Since the 1980s there has been a relatively high degree of media interest in military women. A topic that has been deemed newsworthy in and of itself—the variation in gender roles in relation to women’s work—has fed news stories ranging from policy and debate to scandal and humor. In turn the discourses developed in news media have impacted on and shaped film and television fictions featuring military women. This chapter begins with an exploration of how American news media have presented military women, focusing on the contradictory tendencies to celebrate and pathologize them. Two case studies follow; the first is concerned with the role of military women in fictional scenarios of military justice, the second examines fictions in which military women are effectively put on trial. Both sets of fictions clearly employ tropes established in news media, reiterating associations between military women and cultural controversy.

**Military Women: Celebration and Pathologization in American News Media**

There are at least five distinct types of stories or recurrent story elements identifiable within American network news coverage of military women:

- **Celebration**: Military women’s achievements, presence, and deployment are regularly deemed newsworthy in and of themselves, a fact to be celebrated as a marker of progress.
Celebration of the military woman also serves as a sign of American modernity and democracy. Stories in this mode are not only contemporary; they also contribute to the memorializing work of groups of past military women long marginal within mainstream accounts, such as Vietnam War nurses, the WASP pilots, and POWs of the Second World War.

- **Debate**: Whether triggered by an incident during deployment (the death, injury, or capture of a military woman, for instance) or political or military intervention, news coverage repeatedly takes the form of debate on the viability of combat exclusions and the proper role of female personnel in the modern military. Such debates may be formal or informal, involving politicians, policymakers, service-men and servicewomen, or concerned commentators.

- **Scandal**: In media coverage the scandal generated by military women’s involvement in the humiliation and torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib turned as much on the violation of gender norms as on the practices themselves. More generally, military women are repeatedly associated with sexual scandal. Stories of sexual misconduct and rape frequently cast military women as victims, whether of predatory men or of masculine military culture more broadly. Underpinning a fascination with sexual scandal is a preoccupation with the female body, construed as a problem, as out of place.

- **Testimony**: Here female military personnel “speak for themselves,” typically arguing for a gender-blind assessment of their performance and the opportunity to simply do their work without special treatment. The testimony of male personnel, whether supportive of or antagonistic toward military women, is also regularly included in news features.

- **Professional and personal lives**: News media repeatedly highlight tensions between the professional and personal responsibilities of military women. The “problem” of pregnancy and the deployment of mothers are common themes. There is a degree of commonality here with the media presentation of working and professional women more generally, and in particular the trope of an elusive yet highly desirable “work-life balance.”

These five story elements are by no means mutually exclusive; both celebration and scandal are typically coupled with debate, for instance.
Perhaps particularly relevant for thinking about the ways such news coverage impacts film and television fictions is the manner in which the body of the military woman becomes a site of contention and concern. Women’s physical strength relative to men’s is routinely scrutinized. This may take the form of “weak,” “petite,” or unreliable female bodies, or produce the specter of disturbingly strong (read “masculinized”) women. The body of the military woman is pictured as disciplined and trained, but also as potentially unruly: menstruating, penetrable, pregnant or potentially pregnant. The body of the military woman has been claimed as a sign of American modernity; at other times it has been perceived as a problem requiring state intervention. Competing discourses then attempt to account for, naturalize, or problematize the female body, which remains a site of discomfort and even disgust.

A more detailed consideration of a particular example of the media coverage given to military women may help to illustrate how these five story types overlap and inform each other. To this end I examine an ABC News Nightline special devoted to a militarized all-male college, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), which was broadcast on 20 February 1990. The Institute finally changed its male-only admissions policy some years later, in 1997, amid heightened media attention. The college’s reluctance to do so provides an opportunity to rehearse wider debates. Ted Koppel, the program’s anchor, introduces the special, speaking of the historic changes the U.S. has seen with respect to combat and locating VMI— and by extension the position of military women—in a dialogue between modernity and tradition. “It may seem curious, even quaint that we are still debating whether women should be allowed in combat,” he begins. The implication seems clear: once appropriate, VMI is now outmoded, a point underlined by scenes of elaborate rituals involving traditional uniforms and weaponry which introduce the college. The college here stands for a nostalgic fantasy of military masculinity from which the nation, it is implied, has moved on. The discussion and commentary that follow include reference to the “bruising brotherhood” that characterizes VMI and fears that the integration of women will mean the loss of male comradeship (tellingly framing the “problem” of military women in terms of their impact on men). Maj. Gen. John Knapp, VMI’s superintendent, insists categorically, “Nothing in the barracks, nothing in the process we use for cadet life has in any way ever been designed or allowed to continue with women in mind.” Images of female cadets graduating from the service academies
suggest that other institutions have adapted to military women, and headlines from Panama point to the deployment of those same women the previous year. Authorities also comment: Brian Mitchell, the author of various books arguing strongly against women in the military, suggests that upcoming defense cuts should focus on women since their presence in the U.S. military is a significant disincentive to male recruitment; Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder criticizes the premise of those official reviews geared at gauging the efficiency and capability of military women and attempts to debunk myths of male military chivalry.

Moving from the experts and policymakers to the individual soldier, the feature offers the confident testimony of Pvt. Cassandra Messick: “As far as physical, we have a lot of women here who can surpass some of the men. And as far as mental capabilities we definitely surpass them!” Surrounded by cheering women, Messick is clearly coded as a representative young, modern military woman. If the feature seems stacked toward modernization, a voice-over now seeks to qualify these views by evoking familiar anxieties: “But with women, many say, come problems. Romance, for example, and pregnancy, then child care. Not to mention the fundamental question of whether they’re up to the job.” In this way Messick’s youthful assertions of military women’s capabilities are almost immediately superseded by an assertion of the problems that women literally embody: emotional attachment, unruly bodies that become pregnant, and the responsibilities of parenting. (Men, it goes without saying, are deemed to have no place in any of this.) One “fundamental question,” the ability of military women to perform a given function, is thus displaced by another: their reproductive potential. The fact of the female body thus functions as a sort of end point in this feature’s articulation of the various story elements identified above. We see celebration, arguments are rehearsed, soldiers and students speak for themselves, but what to do about the scandalous female body persists as an unanswerable question.

Media insistence on women’s vulnerability to rape and sexual harassment, whether as potential POWs or within the military’s own academies and bases, represents an extension of these concerns with the “problematic” female body (concerns explored more fully in chapter 7). Military masculinity itself can be problematized only so far however, since it functions as a desirable goal to which military women are expected to aspire. As a consequence, it is repeatedly women themselves who are constituted as a problem, expressed in terms of their potentially disruptive
effect on male military personnel. In this way conservative commentators cite instances of sexual harassment as evidence of the failure of gender-integrated training rather than speaking to a need for cultural change.\(^3\) Popular culture too has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to acknowledge military women’s exclusion and marginalization while retaining a more or less conservative view of these exclusionary institutions. An example from the late 1990s, when both The Citadel and VMi finally opened their doors to women, speaks to this playful doubleness.\(^4\) An episode of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* from 1997 has the smart misfit Lisa Simpson electing to join her unruly brother Bart at military school, in the process becoming the first female to join the academy (“The Secret War of Lisa Simpson,” 18 May 1997). In a pastiche of boot camp and military school narratives, Lisa’s fondness for discipline fails to endear her to the other cadets, who exclude her while welcoming the rebellious Bart. *The Simpsons* parodies the sort of narrative played out in films from *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982) to *G.I. Jane*, released the same year, a film which manages to effectively castigate institutions perceived as anachronistic in gender terms while simultaneously reiterating the problematic status of the military and militarized woman.

Gender trouble remains central to news coverage throughout this period. Concerns over military women’s gender status range from a discussion of inappropriate or insufficient physical strength to the significance of general appearance, clothing, and hairstyle. Writing of the media attention she received as a member of one of the first classes of women to attend West Point, Capt. Carol Barkalow recalls being asked, “Do you feel that you’ve lost your femininity?” She adds that some of her peers replied that “when they wanted to feel more feminine, they’d put on makeup or a skirt,” but she felt differently: “Femininity was not a matter of how I looked or what I wore, but how I felt. . . . No one could take that from me.”\(^5\) Barkalow’s attempt to redefine femininity in terms other than appearance flies in the face of institutional and media scrutiny of military women’s gender in precisely these superficial terms. The need to accommodate the military to female bodies is repeatedly constituted as a problem, one implicitly or explicitly linked to combat exclusion policies understood as a way to regulate potentially unruly and troublesome military women.

When in 1976 West Point, the Naval Academy, and the Air Force Academy admitted their first female class members in response to a con-
gressional order, media coverage speculated, “Why would a girl go to West Point?” In covering this policy change, television news foregrounded and implicitly (at times explicitly) questioned women’s physical and leadership abilities. Yet contemporary reports showed as much interest in sleeping and toilet arrangements, playfully highlighting the potential for sexual relations between male and female cadets while reassuring viewers that the leadership was as intent on “moral” as military regulation. A recurrent focus on toilet arrangements and separate living quarters in the decades that followed points to the persistent anxieties associated with the intimate proximity of male and female military bodies.

As combat exclusions came under increasing scrutiny the problem of where to place the military woman—professionally and personally—also intensified as a topic of media interest. An NBC news segment on 22 May 1985 reported on the “career crossroads” facing women who had graduated from the military academies. A variety of high-achieving women (all white) provided the report’s examples: Capt. Ann Fields, one of the first women to graduate from West Point, who learned to fly helicopters but is “limited” by combat exclusion policies (“Let us do what we’ve been trained to do,” she appeals); a pregnant officer; another seen juggling career and family commitments; and Lt. Crystal Lewis, who trains pilots to fight but is not permitted to fly in combat herself. The report ends with the image of Lewis looking on from the ground as planes fly past, the commentary underlining the gendered division of space and opportunity: “Talent is not yet enough to put her, or the others, in the pilot’s seat.” This imagery effectively evokes the figure of the grounded military women seen in films and recruitment materials from the Second World War, though now framed as a problem rather than an appropriate organization of space. The report thus suggests a failure to modernize, to make full and appropriate use of military women’s skills and knowledge. Just as evident, however, is the report’s juxtaposition of the “problem” of placing the military woman in an appropriate professional setting with the “problem” posed by pregnancy and motherhood. Ultimately such features tend to imply that it is the problematic female body rather than policy or military regulation that limits military women.

If the admission of women into the military academies underlined the problematic character of their exclusion from combat—surely an important aspect of the profession for which they were being trained as leaders—the various conflicts in which the U.S. has been involved over
the decades that followed also tested and extended public understanding of the place and potential of military women in combat. Media coverage of the Gulf War revealed in images of military women, typically presenting them as extraordinary in spite of the women’s insistence to the contrary. Thus Jeanne Holm reports the “incredulous” response of a CNN reporter to Maj. Marie Rossi’s assertion, “We [military women] see ourselves as soldiers.” Clearly, however, military women signified something exceptional rather than routine in contemporary news media. In what was a tightly controlled media context, the story of military women, mothers in particular, represented an attractive source of soft news stories. Throughout the 1990s American military women were involved in peacekeeping missions in Haiti, Bosnia, and Somalia. During Operation Desert Fox in 1998, which sought to police the no-fly zone over Iraq, women aviators flew operational combat missions for the first time. Women also participated in combat operations the following year in Kosovo, with news coverage devoting as much time to this verifiable domestic milestone as to the purpose of the action itself. As the media image of the female soldier became more commonplace, her presence in or near combat was less likely to be the sole focus of news stories; nonetheless it remains remarkable, a facet of military culture to be commented on and concerned about.

In the 1990s public, media, and political debate concerning military women in the U.S. was framed by two distinct contexts: the largely positive media attention focused on military women as successful participants in the Persian Gulf War and an emphasis on military women as victims of sexual harassment within a male-dominated military. The events that took place at the annual convention of the Tailhook Association in 1991, and the scandal that unfolded in the years that followed, involved the U.S. Navy in a deeply embarrassing sexualized spectacle. The scandal centered not so much on the behavior of those young male naval aviators who had participated in the sexual harassment of women, both military and civilian, but on the seeming toleration of that behavior by senior naval officers. Ultimately the scandal would lead to the resignation of a number of high-profile officers; as late as 1994 the early retirement of Admiral Kelso was linked to the continuing reverberations of Tailhook. The revelation of what seemed to be routine sexual harassment, official complacency toward it, and the attempt to cover up the behavior of male officers contributed to a scandal which raised some fundamental questions concerning women’s place in the military. Subsequent scandals in-
volving the Army and Air Force suggested wider, perhaps even structural problems in managing a gender-integrated military. In 1996 accusations of rape and sexual harassment of female trainees at the Army facility in Aberdeen, Maryland, attracted media attention. The following year charges were filed against Sgt. Maj. Gene McKinney, the U.S. Army’s top African American enlisted man; although he was subsequently acquitted, extensive media coverage concentrated attention on the potential for abuse within the ritualized context of basic training, as well as in the acutely hierarchical structures of military culture more generally. Also in 1997 the Air Force was at the center of negative publicity associated with the decision to press charges of adultery and disobeying orders against pilot Kelly Flinn. Politicians derided the charges against Flinn, arguing that they reflected a double standard in the treatment of the sexuality of military men and women.8 In 2003 four former cadets went public with accusations that administrators at the Air Force Academy had punished female cadets reporting instances of rape and sexual harassment. Features and op-ed pieces in the New York Times and other newspapers continue to foreground the incidents of rape and sexual abuse experienced by military women during deployment on active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.9 The coexistence of celebration and victimization as components of popular discourse is evident in an article in December 2003 in Vanity Fair which featured an in-depth report on the allegations of systematic sexual abuse within the Air Force Academy, as well as a feature on the rescued POW Jessica Lynch as the lead in its “Hall of Fame 2003” celebrity profiles.10

The extent to which these two very different constructions (warriors and victims) effectively inform each other is one of the most striking aspects of mediations of the military woman in the past two decades. News media reports on sexual harassment seem invariably to lead to familiar discussions on women’s role within the modern military. For some, sexual scandal provides evidence of the military’s need to change; for others, continuing reports of rape and sexual harassment suggest that a gender-integrated military is simply unattainable. An association between women’s independence and the possibility of sexual abuse is at the very least implied by media coverage which, in the wake of the Persian Gulf War, focused on the question of extending the opportunities available to military women, particularly with respect to combat. Sexual harassment emerges as both scandalous and routine, behavior to be reprimanded, and
simply part of the job. Thus an ABC News report on 11 July 1992 on a presidential commission exploring the viability of combat duties for female pilots focuses not so much on women’s capabilities, which are taken for granted, but on the impact any changes in policy might have on military men. Bob McLane (identified as “Top Gun Commanding Officer”), suggests that the key issue is “cultural change”: “How do we introduce women into what has been an all-male environment?” The reporter’s voice-over adds, “There’s the additional problem of sexual harassment—whether men who are not inclined to do so will treat women as equals.” In a post-Tailhook context of heightened media awareness, sexual harassment is understood as an issue of equality and acceptance, as a cultural question. Yet in foregrounding the aggression that defines and is required by military masculinity (“The women say they are just as aggressive as the men”) the report implies that it is the task of military women to come to terms with and accommodate themselves to a culture that has defined itself as tough and aggressive in part through the exclusion of women.

Tailhook established an unsavory association between naval aviation and an unruly masculinity such that an NBC report later that month described the Navy as “in a class by itself in degrading its women” (21 July 1992). The achievements and potential of those military women (particularly aviators) pictured and interviewed in news reports are implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, set against a male military establishment that devalues them. The same NBC report that commented on the Navy’s “degrading” treatment of “its women” rolled together a series of quite diverse incidents, introducing the item with the assertion, “Sexual harassment and abuse of women in the U.S. military is a rapidly growing problem.” The linkage of women’s advancement within the military and an increased level of sexual harassment, although it is not endorsed, is in many ways assumed in such journalistic discourses.

The high visibility of American military women in the Gulf War also functioned as a sign of modernity, implicitly or explicitly opposed to Muslim women, who signified a repressive patriarchy in media discourses. Observing a recurrent “contrast between the liberated American woman soldier and the veiled Arab woman,” Cynthia Enloe points to the work of such constructions in maintaining a hierarchal relationship between nations and cultures, “implying that the United States is the advanced civilized country whose duty it is to take the lead in resolving the Persian Gulf crisis.”11 Such a pattern is exemplified by a prewar ABC report on
7 September 1990 which profiles Airman Kimberly Newberger, a young crew chief stationed in Saudi Arabia. Newberger describes how she must “be careful of what [she] wear[s]” in her current posting, while characterizing her military career more generally in terms of freedom and opportunity: “I took the twisted, bumpy path to adventure and travel—took me here.” As Deborah Cohler, Susan Faludi, Deepa Kumar, and others have noted, a similar opposition between oppressed veiled women in Afghanistan and the freedoms of American women was extensively played out in the American media prior to the invasion of Afghanistan in 2002. In contrast to such widespread assertions of gender equality, race is rarely mentioned in news reports on American military women. Although African American servicewomen may be pictured (and indeed are overrepresented as a group within the U.S. military) the specificity of their experience is not a subject for comment, and they provide testimony far less often than their white peers. Several scholars intrigued by media coverage of military women in the Iraq War have noted the discrepant levels of media attention accorded to the white POW Pvt. Jessica Lynch compared to other female members of the 507th taken prisoner or killed in the same events in Nasiriyah, the Native American Lori Piestawa and the African American Shoshona Johnstone.

Lynch’s high-profile rescue from an Iraqi hospital in April 2003 was an acknowledged feel-good story; supplied complete with video footage, in Carol Burke’s words the Lynch rescue “revives the figure of war as theatre.” Subsequent revelations that the commandos had met with no opposition, and indeed had expected none, punctured the power of the narrative somewhat, but not significantly. Indeed skepticism seemed to be most commonly expressed in the international but not the American press. To this extent the carefully stage-managed rescue functioned as a metaphor for the invasion as a whole, with the confident but ultimately unsustainable claims that Iraq posed a significant danger to the U.S. and the U.K. through its weapons of mass destruction. As Burke observes, “The Hollywood look, feel, and flow of the rescue did not go unnoticed by the American press, though they treated it as a reason for celebration rather than scepticism.” In her analysis of media coverage of Lynch, Burke notes that “the familiarity of the story invited a hackneyed reiteration of gender stereotypes.” Moreover, in keeping with Burke’s analysis of military folklore, “the mainstream media relentlessly cast Lynch not as soldier but as civilian, not as an agent of liberation but as a surrogate
for the women in the audience watching the evening news.” The words with which Lynch recalls responding to the commandos as they identified themselves, “I’m an American soldier, too,” have a certain resonance here. Yet Lynch’s own account, notably in her book, I Am a Soldier, Too, and a prime-time interview with Diane Sawyer, was only one among many competing stories. As Naomi Klein wryly observed, “The real Jessica Lynch . . . has proven no match for her media-military created doppelganger, shown being slapped around by her cruel captors in NBC’s movie Saving Jessica Lynch.” Lynch attempted to resist her characterization not only as a victim, but also as a warrior. A report published in the Washington Post on 3 April 2003 cited an official’s comment that Lynch “was fighting to the death,” a version of events she subsequently debunked. The spinning of her heroism and rescue produced familiar stories in many senses, not least the construction of a feminine, white woman as simultaneously victim and warrior.

What is most striking in the context of this study is the extent to which the media presence and contested image of the military woman would so explicitly form part of the Lynch story. The American media first promoted the idea of Lynch as warrior and subsequently as victim, a process that morphed into a self-regarding angst about its own myth-making and the amount of attention Lynch was receiving compared to (real) male soldiers. Susan Faludi effectively draws our attention to the repeated media scripting of Lynch as ultrafeminine (pretty, small, scared), a process that served to keep (military) women in their place, underlining once more an opposition between female noncombatants and male combat troops even in coverage which sought to celebrate her service.

Once the scandal of the sexualized humiliation and torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib became widely disseminated and discussed in 2004, other military women, including Sabrina Harman but most particularly Lynndie England, quickly became synonymous with what an ABC News Nightline special on “women warriors” would term “a twisted tribute to gender integration in the U.S. military” (20 May 2004). A cartoon in the conservative British newspaper The Mail on Sunday bears the caption “Well at least we know the Americans have gender equality. We’ve been tortured by both men and women” (9 May 2004). In fact the media visibility of both Lynch and then England was accompanied by the voicing of deeply hostile sentiments toward military women and toward a feminism regarded as culpable for their inappropriate presence in war.
Lynch’s petite body and England’s pregnant body (as photographed during her court-martial) served as different markers of that inappropriate presence. England too was described as “petite,” but also as unattractive (in contrast to Lynch) and masculine. The British journalist Gary Younge suggests that Harman’s and England’s gender “made them easy to demonise,” citing the conservative critic Ann Coulter’s claim that the torture at Abu Ghraib offered “another lesson in why women shouldn’t be in the military. . . . Women are more vicious than men.” That gender could effectively distract attention, at least in part, from the scandal itself (that is, the treatment of prisoners in an illegal and inhumane fashion) has much to do with the long-standing associations between military women and the scandal of gender nonconformity. The two case studies below explore some of the ways the disruptive potential of the military women has been incorporated, exploited, and contained in popular film and television fictions.

MILITARY WOMEN AND MILITARY JUSTICE:
A FEW GOOD MEN AND JAG

Though popular culture has frequently associated their visibility with a positive modernity, the coupling of military women with violence and combat has remained culturally troubling. Legal drama has provided a hybrid generic home for the military woman; as a lawyer she can stand not only for the modernity of the integrated U.S. military, but as a sign of the professional advancement of women in American society more generally. This section takes as examples of this process a successful film, A Few Good Men (1992), and a long-running television series, JAG (1995–2005), both of which frame the work of the military woman within a courtroom setting. Both feature military women as lawyers, taking us into the offices of the Navy’s Judge Advocate General Corps and into the workings of military justice. Demi Moore as the lawyer, Lt. Col. Joanne Galloway, is the only visible military woman in A Few Good Men; JAG foregrounds an exemplary military woman as a central character but also insists on women as an integral part of the Navy. Thus JAG seeks to manage a number of potentially contradictory factors, including respect for military tradition, a valorization of military masculinity, and an awareness of the legal, strategic, and moral issues at stake in a culture that systematically privileges men over women.

A Few Good Men uses the courtroom as a device to debate the kinds
of behavior society requires, and even demands, of the men who serve in its military. The film begins with a precredit sequence depicting intense personal violence: at the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, two Marines, Dawson and Downey, attack a fellow Marine, Santiago, who, we later learn, has been falling behind in his training. When Santiago subsequently dies, the other two are charged. The investigation and court case that follow focus on strategic uses of disciplinary violence within the chain of command. The defense suspects—but cannot easily prove—that the attack was the result of a direct order authorized from a senior officer. The debate that the film rehearses, then, has to do with the legitimacy of such illegal yet clearly sanctioned violence. Narrative resolution comes when Col. Nathan Jessop (Jack Nicholson) is goaded into a defiant public admission of his culpability, a dramatic scene counterposed by Dawson’s more private realization that his actions were wrong, even though he was following orders.

Cynthia Lucia writes that *A Few Good Men* “fetishizes both the military and the masculine—ostensibly the subjects of its interrogation.” Men and their relationship to military masculinity are at the center of the narrative. Yet it is the prominent presence of Lt. Col. Galloway which facilitates this thematic focus, foregrounding and reinforcing the combatant-noncombatant couplet in explicitly gendered terms. The first of the major characters to be introduced, Galloway is seen cutting across an elaborate display of drill, rehearsing to herself a request to be assigned as counsel for the two Marines (and hence to achieve greater professional visibility; figure 40). In the scene that follows, she will stumble over her carefully rehearsed words, signaling her failure to assert herself in public space. Her lack of certainty and her relative lack of authority will be a recurrent feature of the film. Lucia suggests that Galloway is consistently positioned as “a disruptive feminine presence,” patronized and marginalized by her brilliant co-defense attorney, Lt. Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise). In line with her position as a military woman (and Moore’s star status), Galloway’s role is both central and peripheral to the film. Where Kaffee is glib and self-centered, she is an impassioned, deeply ethical character; she pushes her superiors, and later Kaffee, to look deeper into the case, although it is clear that the Navy would rather it be resolved quietly. Her reading of events proves to be the correct one, her suggestion of putting Jessop on the stand pivotal in winning the case, and yet, as Lucia notes, the film consistently adopts Kaffee’s perspective: “Even though Jo is right, she con-
continues to appear wrong; even though Kaffee is wrong, he always appears right.” Galloway’s critique of masculine military culture—in the form of the violence that leads to Santiago’s punishment and death—is acceptable only once mediated by a male military figure. Her attention to detail is valued by her male superiors, qualifying her as a researcher, but not as an attorney: “She’s not cut out for litigation,” one remarks. Galloway herself comes to realize that it is Kaffee’s talents in the courtroom that their clients need, ultimately vindicating his judgment that her passion is “compelling” but “useless.” Voluble outside the courtroom, on only one occasion does Galloway speak in court, an outburst that damages the case. Lucia analyzes this silencing in the context of other films featuring female lawyers in which “the female protagonist quietly is pushed to the narrative periphery by a (superior) male figure.”

The silencing and sidelining of Galloway in *A Few Good Men* are indicative of the cultural work surrounding military women in contemporary media culture. Since the mid-1990s media coverage has routinely construed military women as a problem for military men and for the martial culture that these men are able to so effectively embody. Fictions such
as A Few Good Men and JAG exploit the presence of the military woman not so much to tackle issues of inequity as to elaborate stories in which military men are renewed and remasculinized. So, as Kaffee gradually finds his public voice, Galloway’s idealism and professionalism trigger and sustain the narrative of remasculinization that the film stages around him. His alignment with a military woman (even one he openly disrespects) signals his location in a feminized arena and the need for the very renewal the film enacts. Throughout the course of the narrative he learns to step up and speak out; Galloway, by contrast, learns to keep quiet and to accept her ancillary status. This ancillary gender and military status is expressed in terms of a literal and metaphorical distance between those who inhabit a space dominated by the art of politics and talk, and those who serve in arenas of conflict and combat. A Few Good Men opposes the integrated naval and political elite of Washington to the all-male base at Guantánamo, inscribing in gendered terms a distinction between different forms of military service.

It is clear that Galloway’s military woman is both a “disruptive feminine presence” (as Lucia puts it) and a woman deeply invested in military masculinity. As a military woman she is an outsider, and her attempts to assert herself generate male hostility. Yet she betrays the characteristic longing for acceptance expressed in numerous fictions showcasing military women. While fellow attorney Weinberg (Kevin Pollak) expresses his disgust at the Marines they are defending, characterizing them as bullies, Galloway’s defense of the pair is unequivocal in its appeal to a masculine strength harnessed to national and personal security: “They stand on a wall and they say ‘Nothing’s going to hurt you tonight, not on my watch.’” Her endorsement of a protective military masculinity both aligns her with the code that Dawson and Downey attempt to live by and positions her as representative of the citizenry which benefits from that code. Ironically, while it is Galloway who is the lawyer most committed to military culture, as a woman she simply cannot, within the film’s terms, embody its values. It is not that the film suggests that she has no place within the military. Rather, the military woman’s value resides in her ability to take up a supportive role.

The military drama JAG repeatedly demonstrates the significance of this gender hierarchy and the extent to which it allows the imagination of an integrated military. The show’s recurring female characters are lawyers: Lt. Kate Pike (Andrea Parker) and then Lt. Meg Austin (Tracey
Needham) in season 1, and Maj. and later Lt. Col. Sarah “Mac” MacKenzie (Catherine Bell) from season 2 onward. While the show’s male protagonist, Cmdr. Harmon Rabb Jr. (David James Elliot), a pilot turned lawyer, is explicitly enabled to perform in the air and in the courtroom, crossing and recrossing the supposedly secure categories of combatant and noncombatant, his female counterparts are more strictly coded as noncombatants. My discussion focuses on *JAG*’s characterization of the lawyer as exemplary military woman and, more broadly, the way the series engages with the military woman as a controversial and contested figure. The show was conceived in part as a response to the commercial success of *Top Gun* (1986) and *A Few Good Men*, hence the pilot-lawyer hero and the emphasis on military men and women working together in the context of military justice. From the beginning it was also shaped by the media attention generated by military women, alluding to or explicitly referencing a number of high-profile scandals.

Mac is deeply committed to military masculinity, a high-achieving woman shaped by a difficult childhood which was dominated by an alcoholic and violent military father (like her, a Marine). Yet she is also coded in familiar feminine terms; her emotional bonding with children and her desire to be a mother, and her enigmatic psychic powers, for instance. Thus her military masculinity is at once “explained” in terms of her background (her father) and framed by more conventional female attributes. The show’s legal fiction both conforms to and departs from the characterization of professionally successful women in American television drama more generally. The assumption that a successful woman cannot develop or maintain a romantic, heterosexual relationship is as commonplace in *JAG* as it is in other instances of postfeminist media culture. Because for women, it is implied, romance involves submission, the masculine military woman must by definition be single. Like Galloway in *A Few Good Men*, Mac is a powerful yet isolated figure; both are exemplary military women who thrive in the institutional context of Washington. These characters effectively figure the achievements of white American military women as well as indicating the arena in which such achievement is appropriate.

MacKenzie may show personal vulnerability, but she is constructed as a warrior more often than as a victim. Consider how she explains to her male colleagues her acute (and acutely gendered) awareness of personal space and personal danger: “A woman’s intuition isn’t a joke. It’s a matter
of survival” (“Defenseless,” 9 December 1997). She does not draw on tales of combat here but describes the experience of being a woman in public spaces in terms of a constant expectation of violence; vulnerable to danger at every turn, women in general are advised to adopt her pragmatic, militarized strategies for self-defense. As if to follow up on her description of her everyday state of readiness, another season 3 episode presents her as the object of obsessive interest from a police detective who stalks and eventually abducts her (“The Stalker,” 17 March 1998). Such frank acknowledgment of women’s embattled position in a patriarchal culture suggests at least a feminist-informed understanding of hierarchies and institutions. Yet JAG is as intent on keeping military women in their allotted place as most of the other popular fictions discussed in this book.

On occasion JAG’s female lawyers finding themselves in dangerous situations, even what are effectively combat scenarios. The introduction of Lt. Meg Austin in the series 1 episode “Shadow” (30 September 1995) is indicative of how the show handles this. Rabb and Austin are paired to go aboard a submarine held hostage by an embittered computer nerd who is testing a new weapons system. Her unwelcome presence on the all-male submarine is justified by her expertise as a computer weapons specialist. Such a characterization echoes arguments in favor of expanding women’s role in a modern, thoroughly technologized military. Although Austin’s expertise does indeed allow her and Rabb to win back the ship, she poses a significant problem to the mission by failing to disclose her claustrophobia. Sweating, hyperventilating, and panicky in the cramped submarine, she seems emblematic of the undisciplined and unreliable female body, a figure of abjection of the sort invoked by hostile commentators.

More often JAG situates its central female characters alongside other women on active duty in order to explore the effectiveness of women in combat and the position of military women more generally. The feature-length pilot episode (“A New Life”) established both the formula of a male-female investigative military partnership and the dramatic potential of the military woman in a naval context, focusing directly on the questions posed by the military woman on active duty. Contrasting the masculinized and feminized bodies and modes of behavior of different military women, the pilot explores relationships between male and female personnel onboard ship, staging a debate about women’s combat readiness and the effects of their presence on male personnel of different generations. Over the years many episodes would focus on issues relating to
military women which had received wider media coverage: their position while stationed in Saudi Arabia; their treatment in comparison to men; the difficulties facing a lesbian officer; the fallout from charges of adultery; and false claims of sexual harassment made by and against female officers. In this way the physical and mental capabilities of the female soldier are repeatedly interrogated in a manner that echoes ongoing news media coverage. Some acquit themselves, many fail, but all have something to prove.

The pilot episode begins with an aerial action sequence over the Adriatic and a confrontation between the older, experienced Admiral Boone, referred to as “Cag” (Terry O’Quinn) and his radio intercept operator Lt. Angela Arutti. A familiar generic opposition of youth and technology versus age and experience is explicitly gendered as Cag pushes Arutti and finds her wanting: “I wanted to see if you had the guts for a knife fight—and you don’t.” The show then proceeds to set up an opposition between Arutti, who is blonde and hesitant (feminine), and her muscular, manly aviator roommate, Lt. Cassie Puller. Cassie is introduced taking part in a competitive weightlifting session in which she demonstrates greater strength than the misogynist Lt. “Ripper” Carter, who overtly regards her female masculinity as a threat to his male, military identity (figure 41). In this way the show early on sets up oppositions of different kinds between male and female naval personnel. The terms at stake include not only gender but age, experience, courage, bodily strength, and competitiveness, itself coded as a masculine quality possessed by some women but not all.
That is, the narrative effectively dramatizes and feeds back into the terms in which contemporary news media characterized military women as a problem for men and as somehow anomalous to cultural conceptions of gender.

_JAG_ both acknowledges and incorporates into its ongoing narrative the media visibility and political significance of the military woman in American culture of the mid-1990s. The very media attention generated by military women serves as a recurrent plot device. Arutti’s actions and emotions (her evident fear, participation in combat, decision to resign, secret marriage to a fellow Rio, and ultimately her murder) are all framed in terms of a media obsessed with military women and a Navy preoccupied with its public image. Lt. Kate Pike is assigned to the investigation on the basis of her gender and looks. Arutti is anxious about the prospect of becoming “a blurb on the evening news.” With media attention focused on the “woman warrior,” the Navy’s investigation into Arutti’s death is politically charged. Military men and women are portrayed as operating in a context policed, or at least closely monitored, by popular media and political intervention. Significantly this policing, and even the very presence of military women on active duty, is understood to be a product of the Tailhook scandal, the media repercussions of which I return to below.

The show presents the U.S. Navy as newly aware of the politics of language and behavior in a gender-integrated environment. Yet when individual women insist on the respect due to their position within the Navy, they are coded as lacking respect for naval tradition. Arutti scowls when congratulated on her first kill in sexual terms (“busting your cherry”); her stern response positions her as both outside the military fraternity and as an embodiment of deeply resented changes. Such changes are openly seen as a cause for regret by male personnel, including the male lead, Rabb. The pilot episode attributes the experimental presence of women on a battle carrier to the priorities of politicians rather than to military expediency. The attribution of inappropriate power and influence to female politicians (who are masculinized in a quite different fashion from military women) is a recurrent trope. In this intensely political and closely scrutinized context, individual military women are frequently cast as pawns in a game they do not control or even understand. In turn this complex situation has the potential to impact their judgment; thus, for instance, Rabb is characterized as effectively seeing beyond gender in a way that the military women with whom he works simply cannot.26
As mentioned earlier, like *A Few Good Men*, *JAG* exploits the presence of military women not only in terms of a current topic of interest but also to set in motion a more or less explicit narrative of remasculinization conducted around the male protagonist. Time and again the series provides opportunities for Rabb to demonstrate his distance from the military women with whom he works, showcasing his capability as a man of action, a pilot, and a combatant. How might we make sense of such a shift in focus? Faced with the difficult prospect of sustaining recruitment to a volunteer military, Cynthia Enloe identifies a perception at work on the part of strategists that the “fundamentally masculinized culture of the military” be retained. Thus she notes that while the enlistment of women in certain areas provides a way of stemming the shortfall in recruitment, it is a strategy of which many are wary: “The military that enlists women must remain, it is thought, a military that is appealing to men. . . . Women recruits should not deprive men of the chance to serve in those posts held most precious to masculinity-seeking men.” From the pilot episode on, *JAG* exemplifies this agenda, demonstrating the limited integration of women into certain roles, pointing to the problems of their deployment, suggesting the limits of their leadership abilities, and noting the difficulties and problems of feminist rhetoric—never sustainable against the experience of military men—while castigating and expelling misogynous military men who are identified as too extreme to remain part of the new Navy. Thus in the pilot episode Cag, who openly expresses his lack of faith in women’s combat capabilities, can be retained and valorized, while the more evidently irrational, murderous misogynist Ripper is excluded.

Precisely what is at stake with respect to the gendering of the combatant-noncombatant couplet in this structure is once more apparent in the season 2 episode “Crossing the Line” (31 January 1997). The episode opens with the raucous naval ceremony to which the title refers, which involves the humiliation of male and female “polliwogs” as the vessel crosses the equator; this crossing stands in for a rite of passage associated with an active service inscribed as both carnivalesque and masculine. Disgruntled Lt. Marilyn Isaacs doesn’t take Navy ritual in the spirit intended, filing charges of sexual harassment against Cag, who has suspended her from flight duty; she claims that he has sought to discredit her as a way of discrediting all women in combat. The ritual associated with “crossing the line” is presented in the show as a part of naval tradition that has already been unduly compromised by an emphasis on zero tolerance. *JAG* lawyer
Mac tends to believe Isaacs; she lectures Rabb that in the wake of Tailhook “the good old days are gone” and that “this is a new Navy with new rules.” While the pilot episode expelled an extreme misogynous figure, “Crossing the Line” instead distinguishes between good and bad military women, between those who can accommodate themselves to naval history and traditions and those who cannot.

Along with Mac, the female RIO Lt. “Skates” Hawkes is as an example of the good military woman, adopting a pragmatic approach as she asserts both that “a woman who can’t handle some jerk playing ‘grabass’ doesn’t belong in the Navy” and that women who seek to be “one of the guys” are defined by loss and are required to “give up something . . . be less of a woman.” Being “one of the guys” may involve accepting an uncomfortable level of physical contact. Equally it may involve a denial of the specificity of female experience or any forms of behavior that might be read as feminine. Isaacs seeks to sidestep the guys and the military culture they embody, exploiting her media visibility as a military woman and enlisting the help of Congresswoman Delong, a long-standing critic of the Navy and an advocate of extending more opportunities to women. In Washington Delong imperiously insists that Isaacs’s flight status be restored. The interference of this assertive civilian woman (who patently does not respect male privilege or naval tradition) is, predictably, disastrous. Unwilling to take the advice of the experienced military men who counsel against it she proudly describes Isaacs as “a woman who’s ready to go to war.” In the botched landing that follows, the plane explodes and Isaacs is killed. The message is clear: it is experienced military men and accommodating military women who know best; the assertion of women’s rights should not be allowed to override the judgment of ancient mariners such as Cag.29

The narrative trajectory of “Crossing the Line” suggests that a politically correct military has been achieved at the cost of naval traditions and that dealing with sexual harassment is simply part of the job of the military woman. Isaacs is doubly culpable in this context since she not only rejects the judgment of experienced military men, but exploits the Navy’s (post-Tailhook) vulnerability with respect to issues of sexual harassment. The scenario enacted here points to deep-seated anxieties about female fitness for military service, concerns that center on the female body as undisciplined. Indeed in many ways JAG’s typical perspective on the questions raised by women in combat roles is difficult to disentangle from the
show’s articulation of military women as problematic bodies, disruptive or provocative figures who bring sex with them into a military setting, complicating (if not defiling) the supposedly simple rituals of communal male life. Since these issues—the legitimacy or otherwise of combat exclusions and the prevalence of sexual scandal—are so complexly entwined with wider media discourses, it is in no way surprising that they also inform each other in a show like *JAG*.

The heightened security in the wake of 9/11 and the military action in Afghanistan and Iraq which followed triggered a restaging of *JAG*’s ambivalent articulation of women’s combat readiness and a forceful restatement of the necessity to retain military masculinity of the kind celebrated in the pilot episode. In an episode aired that fall season (“Dog Robber Part II,” 27 November 2001) Mac confronts a case of harassment that leads her to argue for the reprimand of the male commanding officer, Colonel Presser, while simultaneously agreeing with her boss, Admiral Chegwidden that in the current context the military needs tough officers like Presser. The episode achieves its reframing of women in combat by employing a number of the show’s staple elements. These include Mac’s high level of commitment and ability to pass any test as an exemplary (but implicitly exceptional) military woman; an acknowledgment of discriminatory treatment meted out to military women by male peers and commanding officers; an unscrupulous military woman who manipulates media and public opinion; and anxiety that their expression of conservative views on gender might unduly compromise the careers of good male soldiers.

The plot develops as follows: relaxing at home, Mac watches a television show titled *Military Bloopers*, which features Capt. Sheila Grantham being bawled out on the course, conspicuously failing to achieve the physical standards required. This scenario raises the specter of an unfit female body and contrasts this with the capable military women represented by Mac watching at home. Following a complaint from Grantham, Mac investigates conditions at the training center. She scrutinizes Colonel Presser’s insistence that male and female Marines be held to the same standards (to “separate the men from the boys”) and concludes that the strategy has indeed contributed to a hostile environment for women. The colonel stands by his methods and angrily demands that Mac consider a future in which physically inferior women may have to fight for their lives.
Concerns for gender equality are effectively presented as a peacetime luxury which circumstances require the U.S. to set aside.

Against the specter of inadequately trained female Marines endangering themselves and national security, Mac agrees to take her annual physical fitness test while at the center. Of course her performance impresses both Gunnery Sergeant Smith (“Not bad for a lawyer”) and Presser (“Not bad for a Marine”). Yet here, as elsewhere in the series, Mac is constituted as exceptional rather than representative (figure 42). As if to underline the point, it becomes clear that it was Grantham herself who leaked the video tape that triggered the investigation in the first place; by casting herself as a victim she had hoped to enhance her case. Mac’s subsequent decision to charge Grantham with conduct unbecoming aligns her not with the humiliated military woman (who emerges as manipulative and media-aware) but with Presser and the high standards that he enforces. In the episode’s closing conversation with Chegwidden, Mac asks whether he thinks there will ever be a female Navy SEAL. He replies authoritatively that this will not and should not happen, thus affirming a space appropriately reserved for the patriotic service of masculinity-seeking men. In this way the views of Presser are more or less explicitly, if regretfully, endorsed. When he tells Mac, “We can’t carry Marines who can’t cut it,” the reference to female Marines is clear.30 The response to 9/11 in a military drama like JAG highlights the distinction it has typically drawn, in common with wider media coverage, between the place of military women in principle and in practice. In acknowledging the skepticism of male military person-

42. MacKenzie (Catherine Bell) is JAG’s exemplary yet exceptional military woman.
nel and the importance of physical and emotional qualities (strength and courage) that military women are not typically deemed to possess—that they must repeatedly prove—JAG simultaneously interrogates and reiterates the perceived discrepancy between woman and soldier.

**MILITARY WOMEN ON TRIAL:**

*SHE STOOD ALONE AND ONE KILL*

How do the themes of harassment and unruly masculinity, which recur in popular journalism of the period, feature in film and television fictions of the 1990s and since? In what ways does the media presence of sexual scandal shape narratives of military women? The early years of JAG were very much informed by and even spoke directly to the somewhat tarnished image of the U.S. Navy with respect to gender equality that resulted from the Tailhook incident. The show tends to equate the enhanced position of women in the Navy with both modernity (it is a sign of the forward-looking character of American society more generally) and loss (elite spaces previously occupied only by masculine men seem compromised by the inclusion of women). By contrast, the television movie *She Stood Alone: The Tailhook Scandal* (first aired on CBS on 22 May 1995) approaches Tailhook from the perspective of Lt. Paula Coughlin, the naval helicopter pilot whose initial complaint and subsequent media interviews triggered the scandal.

In line with the conventions of the television movie, Coughlin (Gail O’Grady) is a heroic, if somewhat naïve, protagonist whose personal experience highlights a topical issue. She is portrayed as a tough individual who stands up to her peers, her senior officers, and the naval traditions they embody. Ultimately she is praised by her ex-military father (and the film) for having changed the Navy. Yet the narrative also traces her exclusion from the Navy, a movement that seems inevitable once she has broken ranks to complain about her treatment. In line with wider media coverage, *She Stood Alone* contextualizes Coughlin’s experience of sexual harassment within a military culture that is male-dominated and overtly hostile to women. The film characterizes her as an ambitious, capable, and successful woman; indeed her experience of sexual harassment is explicitly linked to her ambition. In this context two aspects of *She Stood Alone* are particularly significant: the construction of Coughlin as an exceptional woman as a way of intervening in and commenting on the commonsense opposition between woman and soldier, and the presentation
of sexual harassment as part of a more general male hostility to any increase in the opportunities available to women within the military.

*She Stood Alone* begins with shots of Coughlin as a young girl out in the woods playing with a toy airplane that she holds aloft as she runs around. When real planes speed overhead, the excited girl asks her mother if one might be piloted by her father, and she expresses awe at the prospect. Her mother seems equally involved in the glamour of flight, telling the young girl, “That’s why I married a pilot.” A close-up of the girl’s face has her saying quietly to herself, “Why marry one when you can be one?” We cut straight from this establishing scene to Coughlin as a young woman, now a naval officer and helicopter pilot, who tells a colleague, “I want it all,” which here means command, combat experience, and a future in Washington “with a chest-full of ribbons.” Thus the film positions Coughlin as an ambitious woman, a daughter in awe of her aviator father, and a woman deeply invested in military culture. Rejecting her mother’s route of marriage to the military, she has sought to become a part of the institution. She deftly deals with an admiral’s sexism while playfully distancing herself from “those feminists,” suggesting her ease with male authority. When we next see her talking with her mother it is to confess feelings of anger and fear. The metaphor of military as family has become perverse as Coughlin speaks angrily of the officers who assaulted and betrayed her: “These guys are supposed to be my brothers.” Ultimately she resents being treated as if she were a civilian, which is to say nothing more than a woman.

Coughlin is excited about attending Tailhook, seeing it as a chance to advance her career and meet the right people. (She does indeed get an introduction to the secretary of the Navy.) Yet at a panel designed to encourage an open exchange of views between naval leaders and junior officers, the hostility of military men toward military women is apparent. A uniformed woman asks the panel, “When are women going to start flying in combat?” The admiral’s amused and evasive response is matched by derision from the floor as male aviators shout the woman down. The film links the public mockery of this young military woman, eager to question combat exclusions, to the sexual humiliation experienced by Coughlin later that night. Just as military women are let down by fellow officers and commanders in a public forum where they might have expected support, Coughlin’s appeals for help during the incident itself, and subsequently in her attempts to seek redress, are ignored or laughed down.
Once she has made her complaint, Coughlin is effectively grounded and isolated from her peers, both male and female. Her boyfriend, Rocket, and her buddy Stick are both perplexed and angry about her decision. Having described Coughlin as “warrior class” early in the film, Stick subsequently delivers a contemptuous rejection of military women’s claims to soldier status. His comments suggest not only that Coughlin has overreacted to male exuberance, but that such a reaction demonstrates how inappropriate it is for women to see themselves as combat-ready. Later he will attempt to reestablish a bond with her, offering an apology and a salute; that the gesture is rebuffed could be read as reinforcing the military woman’s “failure” to understand or incompatibility with (male) military codes. The film’s final scene has Coughlin’s father reassure his newly civilian daughter that she is a “warrior” and that he is proud of her. Thus *She Stood Alone* attempts to reverse the conventional understanding articulated by Stick, suggesting that Coughlin’s toughness—her warrior status—is bound up with her determination to pursue her complaint as much as her status as military woman. Yet as the film’s title asserts, this involves her separation from the very military unit to which she aspires to belong and even ultimately to lead.

Military women more generally are presented as isolated and fearful in *She Stood Alone*. Fellow female officers tell her that the matter should have been settled in house, that sexual harassment “goes with the territory”: “It does not pay to keep reminding these guys that we’re different.” During this last conversation Anita Hill’s testimony plays on the television in the background, reinforcing a suggestion that publicly confronting male power and privilege is potentially costly. Nonetheless when Coughlin finally goes public it is with the support of the initially hostile Lt. Cdr. Evans, who has “kept quiet” about her own experiences of sexual harassment. Another hostile fellow officer confesses her experience of abuse following this public testimony. In this way, albeit tentatively, *She Stood Alone* suggests the possibilities of alliances between military women. Such bonds are potentially supported by the more overt feminism of a powerful female political figure in Assistant Secretary to the Navy Barbara Pope (Bess Armstrong), whose perspective is represented not as an uninformed antimilitary stance, but in terms of a fervent desire to modernize the military. While Pope insists that military women are a reality to be acknowledged and respected, she rails against the exclusive “cult of the warrior,” which, she claims, “by definition excludes
women.” Despite its title, there is a relative optimism evident in She Stood Alone, not only in its concluding image of father and daughter, but in the offers of support Coughlin finally receives from other female naval officers. Such images of female comradeship are rare in recent military narratives. From the late 1980s onward film and television fictions have emphasized the isolation of the military woman in a gender-integrated but male-dominated environment.

She Stood Alone explicitly dramatizes the Tailhook scandal within a postfeminist media culture which routinely trades in the assumption that gender equality is already achieved and as a result is uncontroversial. The military is portrayed as out of step with civil society and in need of change. Both military women’s professional isolation and their association with sexual scandal became conventional features of subsequent television fictions. The juxtaposition of sexual scandal and female ambition is clearly on display in One Kill (first aired on CBS on 6 August 2000), which stars Ann Heche as Marine Capt. Mary Jane O’Malley. O’Malley’s affair with Maj. Nelson Gray (Sam Shepard) leads to his death and her trial for premeditated murder. Since Gray is married (although she does not realize this at first) the relationship compromises O’Malley’s position; that he is unbalanced places her and her family in danger. A divorced mother of two, O’Malley is also characterized as a lonely, single, professional woman, an ambitious figure who employs the rhetoric of equality feminism and patriotism: “It’s not my country if I don’t fight for it.”

The film opens by juxtaposing victim and warrior imagery. The first sequence stages the event that leads to Gray’s death, his sinister, nighttime intrusion into O’Malley’s home, accompanied by menacing music. Camouflaged as if for a military operation, Gray breaks into the house where he presents military tokens (an insignia and a salute) to O’Malley’s young son. This collision of military and domestic tropes is strongly suggestive of imminent violence. Yet that violence is not seen; instead, as the bedroom door closes behind Gray, we cut to the credit sequence and an extended display of O’Malley’s efficient progress through an assault course, effectively celebrating her athleticism. The film depicts her as an exemplary, high-achieving, aggressive, and physically able military woman who works in an almost exclusively male context. That this celebration of female military muscle follows immediately after a sequence that suggests domestic threat is quite in keeping with the double focus of contemporary narratives featuring military women.
Though my comments foreground an association between military women and sexual scandal, questions of both women’s combat readiness and the extent to which gender integration is achievable also clearly inform One Kill. Gray is initially brought in to monitor the training exercise in which O’Malley’s convoy (she works in supply) will be involved. He is openly hostile, observing, “In a real war, women don’t fight out front. I like to train people I can take with me.” Her commander, who will later conspicuously refuse to back her, whispers to O’Malley, “I guess you’d better bring him into this century.” It is O’Malley’s subsequent success in the training exercise which garners the support of her macho military team, one of whom dubs her a “true Marine.” While such comments imply that it is Gray whose attitudes are atypical among a more inclusive modern Marine Corps, the support of O’Malley’s men is short-lived; the same lieutenant who praises O’Malley also propositions her. Later, at his instigation, all her men change their testimony in order to incriminate her. Like many other recent narratives centered on military women, One Kill constructs an exemplary military woman as an outsider. Indeed the film features a military establishment concerned to protect the reputation of a male war hero (Gray) and willing to sacrifice an exemplary female officer in the process. O’Malley’s commanding officer explicitly warns her, “If you make me choose, it won’t be you.” The evocation of fear, secrecy, and conspiracy frames the position of the military woman (however exemplary) as extremely precarious. O’Malley’s language suggests that she has become detached from the Corps, that, in standing up for herself, she risks losing a tenuous position within male military comradeship. In supporting O’Malley, the military lawyer Captain Randall feels that he too is breaking the rules; he confesses that he feels uncomfortable in going against what the Corps wants him to do. Just as one of the investigators in She Stood Alone comes to believe and support Coughlin, Randall will ultimately defend O’Malley successfully, ensuring that she has the right to keep her position. Yet O’Malley chooses not to exercise that right, and both films end with the exclusion of their female protagonists from a military career which had previously defined them.

As in the Second World War, the period following gender integration sees the military woman as a sign of modernity. Yet despite this commonality, the two periods are clearly different when it comes to the discourses
surrounding military women. The shift is from a temporary necessity, an adjunct to conscripted male service, to high-achieving women seeking advancement in a professionalized volunteer military. Military women achieve significant levels of visibility in the news media, while in popular film and television they appear in markedly contradictory terms, simultaneously celebrated and tested (and thus implicitly needing to prove themselves), valorized and victimized. The genres in which military women appear register these contradictions, often figuring them as isolated rather than integrated. Whether that isolation has to do with the women’s exemplary and exceptional status or a more threatening sense of being out on a limb, popular narratives work through anxieties about gender and about the consequences of feminism for women’s working lives; thus in narratives that nostalgically celebrate military traditions and military masculinity the military woman is seen heroically confronting conservative institutions which require modernization.