

**Melissa S. Herbert.** *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1998. ix + 205 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-3548-0.



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## Military Women Battle Gender Bias

In her book, *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military*, Melissa S. Herbert provides an excellent overview and analysis of a problem encountered by many (if not most) women serving in the military today. Herbert, who served in the military and who now is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Hamline University in Minnesota, presents a carefully considered examination of the oftentimes burdensome role of gender in society, specifically in the military society.

Herbert begins her book with a concise history of how women in the military have been perceived from the 1940s until the present. She poses the question, "Can one truly be a soldier and a woman and not be viewed as deviating either from what it means to be a soldier or from what it means to be a woman?" (p. 10). The question is pertinent, because as Herbert exemplifies, "The military continues to see femininity as something to be denied or, at the very least, controlled." (p. 45) Herbert acknowledges that "thousands of women...have served admirably and have won

the respect of their male coworkers, peers and supervisors....," but maintains that "women as a group are viewed as second class and are subordinated by the men of the military" (p. 122).

Herbert based her research on personal observation and a comprehensive survey of nearly three hundred female military members and veterans. Throughout her book, she cites the difficulty of women attempting to maintain femininity while simultaneously being perceived as competent. "[Women] must strike a balance between femininity and masculinity in which they are feminine enough to be perceived as women, specifically heterosexual women, yet masculine enough to be perceived as capable of soldiering" (p. 82). Herbert quotes a former Navy lieutenant: "One of the hardest parts of being a military woman is just the constant scrutiny and criticism. Act "too masculine" and you're accused of being a dyke; act "too feminine" and you're either accused of sleeping around, or you're not serious..." (p. 112).

Herbert describes the behaviors that military women frequently adopt to improve their chances

for acceptance within the system. Gender, she posits, is "something that we do, rather than simply something that we may be." (p. 102) "Many of the women in this study indicated that they felt pressure to act more feminine or more masculine than they would have otherwise. Even more women noted that there were penalties for women who were perceived as too feminine or too masculine. Regardless of whether women are feminine or masculine, the potential penalty is discharge. If women are aggressive, they are [assumed to be] lesbians; if women are not aggressive enough, they may be viewed as incapable of leading troops and may receive poor evaluation reviews. In either case, the ultimate penalty can be discharge" (p. 120).

Professor Herbert's book is the most articulate analysis of gender and sexuality in the military that I have read. I find it interesting that her observations have proven to be most timely. During the week that I wrote this review, the *Detroit News* (March 26, 2001) ran an article titled "Will Rumsfeld Defend Gays in the Military?" The article cited this information from a Servicemember's Legal Defense Network report: "Lesbian-baiting: Women continue to be accused of being gay at a disproportionately high rate. They were 24 percent of SLDN's cases, but are only 14 percent of the active forces."

This book is well written and, for the most part, well edited. (I did find several minor typos and an incorrectly cited reference). The book is nicely designed, with an easy-on-the-eyes typeface. The author's research is impressive; there is an extensive bibliography. A sample survey and a detailed description of the author's methodology are included.

This book, I believe, would be of especial interest to any woman who has served in the military since the abolishment of the draft in 1973. (Before that, as the author notes, "women served in a more auxiliary fashion" and were not as likely to have had the same types of military experi-

ences as women who have served since that time). I served in the military from 1973 through 1983, and there was nothing in Herbert's book that I didn't observe or experience firsthand.

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