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LAW & JUSTICE

Ban on Women in Combat to End

Change seen as integral to military's success

(AP) — Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, in lifting a ban on women serving in combat, said women have become integral to the military's success and have shown they are willing to fight and die alongside their male counterparts.

"The time has come for our policies to recognize that reality," Panetta said Thursday at a Pentagon news conference with Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Panetta said that not all women will be able to meet the qualifications to be a combat soldier.

"But everyone is entitled to a chance," he said.

He said the qualifications will not be lowered, and with women playing a broader role, the military will be strengthened.

Panetta said that his visits to Afghanistan and Iraq to see U.S. forces in action demonstrated to him that women should have a chance to perform combat duties if they wish, and if they can meet the qualifications.

"Our military is more capable, and our force is more powerful, when we use all of the great diverse strengths of the American people," Panetta said.

"Every person in today's military has made a solemn commitment to



Capt. Sara Rodriguez, 26, of the 101st Airborne Division, carries a litter of sandbags during training at Fort Campbell in Kentucky. The Pentagon is lifting its ban on women serving in combat, opening hundreds of thousands of front-line positions after generations of limits on their service. (AP Photo)

fight, and if necessary to die, for our nation's defense," he said. "We owe it to them to allow them to pursue every avenue of military service for which they are fully prepared and qualified. Their career success and their specific opportunities should be based solely on their ability to successfully carry out an assigned mission. Everyone deserves that chance."

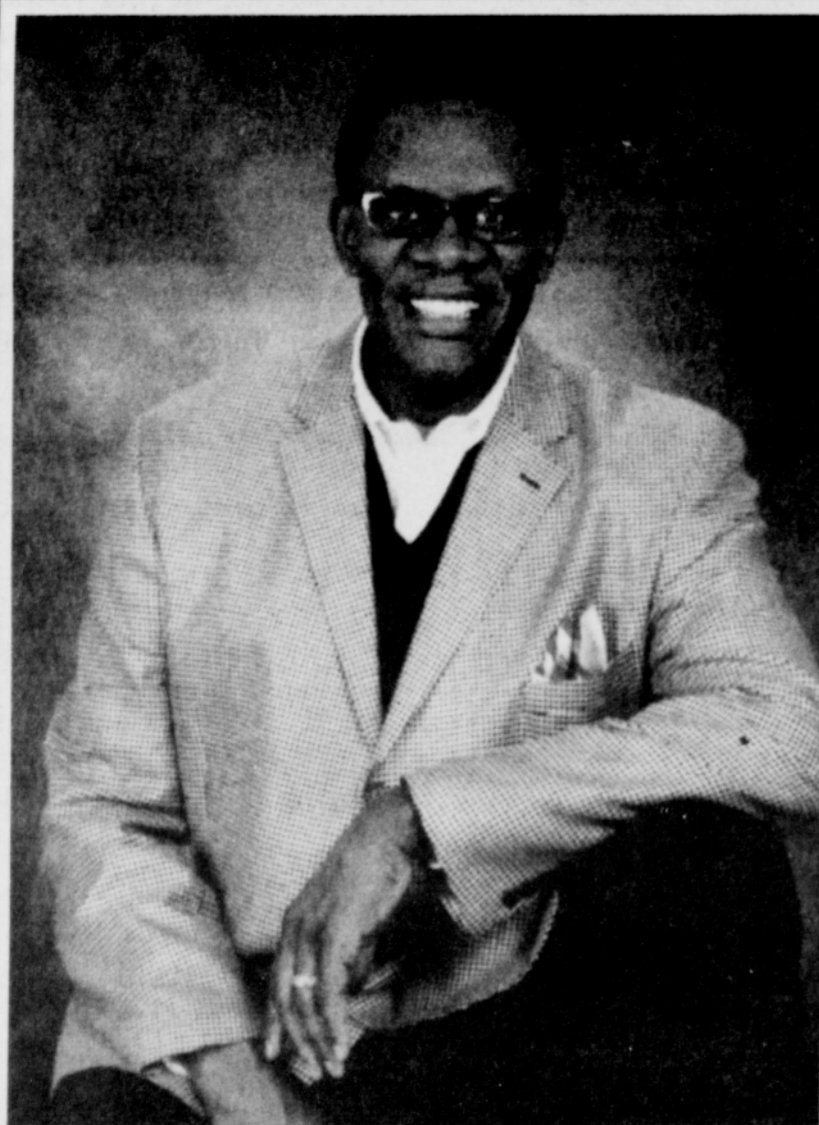
The decision to lift the ban on women serving in combat presents a daunting challenge to top military leaders who now will have to decide which, if any, jobs they believe should be open only to men.

It will be up to the military service chiefs to recommend and defend whether women should be excluded from any of those more demanding and deadly positions, such as Navy SEALs or the Army's Delta Force.

The historic change, which was recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, overturns a 1994 rule prohibiting women from being assigned to smaller ground combat units.

The change won't take place overnight: Service chiefs will have to develop plans for allowing women to seek the combat positions, a senior military official said. Some jobs may open as soon as this year, while assessments for others, such as special operations forces, may take longer.

Panetta's move comes in his final weeks as Pentagon chief and just days after President Barack Obama's inaugural speech in which he spoke passionately about equal rights for all. The new order expands the department's action of nearly a year ago to open about 14,500 combat positions to women, nearly all of them in the Army.



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