

Thank you. The secretary and I will now sign the document.

SEC. PANETTA: Okay. Now, onward.

Go ahead.

Q: Mr. Chairman, you obviously served with and commanded women over the course of your career. Based on that experience, can you just talk a little bit about what you think is realistic as you look ahead to the next couple of years? As you consider some of the physical demands of some of the jobs, do you expect that, you know, you'll ever see anywhere near 100 percent of jobs open? Or what are the realistic expectations that you have based on what you've learned over the past year?

And then, Mr. Secretary, if you want to address that, also, but just on a separate issue, North Korea - as I'm sure you know -- has announced a third nuclear test. Can you talk about what, if any, U.S. military either preparations or precautions may be needed over the next several weeks to prepare for that and to react to it and what, if any, additional steps may be taken?

GEN. DEMPSEY: So to answer the question about what do I see happening now, here's -- well, let me make clear what we've done. With the direct combat exclusion in place -- and, by the way, I saw a ticker on the bottom of one of your networks that said, "Women about to be allowed to serve in combat." We're

way beyond that. And that's part of the point here, is that women are serving in combat and have been.

In fact, in 2003, when I got to Baghdad, as the commander of 1st Armored Division, my first foray out of the forward operating base, I hopped into the up-armored Humvee, and I asked the driver, you know, who he was, where he was from, and I slapped the turret gunner around the leg, and I said, "Who are you?" And she leaned down and said, "I'm Amanda." And I said, "Ah, okay." So, female turret-gunner protecting division commander. And it's from that point on that I realized something had changed, and it was time to do something about it.

What we've done, though, is by eliminating the direct combat exclusion provision, the burden used to be on -- the burden used to be that we would say, why should a woman serve in a particular specialty? Now it's, why shouldn't a woman serve in a particular specialty?

And the services will now have the opportunity to take a -- with that now as the reverse paradigm -- to come back over time and with careful analysis and making sure we got the standards right to the secretary in order to -- if we're going to keep one closed, they have to explain why, and I think there will be the right amount of scrutiny on that.

Fundamentally we will always have to be the most ready force we can possibly be. And so I don't know how all that's going to sort out, but I'm really eager to begin the journey.

SEC. PANETTA: Just to -- you know, just to emphasize that point, I -- the one thing that I've been struck by -- and, you know, it's been almost 50 years since I served in the military -- and to go out now and to see women performing the roles that they are performing and doing a great job at it, I think it just -- it encouraged me and I think it encouraged all of us that everybody should have a chance to be able to perform at any mission if they can meet the qualifications.

And I just -- I think Marty and I had been talking and working this issue for a while now, but I think we both share the feeling that what were seeing in the men and women in uniform are just outstanding individuals and make a hell of a contribution to this country and who are willing to put their lives on the line. And if they're willing to put their lives on the line, then we ought to recognize that they deserve a chance to serve in any capacity they want.

With regards to North Korea, you know, we are very concerned with North Korea's continuing provocative behavior. This -- what they -- what they said in these last -- the last few days has been needlessly provocative. And if they go forward with the kind of tests that they're talking about, it again represents a violation of the U.N. security resolutions and a violation of international law.

We've made very clear to the North Koreans they have a choice. They have a choice to -- between trying to become a member of the international family by negotiating a way to resolve the issues that concern the international community and try to do what they can to improve the status of their people or to engage in this kind of provocative behavior, which in the end will do nothing, nothing other than jeopardize the hope for peace.

The United States is -- we are fully prepared, we remain prepared to deal with any kind of provocations from the North Koreans. But I hope in the end that they determine that it is better to make a choice to become part of the international family.

Q: Just a follow-up. Have you seen any signs that a nuclear test or a rocket launch is imminent?

SEC. PANETTA: You know, we -- we continue -- I certainly continue to follow the intelligence closely. You know, we've seen, you know, no outward indications, but that doesn't tell you much. They have the capability, frankly, to conduct these tests in a way that make it very difficult to determine whether or not they are doing it.

Q: Could you put in perspective, this policy change, with the great policy changes this institution has faced since 1948, integration of -- racial integration, all-volunteer Army, the end of "don't ask/don't tell"? Will

this be as challenging, less challenging because of those major shifts that the military's had to adopt to? And, you know, what are realistic -- as Lita said, this not on autopilot, is it? I mean, there are going to be some hurdles to overcome.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Sure. I mean, that's -- that's why you see some of the time intervals that we've asked for and the secretary has given us. I mean, one of the things we want to make sure we do, Tony, is, you know, we talk about learning the lessons of the last 10 years of war. We just want to make sure we don't learn the wrong lessons of the last 10 years.

You know, what I mean by that is, you know, the kind of warfare we're involved in now is based on forward operating bases. So you foray out of a base -- you're generally back there very frequently. Sometimes every day you come back to the base, where you have the mess hall, you have -- you have housing units and shower units and so forth.

One of the things we want to do with the time that the secretary has given us is make sure that -- that the standards we -- we develop and accept and measure are standards that apply in any particular kind of conflict, not just in one kind of conflict. But, you know, the -- so the answer to your question is that that's why we've asked for the time to make sure we got the standards right so that anyone that can meet the standard will be eligible to serve in that particular occupational skill.

Q: So do you anticipate major roadblocks, sir, over the next year or two?

SEC. PANETTA: You know, in this country, as -- as the president himself pointed out in his inaugural speech, we've been on a long journey, a long journey towards achieving equality. And there have been -- there have been some tough challenges along the road in facing every barrier, whether it was racial barriers, which we've overcome, the "don't ask/don't tell," dealing with women, I mean, all of these have -- have not -- have not come easy. They've required a lot of sacrifice, a lot of work, a lot of dedication, a lot of leadership.

And I think that will be the case here, although, you know, we had the experience of women being in the service. We've seen them in combat, as Gen. Dempsey pointed out. And I think that gives us a head start here. I think -- I feel very confident that we can make this work.

Q: Both of you mentioned eliminating unnecessary gender-based barriers. So what are the necessary gender-based barriers?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, I'll take this. I mean, the answer to that question is -- is the issue of standards. And so -- back to the point I made with Tony about different kinds of warfare -- I mean, if you think about the difference between counterinsurgency and a potential conflict on the Korean peninsula, very different environment that requires a different level of physical stamina, let's say.

So we want to make sure we get the -- when we get the standards right that we don't over-engineer them, either, that they're fair, and then we want to allow individuals of any sex to compete for the position.

Q: But is it just physical standards or will there --

GEN. DEMPSEY: No, but -- no, it's not just physical standards.

Q: Well, what else?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, I mean, look, there -- the standards that we have for occupational -- for these military occupations -- or the Navy calls them ratings -- generally include everything from mental standards to physical standards. But physical standards tend to be the one that people focus on.

Q: What about privacy?

GEN. DEMPSEY: We can -- we can figure out privacy. We've figured out privacy right from the start. By the way, Desert Shield -- or Desert Storm/Desert Shield, 1991, we did live in that kind of environment where we were essentially somewhat nomadic in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and eventually Iraq. And we figured out privacy. We can figure out privacy.

SEC. PANETTA: I mean, look, the fact is that women -- women are now in submarines. And that was one of the concerns at the time. But the fact is that they have re-jiggered the submarines to be able to adapt to that kind of situation. Women are fighter pilots now. So Air Force, Navy have moved in that direction. The Marines and the Army, obviously, are going to move in the same direction. They're going to be -- you know, there will have to be some adjustments in some situations, but, again, I -- based on the experience that we already have, I think we can meet those challenges.

Go ahead (off mic)

Q: You indicated that -- well, at least it sounds like that there may be certain combat operational forays that women might be excluded from still. I mean, what would be the reasons for that? What sorts of operations?

GEN. DEMPSEY: No, I wouldn't put it in terms of operations, Jim. What I would say is that, as we look at the requirements for a spectrum of conflict, not just COIN, counterinsurgency, we really need to have standards that apply across all of those. Importantly, though, if we do decide that a particular standard is so high that a woman couldn't make it, the burden is now on the service to come back and explain to the secretary, why is it that high? Does it really have to be that high? With the direct combat exclusion provision in place, we never had to have that conversation.

Yep?

Q: And what is your personal opinion as to whether women may be able to serve in special operations forces, especially those such as Navy SEALs or Delta Force?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, when you look back at what I've said since I was the chief staff of the Army, what Gen. Odierno has said, Gen. Amos has said, I think we all believe that there will be women who can meet those standards.

The other part of the equation, of course, is in order to account for their safety and their success in those kinds of units, we got to have enough of them so that they have mentors and leaders above them -- you know, you wouldn't want to take one woman who can meet a standard and put her in a particular unit. You know, not -- the issue there wouldn't be privacy. It would be, you know, where's her ability to have upward mobility and compete for command if she's one of one? So we have to -- we do have to work both the standards and the -- kind of the critical mass, if you will, to make this work. But that's what -- that's our commitment.

SEC. PANETTA: And, by the way, that's -- that's why I asked the services to provide a plan that would be presented in May of this year that would point out exactly how this is to be implemented and give us a sense of that.

Elisabeth?

Q: Can I ask briefly about President Obama's involvement in the discussions in this past year with both of you, how much he was involved, how much he's had to inform other people at the White House?

SEC. PANETTA: Well, we -- well, Marty and I have the opportunity to meet with the president, you know, usually every week, depending on his schedule, but meet individually with him to go over issues. And I think, over the past year, I've regularly briefed the president on what was going on with regards to this issue, that we were -- that we had opened up the additional positions, that we were looking at providing even more opportunities to women, and he was very supportive of that.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, if I could add, if I could, I mean, he was supportive and always encouraged us to ensure that, whatever we did, it made the force better and made -- and assured readiness, because he is alert to the fact that, at the end of the day, the armed forces has to be ready.

Q: Can I just follow up with -- earlier you said that it was your experiences traveling around, seeing women in these positions. That was as -- since become defense secretary, correct?

SEC. PANETTA: That's correct.

Q: I mean, it wasn't as CIA director. It was just in the last 18 months --

SEC. PANETTA: Well, you know, at the CIA, I tell you that, you know, we're at a point where close to 50 percent of the people working there were women. And so we -- you know, it was -- it was -- for me, it was really reassuring to see that young men and women were equally dedicated to the intelligence services, and then coming here to the Army, having the opportunity to go out and see that firsthand, it was, again, something that for me was a very special experience, because, you know, I thought, you know, America stands for giving young people those kinds of opportunities. And if they can do the job, if they can meet the standards, if they can meet, you know, the qualifications that are involved here, there is no reason why they shouldn't have a chance. That's -- that's just a fundamental belief of mine, and I think it's a fundamental belief of the American people.

Barbara?

Q: Can I turn you to North Africa for just a minute? Today, as I'm sure you know, the British, the French, and the Dutch are pulling their citizens out of Benghazi, saying there's an imminent threat. So my first question is -- and commercial air has now been canceled out of Benghazi until next week. Is the U.S. going to help at all getting citizens out? And because you certainly would want civilians to know what they face, what is this imminent threat in Benghazi?

Secondly, on Algeria, what -- can you update us on your assessment as to who may have been responsible? Do you now view that Belmokhtar and AQIM [Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb] have rejoined forces? Do you think there is involvement of Libyan fighters and weapons, as Secretary Clinton said yesterday? Can you bring us up to date on your thinking?

SEC. PANETTA: Yeah, on Benghazi, it's no mystery that, you know, it's a -- it's a dangerous situation there. And, you know, the -- everybody in that area, I think, is very concerned that they simply can't provide the security necessary to protect people in those places. And I think that's why these countries have made the decision that they've made. We have -- as far as I know, we have not been asked to participate in moving any people out of Benghazi.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, I'll pick up the rest of the question on who's doing what to who over there. And I think the way to think about the -- North Africa and West Africa is -- is a syndicate of groups who come together episodically, when it's convenient to them, in order to advance their cause. Sometimes their cause is terrorism. Sometimes it's criminal. Sometimes it's arms trafficking.

I'll just name four groups: so in Libya, Ansar al-Sharia; in Algeria, Ansar al-Din; in Mali, it's AQIM. And so there's this -- there's the -- and, you know, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's group is called Signatories of Blood. They work together when it's convenient to them. And what we have to be alert to is that, as we look at these individual groups or individual countries, we have to acknowledge the connective tissue there. And that takes us to a regional strategy, not necessarily a country-specific strategy.

SEC. PANETTA: And with regards -- with regards to Algeria and what happened there, AQIM did take credit for what took place there. But I have to tell you, we still, as of this moment, have not been able to look at the specifics of who was involved, who took -- who took place. We understand the Algerians are questioning two individuals that they were able to capture during this operation. So we're hoping that we'll get better information from them specifically as to who was involved.

Q: If I could very quickly follow up --

SEC. PANETTA: Sure.

Q: ...You, the president have said -- both in the case of Benghazi and Algeria -- that you would go after the perpetrators, that Americans were killed. But how do you do that in North Africa, when you have this -- this mix that Gen.Dempsey's describing? Can you -- with respect, can you still promise that you're going to get these perpetrators of these two incidents that killed Americans?

SEC. PANETTA: Well, I can assure you, Barbara, that if we find out who the perpetrators were, we're going to go after them. And so that's -- you know, that will be the first challenge, is to determine precisely who was involved here. Americans were killed, and we don't stand by when Americans are killed and not take action.

Q: Would that be a U.S. military responsibility or civilian law enforcement, FBI?

SEC. PANETTA: I think what -- you know, without getting into the specifics, you know, we -- we will take whatever action is necessary to go after these people.

GEORGE LITTLE: We have time for two more questions.

Q: Mr. Secretary --

Q: Mr. Secretary, thank you. You both said that this decision will make the military stronger. There will be and there are critics of that premise. So can you give us examples of how putting women in the most physically demanding positions in the military will make our infantry forces stronger?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Let me take a stab at that. Let me not limit it to military. Let me give you two personal observations. One is, I graduated from West Point in 1974. It was an all-male institution. I came back in 1976 to get married, and I watched the first class of -- they were plebes at the time -- I watched the first class of women enter and wondered, what would that be like? I went back to teach at West Point in 1984 and found the academy a far better place than it was when I was a cadet.

Now, I don't have time to explain why. I'm just telling you that it had -- it had become better in almost every way, academically and -- and physically, athletically. It was just a better place. And I attribute a good bit of that to the fact that we opened up the academy to women.

Secondly, you know, we've had -- we've had this ongoing issue with sexual harassment, sexual assault. I believe it's because we've had separate classes of military personnel, at some level. Now, you know, it's -- it's far more complicated than that, but when you have one part of the population that is designated as warriors and another part that's designated as something else, I think that disparity begins to establish a psychology that in some cases led to that environment. I have to believe, the more we can treat people equally, the more likely they are to treat each other equally.

MR. LITTLE: Last question.

Q: What positions are actually being opened up today? And is there any thought to changing the Selective Service requirement so that young women at age 18 will have to -- if we were to reintroduce the draft -- to -- and is it safe to say that this was essentially your idea to push forward with these changes?

SEC. PANETTA: You know, when it comes to an issue like this, this was really a team effort. And it was, you know, Marty Dempsey and the Joint Chiefs and I, we have the opportunity to meet almost every other week, and sometimes every week, in the tank and elsewhere to talk about these issues. And opening up opportunities for men and women in the military has always been something that we've -- we've talked about. They expressed an interest in it. I expressed an interest in it. And we both kind of worked together

to ensure that -- that we take steps to do that.

I basically -- Gen. Dempsey and I looked at each other, and I said, look, you know, we both know that we want to be able to open these opportunities up, but I want to make sure that you and the military, you know, really are the ones who are the movers with regards to this idea, because, you know, they've got to support it, they've got to back it up. And to their credit, they're the ones that came forward with the recommendation. And I was very pleased when I got that recommendation, because it was a fulfillment of what -- what we had talked about and what we wanted to achieve.

With regards to Selective Service, you know, that's not our operation. That's obviously -- I don't know who the hell controls Selective Service, if you want to know the truth. But, you know, whoever does, they're going to have to exercise some judgment based on what we just did.

MR. LITTLE: Thank you, everyone.

GEN. DEMPSEY: And if I could, the -- you asked what specialties will open today? None. We just made the announcement. Give me a break. And we need some time -- we need time to sort it out.

Thanks.

SEC. PANETTA: All right. Thank you.

