

**The Admiral and the Senator**

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## The Admiral and the Senator

I want you to consider with me two Naval Academy graduates. One is the United States Senator from Virginia, James Webb. The other is Vice Admiral William Lawrence. Some of you may have heard of James Webb. A member of the class of 1968, he compiled an impressive leadership record as a midshipman. His athletic focus was intramural boxing. As a junior Marine Corps officer, he completed his obligated service, but was forced to return to civilian life due to the severity of war wounds suffered in Viet Nam, where he was awarded the Silver Star and the Navy Cross for conspicuous gallantry.<sup>1</sup> He is a highly-regarded author of numerous best-selling books. President Reagan named him Secretary of the Navy in 1987.

Vice Admiral Lawrence graduated with the class of 1951. He stood eighth in his class academically and was named Brigade Commander, the highest position a midshipman can hold. He was president of his class. He was the prime mover in the creation of the honor concept at the Naval Academy. As a varsity athlete he lettered for three years in each of three sports – football, basketball, and baseball. Admiral Lawrence served on active duty for thirty-five years. A highly decorated combat pilot, he was a prisoner of war in Viet Nam for six years. He was academy superintendent from 1978 -1980, the era when the first classes containing women passed through Annapolis.<sup>2</sup>

In April 1990, Vice Admiral Lawrence addressed the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (the DACOWITS).<sup>3</sup> He explained to its members how James Webb had harmed the women at the Naval Academy when he wrote an article entitled "Women Can't Fight" for the November 1979 issue of *The Washingtonian*. The admiral told DACOWITS that the article was so damaging that its adverse impact could only be eliminated if Webb were to publicly state that he had changed the views expressed in that article.

This paper is a call for Senator James Webb, from the floor of the United States Senate, to honor the longstanding request from now-deceased Vice Admiral William Lawrence, by repudiating his 1979 article. He should tell the nation that he was wrong in what he wrote in "Women Can't Fight", and that he was wrong to have published it.

There are several reasons why Senator Webb should take this action. First, what he wrote was born, nurtured, and sustained in deception. Repudiation could serve as partial expiation. Second, the article was crafted to impose maximum pain on the women at the academy. It ensured that their male peers would hold them in contempt and isolate them as objects of ridicule and derision. Life was difficult for Webb's class of '68, but it was a walk in the park compared with the psychological firestorm his article unleashed upon those women. An unambiguous repudiation would ameliorate some of the lingering resentment. Third, what he wrote had a corrupting influence on the male midshipmen – teaching them to resist authority, undermine the rule of law, trample on cohesion, and cultivate bigotry as a character trait. Fourth, the harm continues to the present time. Some number from each generation of midshipmen is contaminated by the article's malignant poison.

In 1978 several faculty members advised Superintendent Lawrence that James Webb had expressed an interest in teaching in the English Department. Webb, then a civilian, had recently published *Fields of Fire*, a novel about the Viet Nam war, to wide acclaim. Admiral Lawrence approved the request, and in December 1978 Webb signed a contract with the academy that would commit him to the classroom for eighteen months.<sup>4</sup>

Congressional legislation in 1975 had authorized admission of women to the service academies.<sup>5</sup> Webb opposed that legislation and undertook to de-legitimize it from within. A steady stream of midshipmen visited his office on extra-curricular missions.<sup>6</sup> He used his position to gather information from them for a bitter polemic against the presence of women at the academy. Webb's deception was appalling. He was at the academy under false pretenses; he was engaged in an effort to undermine congressional legislation; he was using young, naive midshipmen as his unsuspecting accomplices; and he was promoting and provoking dissension among and between active duty military personnel.

Webb evidently felt he had all the input he needed after about two months, and decided in February 1979 to leave, actually departing in late spring.<sup>7</sup> The reason he gave for quitting his post so abruptly, was that the midshipmen were consuming so much of his time that he could not get his writing done.<sup>8</sup> In reality, they were consuming his time because he was using them in order to further his own ends.

In "Women Can't Fight," Webb proceeded along three axes.<sup>9</sup> His first argument was based on women's physical limitations for service in the Marine Corps infantry. It was deceptive in that he treated an irrelevance as if it were the heart of the matter. Women then, as now, were not permitted that service option. It was hardly a gender-specific observation at any rate, since roughly ninety-seven percent of all academy graduates did not serve in the Marine Corps infantry. While unstated, there is a subtle undertone in Webb's article implying that aviators and surface and sub-surface naval officers fall somewhat short of being full-fledged combat officers – hence the focus on Marine Corps infantry in an article based on women at the Naval Academy..

The second argument – Webb's psychosexual thesis -- is both deceptive and bizarre. It says the presence of women at the academy sexually sterilizes the men. Men then lose the capacity to celebrate their masculinity. Apparently, this emasculation is fungible. Webb said it sterilizes the entire process of combat leadership. When "Women Can't Fight" was written, ninety percent of all men commissioned in the Marine Corps went to civilian colleges with women. They also spent ten weeks at Officer Candidate School, away from women, during one summer of their college years. Presumably those ten weeks unsterilized the men, restored their celebratory powers, and vaccinated them against reinfection when they returned to school with all those potentially sterilizing women. British author Martin Amis provides a current example that could help explain Webb's theory, namely the fundamentalist Muslim jihadist.<sup>10</sup> Although he claims other causes of offense, what the jihadist, from his patriarchic culture, really hates about the west, is the equality of women. When he sees a woman driving a car he feels dishonored. Similarly, when a mere woman performs the same military duties as a man, Webb and his fellow travelers also seem to experience dishonor. The author's pitiful cry from "Women Can't Fight" is Quote "Where can someone who knows he is a man go to celebrate his masculinity?" Unquote.

Webb's third argument is that the presence of women prevents the development of combat leaders. He claimed the academy's original mission was the transformation of midshipmen into warriors, primarily in their first year, using a process of physical and psychological brutality. Webb believes part of his ascent to warrior status occurred when upperclassmen physically and brutally clubbed him with a cricket bat. It was, he said, preparation for combat, and survival in prisoner of war camps. During Webb's brief sojourn in the English Department, he was offended to learn that "leadership by brutality" was no longer standard practice. His frantic search for a causal agent yielded several conclusions, namely: the mission must have changed; the academy must have decided to stop producing warriors; the catalyst must have been the presence of women, since they would not be able to tolerate the physical brutality. Case closed. Thought process over.

As an alternative to trashing the women and the academy, Webb might simply have aired his concerns with the Superintendent. Admiral Lawrence could have told him that brutality was not practiced over most of the academy's history. Congressional legislation way back in 1872 outlawed hazing and defined it as: quote "unauthorized assumption of authority by a midshipman whereby another midshipman is exposed to any cruelty, indignity, humiliation, hardship or oppression, or the deprivation or abridgment of any right"<sup>11</sup> unquote. The admiral could have cited his six-year experience as a frequently-tortured prisoner in Hanoi's dungeons to debunk any linkage between arbitrary, pubescent brutality and long-term survival as a POW. Hazing, of course, is simply the adolescent version of child abuse. It has the same dynamic; the victims perpetuate the abuse on subsequent generations. In 1872, then-superintendent John Worden addressed the hazing that inspired the federal law. He told the brigade, quote ". . . the academy will be purified of this disgraceful practice and its rebellious spirit. . . by the dismissal, if necessary, of every cadet – to the very last . . ." <sup>12</sup> Unquote. From the beginning, dismissal was the purifying response whenever hazing raised its obscene head.

Webb's deception on the "preparation-for-combat" issue surfaced in various ways for years. A mere three months after publication of "Women Can't Fight," he lectured at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. He said male Marine Corps Lieutenants who attended the academy with women were no longer competitive at the Basic School, compared with officers from other commissioning sources. The next day the college Director, issued a memorandum to all students, exposing Webb's claims as false.<sup>13</sup> Class standings of academy graduates at the Basic School were, in fact, higher than their contemporaries from other commissioning sources.

In 1987, eight years after the publication of "Women Can't Fight," the Senate held confirmation hearings to determine Mr. Webb's fitness to be Secretary of the Navy. When asked, in those hearings, about women at the academy, he said, in essence, "the academy no longer holds to its mission of producing combat leaders; so the presence of women isn't a big deal any more."<sup>14</sup> Mr. Webb, at the moment he was about to become Navy Secretary, was being absolutely consistent with the views he expressed in "Women Can't Fight."

Shortly after assuming office he issued a directive announcing an officer and enlisted promotion policy that would emphasize combat performance.<sup>15</sup> Since the law kept them out of combat billets, women obviously felt disadvantaged by this directive.

Secretary Webb was adamant that women at the Naval Academy prevented the development of combat leaders, and he quickly attempted remediation. Midshipmen going into the Marine Corps would have to spend a summer at Quantico approximating the regimen undergone by non-academy officer candidates – this in addition to the four-year challenge at the academy.<sup>16</sup> Within two years midshipmen applications for commissions in the Marine Corps dropped by nearly fifty percent.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, Secretary Webb quit his post after only nine months, and his action was reversed. Today the academy gets triple the Marine Corps applicants as it did after Secretary Webb instituted his solution for which there was no problem.

There is substantial evidence, based on his actions after resigning, that Secretary Webb never experienced the slightest change in his views on military women during his brief time in office. How, then, does one explain his opening up more billets for women on combatant ships than any previous Navy Secretary?

There was a precipitating event – namely, the DACOWITS trip to the Pacific in the summer of 1987. Everywhere the delegation traveled, it exposed the Navy's culture in its treatment of women. Sexual harassment was a condition of life for most women in the Pacific region. The service secretary could not avoid being tarred by these findings, since they indicted multitudes for whom he was accountable.<sup>18</sup> The treatment of Navy women by Navy men aboard a salvage ship, USS Safeguard, was the most egregious case to emerge from the DACOWITS trip.<sup>19</sup> The ship's commanding officer tolerated, promoted, and was the leading practitioner in unremitting sexual harassment of his women crew members. He attempted to draft enlisted women into sexual acts with Korean officers; he routinely subjected the women to crude and lewd public acts of debauchery.<sup>20</sup> After the DACOWITS learned what had happened, and submitted its findings, the report became the subject of major media coverage. The New York Times learned many of the details of the Safeguard debacle and ran several articles on the sorry state of gender-related culture in the Navy. Secretary of Defense Weinberger ordered each of the service secretaries to conduct service-wide studies of the treatment of women. The genesis of this staggering cultural failure preceded Webb's time as secretary, but its public airing took place during his tenure in that post.

Secretary Webb went into the damage-control mode following the DACOWITS report and especially the media response to the pathetic USS Safeguard example. Pressure from congress and within DOD was increasing daily. The Secretary quickly formed an internal study group to: quote "conduct a comprehensive examination of current policy on the utilization of women" unquote. That group comprised mostly senior women naval officers, one of whom, Lory Manning, is present with us today. The group met from October through December 1987. Given the public scrutiny directed toward the Navy's gender-related culture deficit, the likelihood of Secretary Webb opposing anything this group recommended was essentially zero. He gave it free rein to act and he approved every one of its recommendations, one of which was the opening up of combat logistics ships to service by women. Two months later he resigned.

The DOD-directed, navy-wide study was also in the process of documenting Navy culture in its treatment of women. Thousands of Navy men and women at more than 100 sites would report three common elements faced by navy women everywhere: lack of acceptance, underutilization, and lack of equal treatment.<sup>21</sup> The secretary resigned before those findings were made public, but the outcome of the study was no surprise.

Secretary Webb has said in the past that he does not take well to a bridle. The emergence of the truth about the treatment of women everywhere in the Navy was backing him into a corner. The bridle was clearly stealing the fun from his time in office. Given his core beliefs about military women, it would hardly do to be forced out on that issue. The search for a resignation rationale yielded the 600 ship Navy. He laid out the argument in a speech to the National Press Club.<sup>22</sup> The heart of his justification focused on multi-faceted, globe-encircling threats from the Soviet Union – a nation that would cease to exist within three years. When he couldn't get his way on this issue, a foregone conclusion, he resigned in February 1988, allegedly on principle over the 600 ship navy.

Congressional legislation in 1993 repealed the Combat Exclusion Law, opening surface combatant ships and aircraft with combat missions for service by women.<sup>23</sup> The Navy ruled that the new law would apply retroactively

to all women then at the academy.<sup>24</sup> Overnight the relationship between men and women changed. All midshipmen now had the same obligation to serve in warfare communities upon graduation. Women could no longer be devalued by their male peers on the issue of post-academy destination.

The change in law offered an ideal moment for Webb to repudiate "Women Can't Fight." Instead, throughout the decade of the nineties, he demonstrated the rigidity of his beliefs about military women. A single, incendiary event revealed the "true-truth" about the character of the former Secretary. That event was the 1991 Tailhook Convention in Las Vegas.

The report of the DOD Inspector General's official investigation of Tailhook included among its many findings the following: naval aviators carried out sexual assaults on at least 90 women; over fifty officers deliberately lied or sought to mislead the investigators; there was a serious failure of leadership in which some of the Navy's most senior officers knew about the excesses at Tailhook '91, but by their inaction condoned and even encouraged the lawless behavior.<sup>25</sup>

James Webb, more than four years after he resigned as Navy Secretary, was firmly opposed to holding senior officers accountable for the pervasive collapse of military discipline at Las Vegas. He was in a resolute state of denial about the culture failure that Tailhook '91 confirmed. In a 1992 article in the *New York Times*, Webb took the minimalist position – punishment for the few drunken aviators whom he claimed carried out the sexual assaults; amnesty for all senior officers who looked the other way while their juniors carried out the criminal activity. Consider the following example that puts Webb's leadership approach in perspective. A Marine Lance Corporal -- left behind in a combined-arms exercise in 1988 -- died in the desert heat. Marine Commandant, General Al Gray, relieved every single person in the chain of command, up to and including the Commanding General. The lower-ranking, directly-culpable Marines were punished, but General Gray understood that the incident could not have happened without a failure of leadership all the way to the top.<sup>26</sup> He had the wisdom and, above all, the courage to do what senior leadership requires. Evidently Webb's ideology trumped that kind of wisdom and courage. His course of action was to pander to the macho element of navy culture. He called the attempt to affix accountability a witch hunt. In the process he carried out his own witch hunt. He savaged Acting Navy Secretary Sean O'Keefe because O'Keefe had said in September 1992 that the navy's cultural climate had promoted demeaning behavior and attitudes toward women. Webb falsely accused O'Keefe of indicting the Navy's entire corpus of ethos, traits, history and tradition. He said O'Keefe had never served on active duty and therefore was not qualified to comment on navy culture.<sup>27 28</sup>

In 1997 Mr. Webb struck again. This time he went back twenty-two years to time zero. In an article entitled "The War on the Military Culture," he continued to attack the 1975 legislation that opened the service academies to women. He said outside forces had conspired to destroy the military culture. He referred to women serving in the military as a "social experiment" on six separate occasions in that single article.<sup>29</sup> The "social experiment" epithet was on equally odious display when I first came into the Marine Corps. Then it was used to mock the racial integration of the services. It was abhorrent then. It is beyond abhorrent when used by someone who has occupied high positions in our national security apparatus.

In October 2006 a classmate of mine forwarded an E-mail from a midshipman he sponsors. The midshipman was lamenting time spent in academics rather than "combat leadership." He called it, quote "a symptom, as James Webb argues, of admitting women" unquote. For some number of midshipmen, the evil transmitted by "Women Can't Fight" lingers on. Lancing that festering wound is long overdue.

The Naval Academy has a noble honor concept. It proudly proclaims that midshipmen do not lie, cheat, or steal. Those are not narrow proscriptions. One who robs another of his or her dignity is a thief; to distort the performance capabilities of a class of persons is to engage in lying; advancing one's own cause by misrepresenting or demeaning another's basic humanity is blatant cheating. The breadth encompassed by the honor concept explains why Admiral Lawrence, its primary originator, was adamant about James Webb retracting his 1979 article. The admiral, of all people, understood that the ideology in "Women Can't Fight" guaranteed the trampling underfoot of the honor concept. Now is the time for Senator Webb publicly to repudiate his twenty-eight-year-old treatise from the floor of the senate. He should acknowledge that he was wrong in opposing the presence of women at the service academies. He should make an unequivocal statement supporting the ongoing expansion of their roles in the military. Those words now could restore some of the cohesion between and among our military members which his words ripped asunder nearly three decades ago. Public repudiation would nullify forever the temptation of some number of male midshipmen to use "Women

Can't Fight" as the warped justification for withholding full commitment to their oath of office. The senator's election to office, his important assignments within the senate, and the extensive media coverage he receives make this the ideal time for him finally to undo this decades-long moral affront.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Timberg, Robert, *The Nightingale's Song*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> Lawrence, William P. and Rosario Rausa, *Tennessee Patriot: The naval Career of Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, U.S. Navy*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Lawrence, William P., "Presentation to DACOWITS," Transcript of speech, April 24, 1990
- <sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *Tennessee Patriot: The naval Career of Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, U.S. Navy*.
- <sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *Tennessee Patriot: The Naval Career of Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, U.S. Navy*.
- <sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *Tennessee Patriot: The Naval Career of Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, U.S. Navy*.
- <sup>7</sup> Webb, James H. Jr., Facsimile message to Elizabeth Donovan at *Navy Times* dated April 26, 1990.
- <sup>8</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *Tennessee Patriot: The Naval Career of Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, U.S. Navy*.
- <sup>9</sup> Webb, James H. Jr., "Women Can't Fight," *The Washingtonian*, November 1979.
- <sup>10</sup> Finnerty, Amy, "Famous Amis," *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> 10 United States Code 6964.
- <sup>12</sup> Order no. 109. United States Naval Academy, September 28, 1872.
- <sup>13</sup> United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College Memorandum 1610 dated February 5, 1980. Subject: Naval Academy Graduates.
- <sup>14</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *The Nightingale's Song*.
- <sup>15</sup> Manning, Lory, E-mail dated October 4, 2006
- <sup>16</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ *The Nightingale's Song*.
- <sup>17</sup> Office of Institutional Research, United States Naval Academy.
- <sup>18</sup> Dr. Jacquelyn K. Davis was Director of the DACOWITS during the WestPac trip. In her post-trip report she explained one aspect of the acculturation process as she described the sexually-oriented entertainment arranged officially in the military clubs system. She said "the issue of moral accountability aside, on-base activities such as these contribute to creating an environment in which all females are regarded with little or no respect and abusive behavior toward all women is not only passively accepted and condoned but encouraged."
- <sup>19</sup> Kennedy School of Government Case Study C16-88-853.0: *Women in the Navy*. Cambridge, MA 1988.
- <sup>20</sup> United States. Department of the Navy. Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation: *Investigation to Inquire into the Allegations of Misconduct Committed by Commanding Officer USS Safeguard (ARS 50)*. Washington. 1987. The Commanding Officer was charged with eleven serious offences under the UCMJ. Fortunately for him, the Navy culture during Secretary Webb's time in office tolerated his ubiquitous criminal behavior with ease. He escaped with a slap on the wrist at an Article 15 non-judicial proceeding.
- <sup>21</sup> United States. Department of the Navy. *An Update Report on the Progress of Women in the Navy*. Washington. 1990
- <sup>22</sup> Webb, James H., Jr., "U.S. Military: Strength Through Flexibility," Speech to National Press Club; Washington, D.C, January 13, 1988.

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<sup>23</sup> Public law 103-160 Section 541

<sup>24</sup> OPNAV INSTRUCTION 1300.17A, dated January 30, 1994

<sup>25</sup> Deputy Inspector General Memorandum for Secretary of Defense dated April 12, 1993. Subject: Report of Investigation: Tailhook '91 – Part 2, Events of the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Tailhook Symposium.

<sup>26</sup> Gray, A. M., Commandant of the Marine Corps Endorsement dated December 24, 1988 on Investigation to inquire into the Circumstances Surrounding the 30 August 1988 Disappearance of Lance Corporal XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Which Occurred During CAX 9-88 at Twenty-Nine Palms, California.

<sup>27</sup> Webb, James H., Jr., "Witch Hunt in the Navy," *New York Times*, October 6, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ "The Navy Adrift," *Washington Post*, April 28, 1996. This article was adapted from Webb's speech at the Naval Academy at a conference sponsored by the Naval Institute. While prefaced by inspiring words about great leaders of the past, the essence of the speech was given over to complaints about the unfair treatment of men over the issue of Tailhook '91 and the favored treatment of women (he called them a politically-protected subgroup) there and elsewhere. Webb excoriated the senior leaders who tolerated the alleged destruction of Navy culture, but, in the process, grossly misrepresented the nature of the culture at issue. He falsely said "the entire navy ethos, as in the overall body of traits that constitute an institution's history and traditions" was under attack. That was carefully crafted falsehood. He conflated that noble notion of tradition with the "tradition" that conferred upon aviators at Tailhook conventions the right to conduct sexual assaults upon women of their choosing without interference from senior leadership or prosecution under UCMJ. The soaring language of the speech was magnificent but the essential message embedded in Webb's address was both deceitful and repugnant.

<sup>29</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ "The War on the Military Culture," *The Weekly Standard*, January 20, 1997.