

ACFT 3.5: How the Army can Meet Congressional Guidance without Resorting to Gender Discrimination



by Kristen M. Griest

I wrote [an op-ed](#) through the Modern War Institute in February advocating against the implementation of [ACFT 3.0](#), the latest version of the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT). The new updates to this test include the option to choose either a plank or leg tuck as a core exercise, the removal of branch-specific minimum standards, and the addition of a promotion system that will assess Soldiers according to their gender. While the Army is eager to produce a version of the test that will not disadvantage women and thereby gain [Congressional approval](#), the ACFT 3.0 misses the mark.

Even as a temporary solution, the “bad data” that the low standards of this test are producing during a [critical fact-gathering period](#) will create lasting negative consequences for women. Additionally, instead of fixing the Army’s outdated promotion system, the ACFT 3.0 keeps it segregated along gender lines, reinforcing the stigma that women cannot

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perform the same job as their male peers. And finally, the new ACFT policy presents the female physiology as an inherent weakness for which the Army must compensate, instead of incorporating critical fitness components for which the female physiology is often advantageous. By making a few modifications to the ACFT 3.0, the next version of the test could easily meet lawmaker guidance without perpetuating a class system that keeps women at the bottom.

The Problem with Gathering “Facts” on Women

If the Army uses data gathered over the last six months of the ACFT 3.0’s implementation to assess the physical capabilities and predict future potential of women, it will unintentionally stifle both. Studies in performance and sport psychology repeatedly attest to the important influence of high goal-setting, leader expectations, and self-efficacy in successful performance, known as [the Pygmalion Effect](#). Conversely, [the Golem Effect](#) describes the opposite impact; lower leader expectations result in lower subordinate performance. Therefore, reducing goals and incentives for all soldiers to the minimum passing score during a critical period of data collection inadvertently threatens to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of low performance and will yield artificially low “facts” about female physical capabilities.

While it’s encouraging that the Army is moving towards more data-driven solutions, even good data can be misinterpreted and applied in a manner that unintentionally hinders women. Indeed, the misperception that women could not avoid bacterial infections in the field due to their anatomy was often cited to me as a reason to prevent women from serving in the infantry. This perception was based on accurate data that revealed high rates of Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) among new female recruits in basic training. As a result of this perception, the Army implemented a policy that required women to shower after three consecutive days in the field. I vividly remember this policy because in 2012, it caused my entire Female Engagement Team platoon to be rounded up into the back of a truck like

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cattle during a field training exercise, in front of the infantrymen we were supposed to be supporting, to be sent out of the woods to go clean ourselves (despite our objections). One female OB-GYN at West Point, Dr. Trudy Yavoric, recognized that completely factual statistics had been misinterpreted due to a lack of context. She knew that while [UTIs are caused by bacteria, they are easily prevented simply by urinating](#); women did not need showers, they needed latrines - or at least, time and permission to use them. While men in a field training environment could use the latrine (or woodline) in under a minute, it took women more time to remove cumbersome gear and garments, so they often chose not to attempt it rather than return late to a training event and draw the ire of a Drill Sergeant. A simple change in the bathroom break policy during training resolved the issue. Yet for years, the example of "female hygiene" was constantly presented as a valid reason why women should not be allowed to serve in the Infantry.

Similarly, I believe the ACFT 3.0 data collected over the last six months will inadvertently be used to limit women, as it will be presented to Congress and critics alike without the important context that it was collected after incentives and expectations for higher performance were removed, and many women were taking the test for the first time, without any prior training. Instead of collecting fairly arbitrary performance data in an uncontrolled manner to set future standards, the Army should set objective, criterion-based standards to drive future, desired performance.

Fix the Promotion System Instead of Segregating It

The ACFT 3.0 will also hurt women by reinforcing the perception that physiological differences in women inherently render them less capable of military service or less competitive for promotion than men. This new version of the test introduces color-coded percentile bands so that a Soldier's physical score might be assessed for promotion based on how they compare to other members of their gender (platinum for the top 1%, green for bottom 50%, etc), versus how well they objectively perform on the fitness test. This system

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is an attempt to offset the discrepancy in points between male and female fitness test scores so women are not disadvantaged in promotion. However, instead of trying to compensate for physiological differences between genders, the Army should acknowledge the reality that they exist and also that they do not prevent female Service Members from being competitive for promotion. To send this much more empowering message, the Army should overhaul its outdated promotion system to reflect the skills and qualities in Soldiers that each branch truly values, as many of them supersede physical fitness.

We all understand that fitness is not equally important across all branches, and that diversity of thought, perspective, and experience is often more important. I care much more about a cyber warrior knowing how to code, a linguist being able to speak other languages, and a doctor being able to perform surgery than their respective abilities to perform leg tucks. However, there is a point for each branch past which trading physical fitness for other skills has diminishing returns, and possibly harmful effects on the battlefield. The Army should acknowledge this variation in priorities among branches by modifying the promotion system to value different skill sets accordingly.

While the fitness test may be worth 40% of a Soldier's overall grade towards promotion in a combat arms branch, it may only be worth 15% in a less-physical field such as military intelligence. To weight that metric heavily for a non-combat arms Soldier makes little sense, and might take emphasis away from their ability to develop more important skills, like earning certifications in their respective field. As for promotion, a senior rater or promotion board can subjectively assess that a woman who earns 470 on the ACFT but is the #1 Team Leader in her Platoon may have more potential than a man who earns a 570 on the ACFT but is in the bottom 50% as a leader, even in combat arms branches. This level of precision in talent management is the direction the Army is heading; to revert to judging Soldiers based on their gender instead of their individual performance is a step backwards.

As a former member of the [Army Talent Management Task Force](#), I know that this

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suggestion is not only feasible but completely within the Chief of Staff of the Army, General James C. McConville's, direct guidance. His urging for talent managers to not be constrained by industrial-age processes that may still be in place was most notably manifested with the unprecedented overhaul of the selection process for senior level commanders with the [Battalion and Colonel Commander Assessment Programs](#) (BCAP and CCAP). These programs of precise talent assessment and management were implemented within six months of conception; I am confident that each branch can follow suit and set promotion-related ACFT guidelines in a similar timeframe.

Create a More Comprehensive Test to Close the Gender Gap

As the Army continues to validate and improve the ACFT, it should explore other exercises critical to Soldier fitness that may naturally reduce the gap in male and female physical performance. While I acknowledge female physiology is generally less athletic than a man's, there are many exceptions to this rule, especially on the battlefield. I found the 5th Special Forces Group obstacle course at Fort Campbell, KY to be a very gender-neutral assessment in both contexts of the term; it includes a mix of realistic, battlefield obstacles that soldiers of both genders can expect to encounter, while simultaneously not providing a clear advantage to either gender. In addition to high walls and wide gaps to cross, which are generally easier for men to execute, this course included tight tunnels with objects protruding inward around which Soldiers had to maneuver as well as obstacles with small ledges for soldiers to shimmy across. During one friendly battalion competition, some men did not even attempt these obstacles, while women found them easier to negotiate due to their smaller stature and lower centers of gravity. Similarly, obstacles that include logs that shake or roll, thin beams placed across high platforms, or a low wire placed less than 18 inches from the ground all simulate realistic obstacles which may be easier for short women to execute. Emphasizing all aspects of functional fitness, instead of the ones to which the male physiology is best suited, will improve the fitness culture of the force without lowering standards.

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In addition to balance, many of these obstacles require flexibility, which is also [critical for injury prevention](#). The ACFT is repeatedly touted as intended to reduce injuries, as the SMA stated [“the new test will also significantly decrease the musculoskeletal injuries that impact unit readiness.”](#) Incentivizing such an important aspect of injury resilience as flexibility in the ACFT would make sense. The addition of the simple sit-and-reach test after the two-mile run would go a long way in improving both holistic soldier fitness and correcting negative stigmas about women being inherently less physically capable than men. Including flexibility in the ACFT may mean that some Brigade Commanders and high-performing Rangers will need to initially accept less than 90 points on some aspect of the fitness test for the first time in their careers. However, if women are going to take a brutally honest look at their holistic fitness, men should as well, and incentivizing improved flexibility will decrease injury rates across the force. The female physiology is naturally suited to many objective battlefield tasks; rather than compensate for female weakness, the ACFT committee should explore ways to incorporate these beneficial components of physical fitness.

Refine ACFT Exercises instead of Lowering the Standards

While four out of the six ACFT exercises were generally well-received, the independent review of the test should consider refining the other two controversial exercises. The leg tuck exercise is the most contentious event due to the initial high failure rate among women. To resolve this issue, the ACFT 3.0 introduces a graded scale from 60-100 points for the alternate plank exercise to allow soldiers time to build the upper body strength necessary for the leg tuck. However, allowing Soldiers to earn 100 points for the plank exercise is having the exact opposite effect; many women are simply choosing to cease attempting the leg tuck to train solely on improving their plank score. Even more discouraging, women who were excited about their improvement from zero leg tucks to eight or fifteen repetitions now feel they are going to be penalized for attempting the more difficult exercise, which may only earn them 70 or 80 points. If people are truly concerned about how the leg tuck may negatively affect women’s promotion rates, they should

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consider that the upper body strength required for a leg tuck is also necessary to attend such confidence-building and career-boosting schools as Air Assault, Airborne, Sapper, and Ranger. The hope for younger soldiers should be to improve their abilities as leaders and teammates which will lead to promotion, not solely focus on promotion itself.

The solution to this dilemma, and it is complicated, is to allow Soldiers with a valid medical profile to earn up to 100 points on the plank, but to cap the plank grading scale at 75 points for healthy Soldiers. There are many medical conditions that warrant exemption from the leg tuck, from shoulder surgeries to back injuries, and most relevant to this discussion, abdominal separation due to childbirth. Many women have reported that their medical diagnosis for [Diastasis Recti after childbirth](#) does not merit a medical excusal from certain exercises, even though a man would receive a medical profile for a hernia; this medical policy should be changed, as the article linked above states that even crunches can exacerbate the condition. Additionally, the plank as an alternative exercise for healthy soldiers should only be allowed for initial entry for any Soldier joining the Army after 2021. Drill Sergeants in basic training can ensure their Soldiers meet the leg tuck standard during the sixteen weeks of basic training; it is not Congress's job to ensure junior soldiers are competitive for promotion, it is their leadership's job and an individual responsibility.

The Standing Power Throw (SPT) is the other exercise that is controversial, not only due to its high failure rate among women, but also because no soldier can recall ever having to throw an object backwards over their head for any reason. Alternatively, the [Baseline Soldier Readiness Requirements Survey \(BSRRS\)](#), upon which the ACFT was based, states that, "Jump tests generally have good reliability and strongly correlate to select military performance tasks." These tasks include scaling an eight-foot wall or leaping from one platform to another which are skills required in most Army obstacle courses or selection processes, but are never formally trained or incentivized. The vertical leap test is the least likely to cause injury and the easiest to practice and perform, as it only requires a vertical surface, a tape measure, and some colored chalk for soldiers to mark their start and end

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points before and after jumping. While the discrepancy between male and female performance on the SPT can be several meters due largely to physical height and technique, the average difference between vertical leap performance will be measured in inches and will have no relationship to the Soldier's height. Replacing the SPT with the vertical leap would not only be more applicable for common soldier tasks but would naturally reduce the gap between scores among men and women.

Conclusion

The ACFT is unquestionably a better fitness assessment than the APFT, but the effort to be a more inclusive Army as well as a more lethal one will cause some growing pains. I hope lawmakers recognize this fact and allow the Army to continue to work through the issues endemic to different training facilities, austere environments, quality of training programs, injury prevention, and training time allocation, all of which present problems that junior leaders exist to solve. I know the Army can adjust some old systems and the ACFT over the next few months to ensure that we are moving forward instead of backwards with regards to equal opportunity and building a culture of fitness.

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The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.

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