

Military Sexual Assault and Popular Discourse: A Tale of Two Scandals

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Introduction

The US Military is a large and diverse organization. Like the society it mirrors, it also has a long and storied history with violence, to include sexual violence. In this paper, I will examine two large-scale (of many) scandals which have taken place with regard to sexual violence in the military, known as military sexual assault or military sexual trauma. The two events both kicked off firestorms of media coverage as well as demands from Congress for change, yet as will be explored, though the events of Tailhook and Vanessa Guillen were three decades apart, much of the problem and rhetoric remained the same. I set out to find out what changes, if any, had taken place to address sexual violence in the military and if media coverage and assumptions about victims were different in any way after nearly 30 years.

Prevalence and History/Literature Review

In Fiscal Year 2019, there were 6,236 reports (reports represent an estimated 1/3 of actual occurrences) of Military Sexual Assault, up by 3% from the previous Fiscal Year 2018 (DOD Annual Report, 2019). In 2016, an estimated 14,900 service members in the United States military experienced a sexual assault (DOD Annual Report, 2016). According to Skaine (2016, p. 60), as of 2012, the female service member is 180 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than killed in combat.

Women have been serving in the United States Armed Forces, in one way or another, since the earliest days of our Nation's founding. Originally disguised as men, women have served in every armed conflict our Nation has engaged in. Women were officially and formally allowed to enlist and serve as women beginning during and then following WWII (Blakemore, 2019). In 1948, women officially became a permanent part of the Armed Forces under the

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Women's Armed Services Integration Act signed into law by President Truman (Blakemore, 2019). Prior to that law, in peace-time only nurses were allowed to remain in service.

In the 1970s, during the Vietnam conflict, women were admitted into additional job occupations but were not permitted to serve in combat arms (those jobs that are directly engaged in combat rather than support roles). In 2013, women were finally admitted completely, with no restrictions, into all military jobs and specialties including direct combat roles and in 2019 a federal court ruled the draft was discriminatory for excluding women (Blakemore, 2019).

The relationship between women and the Armed Forces has always had the shadow of misogyny hanging over it. From the very beginning, arguments have been made that women should not serve due to the prevalence of sexual harassment and fears of sexual assault (Blakemore, 2019). Mesok (2016) further explains that Senators and journalists alike have credited the problem of sexual violence to the mere presence of women in the military and their full integration into the service. Such a notion is a deflection from the very real culture problem that is destroying units and readiness.

Military Sexual Assault is not only wrong and destroys unit morale and cohesion, but it also comes at a monetary cost. "The total estimated organizational costs related to sexual-assault incidents involving active-duty service members in the five U.S. armed forces in FY 2012 range from a minimum of \$89M to a maximum of \$1.43B" (Bo, 2013, p. 3). Costs are also incurred by "lower productivity, diminished readiness, and impaired public trust," (Skaine, 2016, p. 23). Not to mention damage to morale and unit cohesion. It is imperative for the strength of our military to address sexual violence in the ranks.

The Scandals

Tailhook Event

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During a several days long convention put on by the Tailhook Association, in Las Vegas, Nevada in September of 1991, over 90 women and men were physically assaulted by Naval and Marine Service Members (Skaine, 2016). This event took place one month before the Anita Hill hearings during the same year, which brought sexual harassment in the workplace to the public consciousness. The Tailhook incident emerged due to the courageous report of one Naval Officer, LT Paula Coughlin (Winerip, 2013). She reported her sexual assaults to her supervisor who reacted with a “what’s the big deal” (Skaine, 2016, p. 23) attitude so she escalated her concern higher. She then went on national television with details of the event and assaults (Winerip, 2013). The media picked up on the details of the wide scale excesses and abuses of the event and began reporting, turning the event “from a Navy embarrassment to a national scandal” (Winerip, 2013). Overall it was discovered that 83 women and 7 men, of over 5,000 attendees, had been assaulted at the event and over 2,900 interviews were conducted as part of investigations into the event (PBS Frontline, 2021).

Vanessa Guillen and Ft. Hood

Vanessa Guillen was a Soldier in the United States Army, who in the in early Spring of 2020, reported to her mother that another Soldier was sexually harassing her. Not long after confiding in her mother, Vanessa went missing in April of 2020 and in July of 2020, her remains were found and the person of interest in the case committed suicide as police tried to apprehend him.

This event sparked widespread outcry and anger, especially in the media and on social media. Several hashtags were created to post about this case, some of which were, #MilitaryMeToo, #IAMVANESSA, #WeAreVanessaGuillen, etc. Many servicemembers, especially women service members, began sharing their own stories of sexual misconduct that

had taken place during their service. Many of whom reported that their assailants were still in the military and had received no consequences. Vanessa's harassment and death led to renewed calls by the media, population, and Congress to address sexual violence in the ranks.

Treatments of the Problem

From 2012 to mid-2019 former Defense Secretaries "launched more than 50 initiatives against sexual assault," (Baron, 2021). Every year the Department of Defense (DOD) releases an Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military (Skaine, 2016). And every year the numbers paint a bleak picture, as seen above. These annual reports continue to produce calls from Congress to act and to change the military's handling of these cases. In addition to the DOD annual report, the RAND Corporation also periodically surveys the Military to determine actual prevalence and reports rather than the DOD measurement of only reported sexual assaults. This is an important distinction as sexual harassment and assault are notoriously underreported and reports represent on average merely a third of occurrences (Skaine, 2016).

One of the treatment suggestions provided by Skaine (2016) is to institute similar prevention and bystander trainings as used in the military to curb excessive alcohol use to reduce DUI (Driving under the influence). These programs were widely successful in changing the strong drinking culture in the military and the amount of DUIs and the Command's tolerance for DUIs were reduced significantly. As of this writing, service members stand to lose their career at a minimum over a DUI, yet as the prosecution rates will show, are not likely to face any consequences for sexual misconduct.

A popular recommendation, in fact for some Senators it's a demand, is that military justice for cases of sexual misconduct be removed entirely from the Chain of Command for decision making. Senator Kristin Gillibrand is a major driver in the push to make this change and

remove all felony level crimes from Chain of Command jurisdiction and instead place it with a neutral prosecutorial authority, still within the Military but outside of the Chain of Command (Skain, 2016).

Currently all misconduct cases of any type are handled by the Chain of Command. Commands however, are very rarely trained in the law and legal process and have a conflict of interest when it comes to adjudicating cases. Court cases or Courts Martials are long and drawn out processes that can remove unit members and decrease readiness throughout the course of the case making it an unsavory option for Commanders concerned about unit readiness to deploy. Further, Commanders often know one or both parties involved in the case and can, and do, have bias when it comes to prosecution (Skaine, 2016).

Some, like former Secretary of Defense Martin Dempsey, speculated that military sexual violence would decrease when women were fully integrated into combat arms. That transition happened in 2013, yet the numbers continue to increase. His premise was that as long as we had two classes, warfighter and “other” equity would never be reached (Mesok, 2016). While women are now allowed into combat arms they are not yet fully accepted in the eyes of their peers as equals.

Media Coverage

Methods

In order to get a sense of how the media covered both events, I analyze media sources and the way they present “the facts” as well as the tone used in the articles, evaluating whether tone is neutral, condemning, or accepting of the behaviors and allegations being described. Further I analyze the ways in which the victim/survivor(s) are described and the tone of the coverage. Using the lens of feminist critical theory, I explore the prevalence of rape myths or

lack of rape myths in the comments sections of the articles. According to Zalinski et al. (2016) rape culture and rape myths abound on social media and are not decreasing. I will explore whether these two incidents and the stories and comments reinforce or are counter to their argument.

Tailhook

Tailhook was extensively covered by the media following Paula Coughlin's brave accounting of the event and then continued until completion of the punitive outcomes (or lack thereof) in 1994. It also seems that anytime a new military scandal erupts, Tailhook comes back into the public consciousness. Generally, there was a sense of outrage and indignation surrounding her story of what took place at the Tailhook convention. She alleged that some of the top officers in the Navy condoned or turned a blind eye to the behaviors of its members. Following the release of the initial Naval Investigation into Tailhook, the media firestorm increased as initially, none of the officers interviewed were willing to speak to the investigators (PBS, n.d.). Skaine (2016) stated that the Department of Defense Inspector General report concluded that the silence was out of self-preservation because if they admitted they had seen the conduct they could have been in trouble for their own actions and inactions.

One story described the so-called "gauntlet" and the way that aviators and spectators lined the hallways and lured unsuspecting women (mostly) down the hallway as the aviators and attendees groped, stripped, bit, and assaulted the victims as they were pushed "like pinballs" down the hallway (Kempster, 1993). Another article used the language "terror" to describe the feelings of attendees subjected to these criminal behaviors. It also described the assailants as "officers, but they certainly weren't gentlemen," (Newsweek Staff, 1992). In this same article

there is an element of victim blaming where the author points out that Paula Coughlin did not at first “think twice” about walking down the gauntlet hallway (Newsweek Staff, 1992).

PBS provided a breakdown of the Tailhook scandal which used very neutral language condemning neither the perpetrators nor the victims, merely providing a detailed account of the timeline of events and allegations. I determine this language to be neutral as it is not containing emotionally charged language similar to that described above. Of note however, under the Rationale section, the article does state that “their [assailants] behavior was justified or at least excusable,” though that does not appear to be the author’s opinion but is representing what the tone provided from the Navy at the time was (PBS, n.d.). The Newsweek article similarly describes the Navy’s response as that of an opinion that it was “merely a frat party that got out of hand,” (Newsweek Staff, 1992). The same article describes the scene as terrifying and the victim(s) as helpless. It goes on to use language like the behaviors were out of bounds, rather than stronger language such as “criminal” which would have been more accurate to the occurrences.

Lastly, an article by the Baltimore Sun described the women as having been active participants, “running the gauntlet,” (Lewthwaite, 1994). A top officer at the event is quoted as having said that the “women would not have gone down the hall if they did not like it,” (Lancaster, 1993). There was quite a bit of victim blaming tone in these articles which reflect that the culture at the time was not ready to view the perpetrators as the problem but considered the “complainers” to be the issue.

One article focused heavily on the alleged participation of Paula Coughlin in some of the “leg shaving” activities the night prior to her reported sexual assault. Aviators are alleged and documented to have engaged in shaving the legs of women at the event as well as shaving the

public areas of some women. There was little information provided on whether this particular activity was consensual or nonconsensual that was uncovered as a part of this review (Macy, 1994).

The media article covers this allegation as if to discredit and cast doubt onto Paula Coughlin's character, though the article does not dispute that the allegations she made about sexual assault occurred (Macy, 1994). This is a dangerous narrative of victim shaming and is an attack on victim credibility. Such coverage today would likely be met with backlash and condemnation.

Outcomes

Ultimately some 100 Officers were accused of and investigated for their parts in the criminal activity that took place at the Tailhook convention, some 4,500 promotions were also held up as investigations were ongoing to determine accountability. Of those accused and investigated however none ultimately received any criminal action or serious consequences (Newsweek Staff, 1992). Even though no one faced criminal charges, several top-level authorities were forced into retirement or resignation from their positions, to include the Navy's top Officer who attended the event (Lewthwaite, 1994). According to Skaine (2016), 14 admirals and 300 Officers suffered career damage for their criminal behaviors. Additionally, not long after the Tailhook scandal the AirForce and Navy opened most job specialties to women with very few exceptions. As noted above however, it was not until 2013 that all jobs in all branches were opened to women.

Over 20 congresswomen in 1994 signed a letter to the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee to hold hearings related to the Tailhook scandal (Lewthwaite, 1994). A 1993 Article in the Washington Post included a quote that Tailhook brought to life issues that then led

to a culture change in the military. However, as will be seen below, cultures are slow to change and this lofty and overly optimistic stance was premature as the issues continue into today (Lancaster, 1993). An article in the Associated Press (AP) written in 1993 detailed several trainings and requirements that all Navy personnel were now required to attend after the Tailhook scandal (Schafer, 1993).

Vanessa Guillen

Media coverage for this event began in Spring and Summer of 2020 and continues to today. Initially, Vanessa had been reported absent without leave (AWOL) in April and later was declared missing. In June, Selma Hayek began posting about the story on social media which brought the dialogue out of military only spaces and media and to the forefront of public discourse (Bonvillian, 2020). It was also Selma Hayek and military members that began to raise awareness that Vanessa had confided in her mother she had been sexually harassed. This allegation further prompted and outraged the public into sharing her story as well as many sharing their own stories of sexual violence in the military.

Media coverage is largely critical and harshly condemns the military's continued failure to adequately address sexual misconduct. "The legal twists and turns in a rape case involving a soldier stationed at Fort Bragg clearly demonstrate that the U.S. Army is still failing in its responsibility to investigate and prosecute sexual harassment and assault charges from their members," (Paliga, 2020). Paliga (2020) also indicated that military justice should be taken out of the hands of commanders and placed with a neutral third party in order to have appropriate checks and balances. One author wrote that this incident could be the "catalyst" to change the way sexual misconduct is handled in the military (Almendarez, 2020).

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Media coverage of Vanessa Guillen's case began with tones of concern for a missing Soldier and then morphed into outrage from the media and public when allegations of sexual harassment were added to the story. Media coverage focused less on the victim than on the circumstances surrounding her disappearance and ultimately death. Coverage did not victim blame Vanessa but instead was harshly critical of the military's failures in this case. Even headlines stated things such as "The Army Often Ignores Sex Crimes," and "#MeToo Movement Exposes Failure of U.S. Military to Take Seriously Sexual Assault" (Almendarez, 2020), (Paglia, 2020).

Social Media

Absent from the Tailhook analysis was the ability to compare and contrast the treatment of the story in social media with Vanessa Guillen case. However, it would be remiss not to evaluate this medium with regard to Vanessa Guillen. Social media played a large role in this case calling attention and public outrage to stories being told of sexual harassment and assault in the military. This case spawned an entire movement of mostly women sharing their own experiences with sexual harassment and assault online, especially on Facebook and Twitter with the hashtags; #MilitaryMeToo, #IAMVANESSAGUILLEN and #WeAreVanessaGuillen.

Comments ranged from servicemembers sharing their own stories, to denials of a problem in the military, to victim blaming. Examples taken from Facebook comments under an article from the Army Times (2020) about the firing of chain of command: "Yea. More briefings. Works every time," "You know what this means boys....MORE POWER POINTS!!!!" "I would say we should just do a dishonorable discharge for sex-related offences on the books, but there would only be 6 NCOs left in the army," and "More powerpoint, and...and...limp-wristed slaps on the hand for senior leaders. Yeah! That'll fix it." (Facebook, December 30, 2020). As a point

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of clarification with regard to the PowerPoint comments, much of the military's annual, quarterly, and other mandatory trainings are conducted via PowerPoint briefs to include sexual harassment and assault training. These comments poke fun at the lack of efficacy of PowerPoint training and the knee-jerk reaction of the Military to solve everything with even more PowerPoint trainings.

These types of comments show that there is no real faith in the military to address these concerns. The PowerPoint comments and briefings comments indicate that the trainings designed to prevent sexual harassment and assault are not working and are not well received. Other comments were supportive of the victim like, "A Few Good Men, shows exactly what's going on in Fort Hood... hope all the victims receive justice," (Arnold & Strauss, comment to article, November 2020).

These negative and victim blaming types of comments are common on military and civilian media pages on Facebook and even Twitter anytime a story of sexual violence is shared. A more recent example from this week is the story of a Marine Corps female that reported a male Marine in her unit, for improperly obtaining and sharing nude photographs of her with other Marines in their unit. Many of the comments blamed the victim for having nude photographs rather than the perpetrator for sharing them, though it is illegal to do so (Facebook, 2020). While the phenomenon of "trolling" could be part of the culprit the vast numbers, hundreds of negative comments, appear to come from current and former service members and civilians in some way associated with the military.

Outcomes

The allegation of sexual harassment led to calls for reform and investigation into how the military handles sexual misconduct. Congressional members, including Representative Jackie

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Speier, have also introduced legislation, called the I Am Vanessa Guillen Act in order to reduce sexual misconduct and hold offenders accountable (Coronado, 2020). In December 2020, the Army fired 14 personnel from Fort Hood for failures during the Vanessa Guillen case (Weaver & Minutaglio, 2020). The Army also released a 152-page scathing report of findings following this case which explored sexual misconduct on Fort Hood (Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee, 2020). President Biden and new Defense Secretary Austin have stated that eradicating sexual violence in the military is one of their top objectives (Baron, 2021). Stronger pushes are also being made now to remove the chain of command from decisions surround sexual misconduct cases, to include calls from several Senators (Baron, 2021). In November of 2020, Fort Hood renamed one of the post's gates after Vanessa Guillen (American Statesman Staff, 2020).

Her death and allegations of sexual harassment have kicked off yet another reckoning in the US Military about how it handles cases of sexual violence. Congressional oversight and legislation are being introduced and the new Defense Secretary seems committed to making changes related to sexual violence as well as other forms of discrimination and harassment in the ranks. One hopes that some change will finally come, and the numbers start to reflect a better culture for all in the military.

Compare/Discussion

Notably absent in the review of the coverage of Vanessa Guillen's case is the victim blaming language used in the Tailhook coverage. Of all the articles I reviewed none questioned her activities, her credibility, or her actions as they did with the Tailhook incident and Paula Coughlin. Another difference was the level of anger in coverage directed at the failures of the military as opposed to the sense of shock in the Tailhook scandal coverage. There is a tone now

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that the media no longer is surprised by these continued scandals but is actively appalled by their continuation. Language in articles about Tailhook contained words like “terror” and “shocking” as if it was unthinkable something like that incident could have happened in a professional organization like the Navy. Ultimately excusing language was also used to defend the Navy indicating that overall the branch was free of behaviors like this and that it was an isolated incident.

Conversely in the case of Vanessa Guillen, strong language like, “failure,” and “inept,” were used to describe the military’s handling of her case while there was a more permissible and excusing tone used in the coverage of Tailhook. Also of note, is the absence in the more recent coverage of language that questions women’s belonging in the military and their fitness for duty. It is interesting to note that change. Women’s mere presence seems to be taken as the cause of the problem of sexual violence in the past but is seen now as a failure on the part of the institution instead.

There was almost a sense in the Tailhook articles that this sort of allegation should be expected because of women’s presence in the service. Though as stated earlier some articles did express shock, some also had the tone of blaming and questioning whether women should be integrated and if men and women could work together in military jobs. Now, coverage takes women’s presence as accepted. That is a welcome change in media coverage. However, the story on social media paints quite a different picture.

In social media, on posts about the Vanessa Guillen case there are still strong victim blaming statements being made in the comments sections. Comments included, “Wtf is the Army supposed to do about a problem that she didn’t bring to their attention? It’s a different story if she reported or complained but she neither” “Don’t blame the Army,” “If women say they have

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equal rights and they're no different than man, [...] then how can there be sexual assault, harassment?" "Maybe don't use your tits to get ahead," etc. Other comments were more supportive and included sentiments like, "The military needs to do so much better in situations like this." Overall however, the comments sections are overwhelmingly negative and blaming of the individual and the organization rather than the perpetrator(s). These comments were pulled from an article about Vanessa Guillen that was posted on the Army Times Facebook page in July 2020 (Facebook, 2020).

Comments like these show that there is still a long way to go in changing the culture in the military and moving away from a so called, "rape culture" which is claimed by Buchwald et. al. to be a pervasive fact of American life (Buchwald, et. al, 1993, p. 9) and is also then mirrored in the Military mirrors the greater society. Rape culture is further defined as a "complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women," (Buchwald et. al., 1993, p. 0).

Conclusion/Results

Two military sexual violence scandals were examined in how the media covered them in tone, victim blaming, and overall coverage and length of coverage. While Tailhook took place almost 30 years ago, it is still revived in the media with discussions of current scandals. All in all, it was refreshing to see that the media coverage of two military scandals did show improvement in the way that sexual misconduct in the military is covered.

The journalists have migrated away from victim blaming statements and are more condemning in their coverage of the continued failure of the military to address these various scandals over the last 30 years. Though the media coverage has changed significantly however, social media and the public's views still contained victim blaming and rape culture type of

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statements. They also reflect a strong distrust of the military to do the right thing in cases of sexual violence. This shows there is still a long way to go in order to establish trust in the military to do the right thing with regard to sexual violence.

As put by Skaine, “sex scandals in the military would not occur if the culture did not permit it (2016, p. 28). The culture in the military and in broader civilian contexts must change to not only stop sexual violence but stop condoning the behaviors and environments that allow it to fester. Culture change is hard, and is slow, but is a necessary component to fixing the scourge of sexual violence in the military. If we are to truly reach the Department of Defense’s stated aim to attain a “culture free of sexual assault,” (Skaine, 2016, p. 31) change must be made.

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