

# Obama Supports Women in the Draft, but Congress Won't Make It Happen



Female Marine recruits at boot camp in Parris Island, South Carolina, in 2013.

Scott Olson/Getty Images

President Barack Obama announced Thursday that he believes women should be required to register for the military draft, just as men age 18 through 25 must do. This marks a largely symbolic shift in public position; Congress nixed its plan to add women to Selective Service registration two days before Obama's declaration of support.



The **Associated Press reports** that Obama has been considering the issue of women in the draft since Secretary of Defense Ash Carter **opened all combat positions to women** almost exactly one year ago.

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Historically, every time drafting women has become an issue of public debate, those who oppose gender-neutral Selective Service have **invoked a 1981 Supreme Court decision** that exempted women from the draft because they didn't serve on the front lines. Now that they do, the only reasons left for excluding women rest on sexist ideas of what kind of people are competent in battle, whose duty it is to protect, and who must be protected.

A White House National Security Council spokesman told the AP that Obama thinks women have “proven their mettle” in battle, so it makes no sense to draw gender barriers around the draft. The Pentagon's press secretary said Carter agrees with the president that women should be drafted if the draft is ever reinstated—it's been inactive since the Vietnam War—since the military has been strengthened by adding women to combat positions, thus widening the pool of qualified applicants. Top military officials and veterans in both political parties, **including Republican Sen. John McCain**, have said including women in the draft is only fair.

Earlier this year, it looked like Congress was poised to ax one of the few remaining barriers to women's inclusion in the military. In June, the Senate passed a version of the National Defense Authorization Act that **included a provision for an all-gender draft** with a vote of 85–13. That provision made it into the House of Representatives' version, but by the time it got to the floor for a vote, it had been removed. Instead, the final version of the legislation will commission a review of the Selective Service System to see if it's still necessary or practical to keep the draft as an option at all.

The push to include women in the draft likely failed because it was a bigger deal to legislators and constituents who opposed it than to those who supported it. Making the draft gender-neutral would make sense given the current state of the military and combat roles, but since the draft is unlikely to return anytime soon, it would matter more as a vote of confidence in gender equality than as a practical concern. Meanwhile, conservatives have made this largely hypothetical conversation a wedge issue about protecting women. Republican Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska, who might have wanted to shore up support from deplorables while **railing against Donald Trump** in the lead-up to the election, has been among the loudest opponents of adding women to the draft. On Tuesday, **he said** keeping the draft men-only will “put national security ahead of unnecessary culture-warring,” thus avoiding “a fight about drafting our mothers, sisters, and daughters.”

Ted Cruz, too, has made himself a visible warrior against women in the draft. At a presidential campaign rally in February, he mock-addressed his fellow Republican candidates who would

require women to register for Selective Service. **“Are you guys nuts?”** he said. “Listen, we have had enough with political correctness, especially in the military. Political correctness is dangerous. And the idea that we would draft our daughters to forcibly bring them into the military and put them in close combat, I think, is wrong. It is immoral.” Here, Cruz made the classic right-wing argument used to turn conservative women against feminism: that men and women are *not* equal, and that women should be protected. It’s the same argument Paul Ryan made when he responded to Donald Trump’s “grab them by the pussy” statement by saying that women should be **“championed and revered”** instead of objectified. That’s **giddy Trump supporter** Paul Ryan, promising to protect women while endorsing for president a man who brags about assaulting them.

At the February rally, Cruz used his daughters as reasons why including women in the draft would be stupid and cruel. “I’m the father of two little girls,” he said. “They are capable of doing anything in their hearts’ desire. But the idea that their government would forcibly put them in a foxhole with a 220-pound psychopath trying to kill them doesn’t make any sense at all.” What an apropos line of reasoning! The idea that legislators who send America’s troops to war would have to contend with the consequences of sending their own children into harm’s way is one of the main reasons for keeping the specter of an income- and status-blind draft around in the first place.